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# Understanding Parental Decisions in Early Childhood Education Enrollment: Motivations and Educational Outcomes

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## Abstract

*The importance of early childhood educational programs as an integral part of the basic educational system and as an essential context for the children's cultural socialization is now well established by both scientific literature and Italian political regulations (Integrated "Zero-to-Six" System). Despite this, the availability and attendance of Early childhood education centers (ECEC) dedicated to the 0-3 age group are far from homogeneous and widespread in our country. The research explored, through a questionnaire administered to 115 parents, the motivations behind the parental choice to enroll or not enroll their child in an ECEC, also in relation to socio-demographic variables. The results show that this choice produces significant differences in the participating parents' parental skills, knowledge about child development and educational practices in which to involve and engage them at home. ECEC is an important context of educational and cultural socialization for children and also their parents. The implications of these results for educational services and future research directions on the topic will be discussed.*

**Keywords:** Early Childhood Education Centers (ECEC), Parents, Educational outcomes

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## Introduction

Early childhood education centers (ECEC), known in Italy as “nidi” are educational services for children aged 0–3. Their primary goals are to provide daily extra-family care and opportunities for socialization through participation in activities with peers and educators (Mantovani, 2007; 2010; Monaco, 2007; Catarsi & Fortunati, 2013; Musatti et al., 2017; White & Dalli, 2017). Why is such socialization important for a child’s development? According to Vygotsky (1929), alongside a ‘natural’ line of development linked to the child’s organic growth process, there exists a ‘cultural’ line of development that highlights and recognizes the uniquely human specificity of a development culturally mediated by practices, tools, signs, and language. Organic maturation acts as a necessary condition for development, but its evolution is determined by external factors, such as the socialization practices in which children can participate. Therefore, it is the quality and richness of these practices, especially educational and familial ones, that make a difference in children’s developmental and cultural socialization pathways (Ochs, 2002; Ulferts et al., 2019).

In this sense, schools, starting from nurseries and kindergartens, have the “political” responsibility (Calamandrei, 1950) to offer children meaningful and rich socialization experiences, providing them with the “toolbox” (Bruner, 1995) and the “cultural amplifiers” (Gardner, 1983) to progressively become competent members of the culture in which they live and to “find their way into the complex network of canonical mutual expectancies that characterizes human culture” (Bruner, 1999, p.232). Ethnographic research done on ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) and kindergartens (Corsaro, 1997; Buchbinder et al., 2006; Monaco & Zucchermaglio, 2021; Fatigante et al., 2021) has indicated that these early educational contexts are crucial for cultural socialization.

Early childhood education services are strategic investments not only for meaningful child socialization but also from a social and economic perspective: the availability of ECEC centers encourages both fertility choices and women’s labor

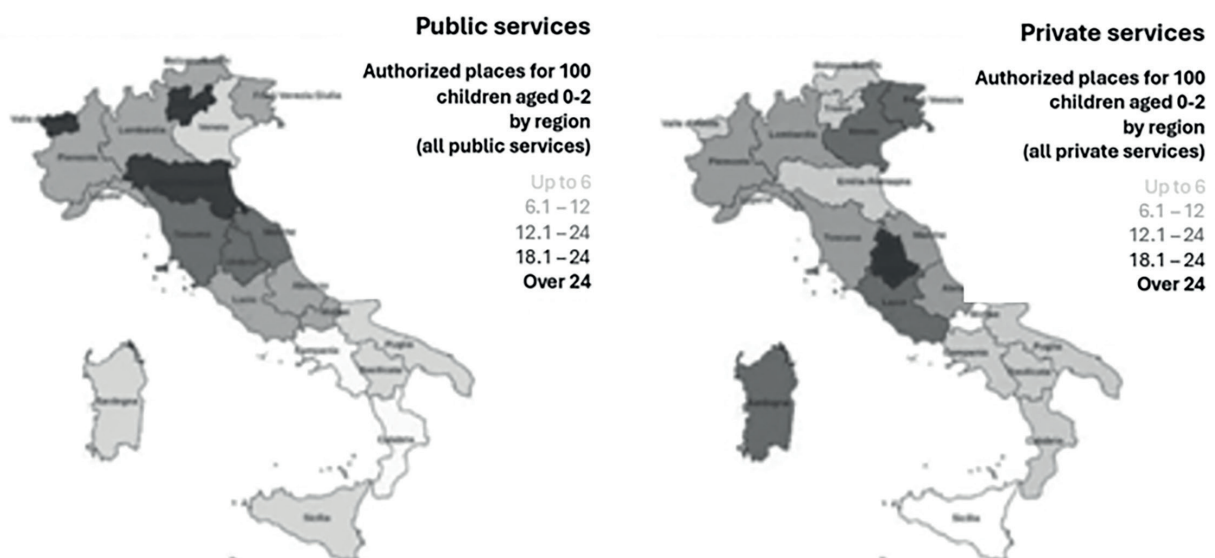
participation, while also helping to mitigate educational poverty (Alberani et al., 2020). Additionally, it has long-term effects on children’s health, cognitive and social skills, and educational and career trajectories (World Health Organization, 2018).

