

# The Impact of the Recruitment Crisis on Our Young Children

## The crisis

In current times, hardly a day passes without a news article highlighting what we now know to be the 'childcare crisis'. The issues that prevail are widely reported across media platforms and are complex. There are no quick-fix solutions to this problem, which has existed for decades.

The existing system of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is fragmented and was built on unstable foundations. Three quarters of ECEC providers operate privately for profit, while one quarter are community-based and not for profit (Pobal, 2024). The system is market-based and market-driven, held up by public funding without parental or child rights to access. Parents are at the mercy of the market.

## The issues

Publicly funding a market model may not have the desired outcomes for the State or for society as a whole in the longer term. A better-thought-out system is needed. There is no doubt that a crisis exists, and a big part of it relates to staffing and the current recruitment crisis in ECEC in Ireland.

SIPTU (2024) reports the main reason for the crisis to be low pay. Educators cannot afford to work in ECEC. Current rates of pay for educators with an accredited level-5 qualification in ECEC start at €13.65 per hour. A lead educator with an honour's degree will be paid €16.28 per hour. Graduates can obtain higher salaries in areas other than ECEC, where remuneration rewards qualifications, such as the Early Years Inspectorate in Tusla, Pobal, or other public-sector roles. It is reported anecdotally that a large number of ECEC graduates are taking up roles as special needs assistants in primary schools, where pay is higher and conditions are of a higher standard.



**Valerie Gaynor**

Manager, Creative Kids & Co. Preschool and School Age Childcare Service

---

**There is a sector-wide recruitment and retention crisis in early childhood education and care (ECEC), with many services closing rooms, and parents not being able to access childcare for their children. This article discusses the crisis, its complexities, and its impact on the children who are attending ECEC services.**

---

SIPTU's recent survey found that 69% of services surveyed had staff leave in the previous 12 months; 42% cited pay and conditions as the reason. Staff shortages were a serious issue in 65% of those surveyed. Though these statistics are widely reported, it is clear there is not enough funding in the sector (0.3% of GDP compared to 1% in the OECD). There are not enough staff or places to meet the needs of parents and society as a whole.

## The impact

Little is spoken or reported about how this is affecting children. The recruitment crisis, the insufficient funding, and the low wages have a detrimental impact on the wellbeing of children. In the SIPTU survey, 66% of respondents said the recruitment crisis is negatively impacting on quality experiences for children.

It is well researched and documented that the first five years of a child's life are the most important period, and the critical development period is the first two years. We have a whole-of-government strategy, *First 5*, to support children and their families during this period of life, yet many children are spending these critical years in understaffed ECEC services without a consistent caregiver.

Relationships and attachments are particularly important for infant and toddler mental health. In the absence of the parent, it is crucial that there is a consistent and caring adult working and being with the child. A slow relational pedagogy cannot exist if relationships cannot be developed. It is common for a young child to have multiple caregivers, many of whom do not know the child, as services struggle to maintain staffing and ratios.

There is evidence to suggest that this is damaging to the child's emotional wellbeing in the long term and can have a detrimental impact on outcomes for them. Children become fearful and reluctant to leave their parents when they have not formed a bond with their educator in the ECEC setting. Parents have no choice but to leave their child in a system where educators report being understaffed, under pressure, and burned out.

## Conclusion

Welcome policy developments in recent years and increased funding have created a high demand for places in ECEC. Parents are now receiving sizeable reductions in their monthly childcare bill through the National Childcare Scheme. Little has been implemented to support the recruitment, and more importantly retention, of quality, qualified early years educators. Expanding services without focusing on quality provision will not deliver good outcomes for children and society (OECD, 2023).

---

*SIPTU's recent survey found that 69% of services surveyed had staff leave in the previous 12 months; 42% cited pay and conditions as the reason.*

---

Turnover in many services is at 25%. Working with babies, toddlers, and young children is undoubtedly challenging. It requires dedication, commitment, and high levels of patience and understanding of how children learn and develop. Educators need to be supported holistically in their role. The workforce is currently 98% female. These educators are earning little above minimum wage for a role that requires a multiplicity of skills, values, and knowledge, yet the reward for this most important job is lower than that of many unskilled workers.

It is time to reflect on the value that our society places on our children and the educators who support their learning and care for them in our ECEC services. It takes a village to raise a child, and it takes a society to ensure that those who deliver this on the ground every day are respected and remunerated for their commitment and dedication to our future generations. We must not underestimate the impact of high staff turnover, low pay, and burnout on our youngest citizens, both now and in the longer term.

---

## REFERENCES

OECD (2023) *Early Childhood Education and Care Policy Review: Ireland*. Paris: OECD. [www.oecd.org/en/publications/strengthening-early-childhood-education-and-care-in-ireland\\_72fab7d1-en.html](http://www.oecd.org/en/publications/strengthening-early-childhood-education-and-care-in-ireland_72fab7d1-en.html).

Pobal (2024) *Early Learning and Childcare Data*. Dublin: Pobal. [www.pobal.ie/childcare/earlylearningandchildcaredata/](http://www.pobal.ie/childcare/earlylearningandchildcaredata/).

SIPTU (2024) *Early Years Professional Survey 2024: Analysis of Staffing and Recruitment Issues in ECEC*. Dublin: SIPTU. [www.siptu.ie/earlyyearsunion/](http://www.siptu.ie/earlyyearsunion/).

Tusla (2023) *Early Years Inspectorate: Annual Report*. Dublin: Tusla. [www.tusla.ie/publications/annual-reports-of-tusla-child-and-family-agencys-early-years-inspectorate/](http://www.tusla.ie/publications/annual-reports-of-tusla-child-and-family-agencys-early-years-inspectorate/).