These findings have been adopted in our country with the issuance of the Pedagogical Guidelines for the Integrated “Zero-to-Six” System (DL 65, April 13, 2017, No. 65), which incorporates the best recommendations from psycho-pedagogical research and the most advanced and established educational practices. The aim is to ensure children have equal opportunities for education, instruction, care, relationships, and play, overcoming territorial, economic, ethnic, and cultural inequalities and barriers and becoming an integral and fully recognized part of the entire educational system (Provinciali, 2021, p.2).

### *Early Childhood Education in Italy: Numbers, Issues and Challenges*

Despite Italy having long surpassed the 90% threshold (as indicated by the European Council in 2002), in kindergarten attendance for children aged 3-6, recent years have seen a significant and concerning decrease in enrollments (cf. Istat Report 2022)<sup>1</sup>. This decline is due to demographic decline and economic factors, as many families struggle to afford these educational services. Additionally, families undervalue the importance of these services for the socialization and education of children (Moretto & Tassinari, 2019; Favaro, 2012). If kindergarten attendance is still widely prevalent despite declining, the situation in Italy is particularly deficient, even compared to other European countries, regarding educational services for ages 0-3. Considering public, subsidized, and private ECEC, Italy reaches only about 25% of potential users<sup>2</sup>, with significant territorial disparities between the North and South and between larger municipalities and smaller towns (see Fig. 1). Family income often becomes a discriminating factor for accessing these services (‘Investing in Childhood’ Report, 2020, 4), considering that public ECEC, account for only 49.1% of the total (compared to 51.7% in 2015/2016).

Fig. 1. Public and private Early childhood education centers (Source ISTAT 2023)



At the end of 2020, the Northeast and Central Italy even have higher coverage, or as in the case of the Northwest, close to the European threshold set at the European level (respectively 35% and 36.1% and 30.8%). The Islands (15.9%) and the South (15.2%), despite registering slight improvements in recent years, are still very far behind. International data indicate that nursery attendance by children from low-income families is a factor that substantially contributes to reducing their social disadvantage, as well as having a positive impact on birth rates and women's participation in the workforce, and on family income (Guryan, Hurst, & Kearney, 2008; ISTAT Report 2022)<sup>3</sup>.

It is, therefore, paradoxical that the provision and thus the attendance of such services are lower precisely where and for the families where it would be most necessary. The children who do not attend nursery are mainly those of low-income and low-education parents in families with only one breadwinner. In fact, the children who would benefit the most from high-quality extrafamilial educational experiences are effectively excluded. Nursery attendance rates increase with the income bracket of families and are significantly higher if the mother works and if the parents have a higher level of education (Brooks-Gunn, Han, & Waldfogel, 2002; Bulgarelli & Molina, 2016).

If, as we have seen, the 'first thousand days of life' are crucial for children's development, a social and economic inequality at birth, if not intercepted and compensated by quality educational services, becomes a crystallized 'destiny' for children born and raised in the lowest levels of social stratification.

Saraceno, Benassi and Morlicchio (2020) suggest the adoption of policies that focus not only on reducing material poverty but also on supporting parental skills and providing socially inclusive and qualitatively rich educational contexts, particularly for children in disadvantaged conditions. They receive now fewer public resources than those who are less or not disadvantaged at all.

Considering this framework that has shown the educational relevance of early childhood education centers for the children who attend them and their crucial importance also in socio-economic terms, our research focuses on a topic still underexplored in the literature, which involves parents of children aged 0-3 years. In particular, the empirical research aims to explore the motivations underlying parental choice to enroll (or not) their child in nursery and to describe if and how such choices result in differences in the parental skills and educational practices of parents.

## Method

### *Participants*

The study involved 115 parents of children aged between 3 months and 3 years. Among the participating parents, 71.3% have children attending an ECEC, while 28.7% have children who do not attend ECEC. The majority of the parents are mothers (98.3%), with only 2 fathers participating (1.7%). The age of the participants ranges from 23 to 49 years, with an average age of 36.4 years, and 60% of the participants fall within the 30-39 age range. Regarding educational background, 37.4% of the parents hold a high school diploma, while more than half (57.4%)

have a university degree. In terms of employment, 27% of the sample are engaged in highly specialized professions, including physicians and specialists in physical and natural sciences. A significant segment (15.7%) consists of unemployed parents.

Tab. 1. Socio-demographic data of participants

Variable	Categories	N	%
Attendance at ECEC	Attends	82	71,3%
	Does not attend	33	28,7%
Gender of parents	Female	113	98%
	Male	2	2%
Age of parents	20-29	11	9,6%
	30-39	69	60%
	40-49	35	30,4%
Educational qualification	Master's degree, PhD, or higher degrees	57	49,6%
	Bachelor's degree	9	7,8%
	High school diploma	43	37,4%
	Middle school diploma or elementary school certificate	6	5,2%
Employment status	Employed	97	84,3%
	Unemployed	18	15,7%
Total		115	100%

### *Instruments*

A new questionnaire was developed to explore in detail the motivations behind parents' decisions to enroll (or not enroll) their children in ECEC and their competencies/knowledge regarding their children's development. The instrument consists of 23 questions (both open and closed) and is divided into four sections. The first section collects sociodemographic data, such as parents' gender, age, educational level, and occupation, along with the child's ECEC attendance and birth date. It also gathers information on any other children, their birth dates, and ECEC attendance, thus completing the family and educational profile. The second section investigates parents' motivations for enrolling or not enrolling their child in ECEC, the child's competencies, and the routines acquired during ECEC attendance. The third section asks parents to describe a typical day of their child, highlighting activities, places visited, and caregivers involved. In the fourth and final section, parents are asked to express their level of agreement or disagreement (on a Likert scale) with statements related to infant development and learning.

In this article, we will focus only on the analysis of the following five dimensions:

- Analysis of the incidence of socio-demographic factors on the choices of enrolling (or not enrolling) children in ECEC.
- Analysis of the reasons why parents choose to enroll (or not enroll) their children in ECEC (Questions 7 and 14).
- Assessment of perceived changes in children's competencies, comparing differences between those who attend ECEC and those who do not (Questions 10 and 15).
- Evaluation of children's competencies, activities, and routines, paying particular attention to the effects of ECEC attendance (Questions 8 and 9).

- Descriptions of a typical day of children provided by parents whose children attend ECEC and by those whose children do not (Question 16) (see Appendix 1).

### Procedure

The administration of the questionnaire took place between July and October 2022. Informed consent was obtained from all research participants. After explaining the objectives and methods of the research to the participants, the questionnaire was made available via the Google Forms platform and distributed through parent groups whose children attended the ECEC involved in the study. Collaboration with educational coordinators and teachers at these services facilitated the administration of the questionnaire to parents through various channels, including WhatsApp and Facebook groups.

The data collection was expanded by adopting the “snowball sampling” method, inviting participating parents to involve others in completing the questionnaire. The anonymity of participants was guaranteed.

Eligibility criteria for participants included having a child aged between 3 months and 3 years and possessing fluent proficiency in the Italian language.

### Data Analysis

The analysis of the responses to the questions in this study aimed to compare the group of parents who enrolled their children in ECEC with those who chose not to. Contingency tables were constructed to explore the associations between socio-demographic factors and ECEC attendance. Subsequently, the Chi-square test, along with the examination of adjusted standardized residuals, were used to determine the existence of statistically significant associations between the analyzed variables (Agresti & Franklin, 2016).

For the open-ended questions (items 7, 9, 10, 14, 15, 17), a categorical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022) was conducted, allowing for a comparison of the frequency distributions of responses between the two groups of parents (presented in contingency tables). The coding categories demonstrated internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (the analytical categories are exhaustive and mutually exclusive). This approach was chosen as it allows for the identification of key themes from the open-ended responses, organizing them into analytical categories that capture their complexity, providing a deeper understanding than what could be achieved through other types of analysis. The detailed coding categories are presented in the appendix (see Appendix 2).

For item 16, “A typical day of my child” the analysis focused on the level of detail in the descriptions provided by parents. Responses were evaluated on a scale from zero to two: a score of zero was given for superficial descriptions, a score of one for concise but lacking in detail descriptions, and a score of two for more elaborate and detailed descriptions. The Chi-square test was used to verify the existence of a statistically significant association between the categorization of this variable and the child’s ECEC attendance.

## Results

### Socio-demographic Factors and ECEC Attendance

Is there an association between parents’ demographic factors and the decision to enroll their children in ECEC? To answer this question, the association between children’s ECEC attendance and variables such as parents’ age, occupation, educational level, and the presence of other children in the family who have attended or are attending ECEC was examined. The data analysis and Chi-square test results indicate the absence of a significant association between parents’ age and their children’s ECEC attendance (see Table 2).

Tab. 2. Contingency table between nursery attendance and parent’s age

Parents' age	Attendance at ECEC		Total
	No	Yes	
20-29	4	7	11
30-39	22	47	69
40-49	7	28	35
Total	33	82	115

Note.  $\chi^2 = 1.95$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.300$

The data analysis and Chi-square test results, however, demonstrate the existence of a significant association between parents’ employment status and children’s ECEC attendance (see Table 3). Specifically, it is evident that working parents are more likely to enroll their children in ECEC compared to non-working parents. This result is further supported by the analysis of adjusted standardized residuals, which shows a standardized residual of 3.01 in the “Unemployed - No” cell, exceeding the threshold of 1.96 (For further details, refer to the supplementary materials).

Tab. 3. Contingency table between ECEC attendance and parent’s employment status

Employment status	Attendance at ECEC		Total
	No	Yes	
Unemployed	12	6	18
Employed	21	76	97
Total	33	82	115

Note.  $\chi^2 = 15.04$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.0001$

The data analysis and Chi-square test results also show a significant association between parents’ educational level and their children’s ECEC attendance (see Table 4). However, this association is not supported by the adjusted standardized residuals analysis, as none of the residuals exceed the threshold of  $\pm 1.96$  (for more details, refer to the supplementary materials).

Tab. 4. Contingency table between ECEC attendance and parent’s educational qualification

Educational qualification	Attendance at ECEC		Total
	No	Yes	
Master's degree, PhD, or higher degrees	12	45	57
Bachelor's degree or high school diploma	17	35	52
Middle school diploma or elementary school certificate	4	2	6
Total	33	82	115

Note.  $\chi^2 = 6.26$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.04$

The data analysis and Chi-square test results indicate a significant association between a child's ECEC attendance and the presence of other children in the family who have attended or are attending ECEC (see Table 5). Specifically, if other children have attended or are attending ECEC, there is a higher likelihood of enrollment for the "target" child. Conversely, attendance rates decrease if other children have not attended or are not attending ECEC. These findings are supported by the adjusted standardized residuals analysis, which identifies two cells with values exceeding the  $\pm 1.96$  threshold: the "No presence of other children attending ECEC - No attendance" cell has a residual of 3.14, while the "No presence of other children attending ECEC - Yes attendance" cell shows a residual of -2.30.

Tab. 5. Contingency table between ECEC attendance and presence of other children attending ECEC

Presence of other children attending ECEC	Attendance at ECEC		
	No	Yes	Total
No	13	3	16
Yes	10	40	50
Total	23	43	66

Note.  $\chi^2 = 20.03$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.0001$

*Why Enroll (or Not Enroll) Your Child in ECEC?*

What are the main reasons parents cite for enrolling or not enrolling their children in ECEC?

Among the group of parents with children attending ECEC, the most common reason (41.5%) is "Both parents work" (see Table 6). This motivation highlights the reliance on ECEC for daily childcare management, which would otherwise be complex and difficult due to the parents' work commitments. The second most common reason (22%) is "Both for work needs and to allow the child to socialize." Additionally, 14.5% of parents in this group indicate "To allow the child to socialize with peers" as their motivation for enrollment. These motivations show an awareness among parents of the importance of social interactions in a child's development and the crucial educational value of ECEC for socialization. Though less frequently mentioned, there are also references to the growth of the child's autonomy outside the family context and the specific educational professionalism of ECEC educators.

Tab. 6. Reasons for enrolling children in ECEC according to parents

What were the main reasons for choosing to enroll your child in ECEC? (82 responses)	N	%
Both parents work	34	41,5 %
For work needs and to allow the child to socialize	18	22,0 %
To allow the child to socialize with peers	12	14,5 %
To expose the child to environments different from the family	6	7,3 %
To raise the child with qualified personnel	5	6,1 %
To encourage the child's autonomy	5	6,1 %
Other	2	2,5 %
Total	82	100%

On the other hand, among the group of parents who decided not to enroll their children in ECEC, motivations emerge that reflect less progressive views of child development and a general underestimation of the educational value of early childhood services (see Table 7). A significant portion (36.4%)

of these parents state, "Since I don't work, I don't feel the need and prefer to keep the child with me." Similar reasons are found in the responses of 6.1% of parents who "do not trust the educational staff" and do not want to delegate their parental role to others. In this group, motivations related to the child's age are also significant (15.1% say "will attend in the future" and 24.2% believe "is too young"), considering it too early for participation in extrafamilial educational socialization contexts. Additionally, 9.1% of parents cite economic reasons ("ECEC costs more than my salary"), which effectively prevents them from considering enrollment in the educational service.

Tab. 7. Reasons for not enrolling children in ECEC according to parents

What were the main reasons for choosing not to enroll your child in ECEC? (33 responses)	N	%
Since I don't work, I don't feel the need and prefer to keep the child with me	12	36,4
I think the child is too young	8	24,2
The child will attend ECEC when older	5	15,1
Economic reasons: "ECEC costs more than my salary"	3	9,1
I don't trust the educational staff	2	6,1
Other	3	9,1
Total	33	100

*ECEC Attendance and Children's Competencies*

In the questionnaire (questions 10 and 15), parents were asked to indicate any new skills acquired and demonstrated by their children in the last two months. The results highlight significant differences between the two groups of parents (see Table 8). Parents of children attending ECEC primarily report improvements in language skills (37.8%), an increase in autonomy (29.3%), and greater ability to interact with peers (11%).

Tab. 8. Skills and abilities acquired by children in the past two months

Can you describe a new skill or ability your child has demonstrated in the past two months?	Attendance at ECEC			
	YES		NO	
	N	%	N	%
Language improvement	31	37.8	7	21.2
Greater autonomy	24	29.3	3	9.1
Greater autonomy and language improvement	6	7.3	3	9.1
Progress in psychomotor development	2	2.4	9	27.3
Progress in psychomotor development and first words	0	0.0	9	27.3
Improvement in fine motor skills	4	4.9	0	0.0
Counts and sings songs	4	4.9	0	0.0
Greater ability to interact with peers	9	11.0	0	0.0
Other	2	2.4	2	6.0
Total	82	100	33	100

In contrast, the responses of parents whose children do not attend ECEC are more uniform and less varied. They describe the main progress of their children as improvements in psychomotor development (27.3%), which is a residual category in the other group of parents (2.4%), and progress in psychomotor development along with an increase in vocabulary (27.3%). Additionally, 21.2% of parents indicate an increase in linguistic and communicative skills.

These aspects were further explored with the group of parents whose children attend ECEC, asking them which

skills had positively improved specifically as a result of ECEC attendance (see Table 9).

**Tab. 9.** Skills with the greatest impact according to parents through ECEC attendance

What specific area of your child's development do you believe is most positively impacted by attending ECEC? (82 responses)	N	%
Socialization with other children	35	42.7
Autonomy	24	29.3
Acquisition of routines (meals, hygiene, sleep)	15	18.3
Language	7	8.5
Motor skills	0	0.0
"Everything listed and much more"	1	1.2
<i>Total</i>	82	100

42.7% of parents indicate that "Socialization with other children" is the most positively enhanced competency since their child started attending ECEC, while 29.3% of parents report significant improvements in their children's autonomy. A notable 18.3% of parent responses highlight "Acquisition of routines (meals, hygiene, sleep)" as an effect specifically attributable to ECEC attendance. Interestingly, when compared with the results presented above (see Table 9), the area of motor skills is not mentioned at all by this group of parents as a relevant aspect of their children's development.

#### *Parents and activities with their children*

What are the activities that parents most frequently engage in with their children? Are there differences between the group of parents whose child attends ECEC and the group of parents whose child does not attend ECEC?

In describing daily activities (see Table 10), the group of parents whose children attend ECEC report more frequently engaging in specific and complex activities compared to the other group of parents, such as reading books (11.4% versus 5.1%), drawing and painting (7.7% versus 2%), and helping with small household chores (7.7% versus 4.0%).

The two groups are quite similar in terms of engaging in common activities such as singing (3.7% versus 3.0%), talking (1.6% versus 1%), and walking in the park (13% versus 12.1%).

**Tab. 10.** Most frequent parent-child activities at home

When the child is with you, what are the 3 main activities you do together most often?	Attendance at ECEC			
	YES		NO	
	N	%	N	%
Playing	71	28,9	32	32
Eating/Sleeping/Washing	26	10,6	12	12
Walking in the park	32	13,0	12	12
Reading books	28	11,4	5	5
Drawing and painting	19	7,7	2	2
Helping with small household chores	19	7,7	4	4
Missing response	7	2,8	12	12
<i>Total</i> <sup>1</sup>	246	100	100	100

Note. <sup>1</sup> Activities mentioned with a frequency of less than 6% are not listed in the table (sports activities, singing, listening to music and dancing, talking, watching cartoons, cuddling)

The group of parents whose children do not attend the ECEC tend to use the generic term "playing" more frequently (32.3% versus 28.9%). Additionally, they report more often engaging in caregiving activities with their children, such as eating, sleeping, and washing (12.1% versus 10.6%), and cuddling (3.0% versus 1.6%). This group of parents also shows a significantly higher percentage of non-responses to the question (12.1% versus 2.8%).

To further explore this aspect, only the group of parents whose children attend the ECEC were asked if and which activities and routines had been "transferred" from the ECEC to the family environment. It emerged that a substantial 72% of parents adopt and adapt some of the educational experiences and routines from the ECEC in organizing their child's daily life at home (see Table 11).

**Tab. 11.** Integration of ECEC routines at home

Have you ever "transferred" and reused at home some of the educational experiences and/or routines that your child experiences at ECEC? If yes, can you briefly describe one? (82 responses)	N	%
I have not done it	23	28,1
Recreate meal/sleep routines	17	20,8
Singing songs and engaging in manual and reading activities as done at ECEC	13	15,9
Encouraging personal autonomy (dressing, washing, eating, and sleeping on its own)	12	14,6
Tidying up toys after use	8	9,7
Sharing toys with other children	3	3,6
Eating together and helping to set the table	2	2,4
Other	4	4,9
<i>Total</i>	82	100

Among these, most parents (20.7%) reuse the meal/sleep routines proposed by the ECEC at home. 15.8% of parents replicate educational activities proposed at the ECEC such as singing songs, manual activities, and reading books. 14.6% of parents encourage and replicate at home the autonomous execution of routine activities by the child such as dressing, washing, eating, and sleeping. Activities that promote the development of social skills, cooperation, and the child's sense of responsibility are also reported, such as "tidying up toys after use" (9.7%), "sharing toys with other children" (3.6%), and "eating together and helping to set the table" (2.4%).

These results indicate that attending the ECEC not only provides an educational opportunity for rich socialization for children, but also serves as a source of expert practices for enhancing parenting skills and nuanced knowledge about child development and activities in which to engage and involve them.

#### *The "Typical day" of children*

A question in the questionnaire (question 16) investigates the descriptions (more or less detailed) of a typical day of their child in the two groups of parents (see Table 12).

In the group of parents whose children attend the ECEC, a substantial 67.1% of participants provide a very detailed description of their child's day, 20.7% give an undetailed description, and 12.2% offer a superficial description.

<sup>1</sup> Activities mentioned with a frequency of less than 6% are not listed in the table (sports activities, singing, listening to music and dancing, talking, watching cartoons, cuddling)

**Tab. 12.** Categorization of the level of accuracy in the description of a typical day by the parent: "Describe your child's daily routine, indicating where and with whom they spend the day, providing indicative times when possible"

Level of accuracy in the description	ECEC YES		ECEC NO	
	N	%	N	%
0: superficial description (e.g. only mentions the places where the child spends the day) Example: "ECEC in the morning and afternoon/then home"	10	12.2	12	36.4
1: undetailed description Example: "07:30 wake up and breakfast with dad, then ECEC... after school, mom takes her to the park... 18:30 dinner and 20:30 we try to be in bed"	17	20.7	7	21.2
2: detailed description (e.g. describes the activities the child engages in, the people who are with them, and approximate times). Example: "In the morning at 8:15, mom leaves with the child and the older brother. First, they drop the brother off at primary school at 8:30, then the child at the ECEC at 9:00. The child leaves at 16:00, after which they accompany mom to pick up the brother from school at 16:30. Depending on the weather, they go to the park or home. Dinner (dad, mom, child, brother) is between 18:00-18:30. They play, read, watch a video. Bedtime is at 20:00. On weekends, they mostly go on outings out of town. Relatives are seen on average once a month (paternal grandmother and/or uncle). Maternal relatives about twice a year as they live abroad."	55	67.1	14	42.4
Total	82	100	33	100

Note.  $\chi^2 = 9.57$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.008$

Among parents whose children do not attend the ECEC, 42.4% provide detailed descriptions, 21.2% give undetailed descriptions, and 36.4% offer only short and superficial descriptions.

The Chi-square analysis shows a significant difference in the distribution of description types between the two groups of parents. The results are further supported by the adjusted standardized residuals, which show a value of 2.26 for the cell "superficial description - N (%) ECEC NO". Parents whose children attend the ECEC are more capable and able to provide precise, rich, and accurate descriptions of their children's days, while among parents whose children do not attend the ECEC, brief and poorly detailed descriptions are the most frequent.

## Discussion

The results show interesting and significant differences in some of the dimensions investigated between the group of parents with children attending ECEC and the group whose children do not attend such educational services. Firstly, it emerged, confirming existing literature, that children's attendance at ECEC is closely linked to sociodemographic factors such as parents' employment or the presence of other children attending ECEC. Specifically, children are more likely to be enrolled in ECEC by parents from dual-income families, where both parents work. These families not only need help managing their children but also have greater economic capacity to afford the costs associated with ECEC attendance. However, parents' educational level does not emerge as a significant factor according to the analysis of adjusted standardized residuals. The presence of other children in the family attending a ECEC may be decisive, indicating a familial predisposition towards continuity in their educational choices.

Regarding the second dimension (parents' motivations for enrolling or not enrolling their children in ECEC), the results indicate that parents primarily enroll their children to balance work and childcare, as well as to provide opportunities for peer socialization. Motivations also emerged that highlight and recognize the special educational role of ECEC, such as

helping children grow with qualified personnel, fostering their autonomy by engaging with a different environment from the family, and providing them with valuable opportunities for socialization. On the other hand, parents who do not enroll their children in ECEC tend to avoid delegating their educational and caregiving role to outsiders, lack trust in ECEC staff, and consider their children too young for such an extrafamilial experience. Some parents in this second group also indicated that they had to forgo ECEC due to the high cost of fees.

Regarding the third dimension (ECEC attendance and children's skills), the results highlighted more refined knowledge and skills among parents whose children attend ECEC compared to those who do not use such services for their children. Parents of children attending ECEC are able to recognize and describe the socio-cognitive competencies positively influenced by ECEC with greater precision and detail (such as language skills, autonomy, and social abilities). In contrast, parents in the second group primarily observe developments and learning in the psychomotor and lexical (and partly linguistic) areas, indicating a more limited and narrow understanding of child development.

Regarding the fourth dimension (activities carried out with their children), the results show that parents of ECEC-attending children tend to organize a wider, richer, and more diverse range of activities with their children. They can identify and engage in many different and specific activities suitable for young children, beyond the generic "playing." This group of parents often adopts and "transfers" into the family environment the activities and educational routines typically proposed at the ECEC, involving their children in a richer and more diverse range of activities at home. This result further highlights the educational value of ECEC, not only for children but also for their parents.

Regarding the fifth dimension (the children's typical day), the results also show significant differences between the descriptions provided by the two groups of parents. Parents of ECEC-attending children can provide more detailed, accurate, and dense descriptions of their children's daily routines, while most descriptions from parents whose children do not attend a ECEC are very brief and generic. This difference may be partly

due to the knowledge parents acquire about ECEC activities and routines and partly to the fact that parents who choose to enroll their children in ECEC and often work have a more detailed and diversified planning of their children's days.

A limitation of the research is the small sample size, as participants were recruited from only three ECEC in Central Italy. Considering the inequalities in ECEC access across different regions of the country, it would be interesting in the future to expand the research to include parents from Southern and Northern Italy. Another limitation concerns the imbalance in the sample between attending and non-attending participants, which may have affected the representativeness of the results. Furthermore, individuals with a middle school diploma or elementary school certificate are underrepresented, limiting the generalizability of the findings to groups with lower educational levels. Additionally, a non-validated questionnaire was used, and further studies are needed to confirm its reliability. Lastly, the categorical thematic analysis was particularly valuable in interpreting the open-ended responses, as it enabled the emergence of new and unexpected categories. However, a potential limitation of the study lies in the use of predefined categories for some other responses, which may have constrained the depth and flexibility of the analysis.

Overall, the results highlight that ECEC plays not only an important educational role for children but also represents a formative experience for parents. They "learn at ECEC" significant activities to carry out with their children and gain a richer perspective on their development through interactions and exchanges with professional educators. Regular interaction with educators (and other parents) and participation in ECEC events enable parents to learn about diverse educational activities, enriching their understanding and ability to "read" children's developmental areas in an expert manner. Thus, ECEC proves to be not only a socialization context for children but also a fertile environment for learning refined parenting skills, contributing to the creation of an educational community that extends its value well beyond the family context.

This last aspect could be the subject of future research. It would be particularly interesting to describe in detail the formal and informal practices of interaction and communication between parents and ECEC educators and coordinators, as well as between parents, to provide insights to educational services on how attention to these aspects and their various organizations can contribute to enriching and enhancing parental skills and competencies.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> This decrease is contrary to the recommendation of the European Commission of September 7, 2022, which states that by 2030 at least 96% of children should attend preschool

<sup>2</sup> This value is still well below the minimum target of 33% that had been set for 2010 by the European Council of Barcelona (ISTAT Report 2023)

<sup>3</sup> Italy has one of the lowest rates in Europe for the employment rate of women (52.1% in 2022), over 13 points

below the European average (65.3%). The birth rate is at its historical minimum in our country, with a negative record of only 392 thousand new births (ISTAT 2023).

## Ethical Approval

The information regarding the study and consent for data processing were developed in accordance with the guidelines provided by the Transdisciplinary Research Ethics Committee of the University of Rome Sapienza and the Italian Association of Psychology. The project, along with the data collection and processing procedures, was approved by the organizations where the research was conducted: "A piccoli passi" (a public ECEC), "Il castello di Gelsomina" (a public ECEC), and "Snoopy club" (a private bilingual ECEC).

## Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author.

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No funding was received for conducting this study.

## Author Contributions

M.A.: Data Analysis, Software, Methodology, Writing

G.M.: Data Analysis, Methodology, Investigation, Writing

C.Z.: Conceptualization, Data Analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Writing

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Supplementary Materials

Supplementary materials for this study, including additional data tables, are available at [https://osf.io/pvxcw/?view\\_only=fb78a7e4e64d4afe8f3ca9ee1ad7e323](https://osf.io/pvxcw/?view_only=fb78a7e4e64d4afe8f3ca9ee1ad7e323)

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## Appendix 1:

### Questionnaire “Children and Nido”

Below are the questions from the questionnaire analyzed in the article:

*Question 7:* “What were the main reasons for choosing to enroll your child in ECEC?”

*Question 8:* “What specific area of your child's development do you believe is most positively impacted by attending ECEC?”

*Question 9:* “Have you ever ‘transferred’ and reused at home some of the educational experiences and/or routines your child experiences at ECEC? If yes, can you briefly describe one?”

*Question 10-15:* “Can you describe a new skill or ability your child has demonstrated in the past two months?”

*Question 14:* “What were the main reasons for choosing not to enroll your child in ECEC?”

*Question 16:* “Describe your child’s daily routine, indicating where and with whom they spend the day, providing indicative times when possible.”

*Question 17:* “When the child is with you, what are the 3 main activities you do together most often?”

## Appendix 2:

*Coding categories for questions 7,8,9,10,14,15,16,17*

Below are the categories developed for each question:

*Question 7:* “What were the main reasons for choosing to enroll your child in ECEC?”

- a) Both parents work
- b) For work needs and to allow the child to socialize
- c) To allow the child to socialize with peers
- d) To expose the child to environments different from the family
- e) To raise the child with qualified personnel
- f) To encourage the child’s autonomy
- g) Other

*Question 8:* “What specific area of your child’s development do you believe is most positively impacted by attending ECEC?”

- a) Socialization with other children
- b) Language
- c) Autonomy
- d) Motor skills
- e) Acquisition of routines (meals, hygiene, sleep)
- f) Other

*Question 9:* “Have you ever ‘transferred’ and reused at home some of the educational experiences and/or routines your child experiences at ECEC? If yes, can you briefly describe one?”

- a) I have not done it
- b) Recreate meal/sleep routines
- c) Singing songs and engaging in manual and reading activities as done at ECEC
- d) Encouraging personal autonomy (dressing, washing, eating, and sleeping on its own)
- e) Tidying up toys after use
- f) Sharing toys with other children
- g) Eating together and helping to set the table
- h) Other

*Question 10-15:* “Can you describe a new skill or ability your child has demonstrated in the past two months?”

- a) Language improvement
- b) Greater autonomy
- c) Greater autonomy and language improvement
- d) Progress in psychomotor development
- e) Progress in psychomotor development and first words
- f) Improvement in fine motor skills
- g) Counts and sings songs
- h) Greater ability to interact with peers
- i) Other

*Question 14:* “What were the main reasons for choosing not to enroll your child in ECEC?”

- a) Since I don’t work, I don’t feel the need and prefer to keep the child with me
- b) I think the child is too young
- c) The child will attend ECEC when older
- d) Economic reasons: “ECEC costs more than my salary”
- e) I don’t trust the educational staff
- f) Other

*Question 16:* “Describe your child’s daily routine, indicating where and with whom they spend the day, providing indicative times when possible.”

0. superficial description (e.g. only mentions the places where the child spends the day)
  1. undetailed description
  2. detailed description (e.g. describes the activities the child engages in, the people who are with them, and approximate times)

*Question 17:* “When the child is with you, what are the 3 main activities you do together most often?”

- a) Playing
- b) Eating/Sleeping/Washing
- c) Walking in the park
- d) Sports activities
- e) Singing
- f) Listening to music and dancing
- g) Reading books
- h) Drawing and painting
- i) Talking
- j) Helping with small household chores
- k) Watching cartoons
- l) Cuddling
- m) Other
- n) Missing response