



FOSTERING INCLUSION OF AUTISTIC CHILDREN THROUGH LEARNING PROVISIONS FOR CHILDMINDERS

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ENSURING THE PROFESSIONALISATION OF CHILDMINDERS TO SUPPORT AUTISTIC CHILDREN IN EUROPE

It is estimated that **1% of the population is on the autism spectrum** (around 5 million people in Europe)¹. If you include their families, autism touches the lives of **over 30 million Europeans**. The condition impacts all aspects of the individual's experience, including how they learn². Autistic children share common needs with others and are entitled to appropriate childcare. However, they have **specific needs** related to communication, social understanding, flexibility, and sensory processing. Meaningful access to appropriate childcare is crucial for autistic children.³

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the availability and the quality of early education and care (ECEC) in the European Union, due to an **increased understanding** of the importance of early years in children's development as well as the need of **supporting families' work-life balance**.

Currently available competence frameworks for childminders do not include specific modules dedicated to learning for children with special needs, these aspects are only superficially addressed in general training modules. This has a direct impact both on their employability opportunities, and on the availability of skilled workers for families. Some brief ad hoc lifelong learning modules are available for some of the most common disabilities. These are largely inadequate to address the need of skilled caretakers of families who have children on the autism spectrum. In this context, the ChildIN project aims at addressing this gap and **providing specific blended training for childminders focusing on autism**.

Proven positive impact

The **lack of specific learning on autism for professionals** was addressed by the ChildIN pilot training, and childminders who benefited from it reported **high satisfaction rates** in Poland, Portugal and France.

- **53** trainees completed **successfully** the ChildIN training: 16 trainees in Poland, 16 in France and 21 in Portugal, respectively;
- 65% of the enrolled trainees completed the training;
- Most of the trainees who completed the first week completed the full training with high rates of motivation and satisfaction;
- **76%** were **"satisfied"** or **"very satisfied"** with the training programme;
- **Two professional certifications** will be submitted at national level in France and in Portugal right after the project completion.

¹ Elsabbagh et al 2012; Fombonne, 2011; ADDM 2012; Mattila et al 2011; Saemundsen et al 2013; Baird et al 2011.

² Dawson et al., 2008

³ Baird, G., Simonoff, E., Pickles, A., Chandler, S., Loucas, T., Meldrum, D & Charman, T. (2006) Prevalence of disorders of the autistic spectrum in a population cohort of children in South Thames: the Special Needs and Autism Project (SNAP), Lancet, 368, 210-215.

A LEGAL OBLIGATION TO FOSTER INCLUSION

ChildIN addresses the lack of adequate training on autism for childminders in France, Portugal and Poland in a context where **national education and disability policies** have been evolving in recent years.

The project supported the implementation of **national disability policy** within these countries such as:

- The National Autism Strategy (2018- 2022)⁴ in France⁵;
- Decree-Law 3/2008, the Inclusive Education Act (Decree-Law 54/2018)⁶ in Portugal;
- The Constitution (1997), the Charter of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (1997), the Education Law (2016)⁷, and the Resolution of the Senate on supporting and equalizing opportunities for persons on the autism spectrum⁸ in Poland.

At the international level, the **United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**⁹ has provisions in relation to education and provides guidance on how to achieve inclusive education from the perspective of meeting the needs of all children. The convention, ratified by all the EU member states, as well as the EU itself, outlines in ‘Article 24: Education,’ the importance of an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning, and also specialist teacher training, and what that training should entail in more detail. Furthermore, ‘Article 7: Children with disabilities’ ensures the full enjoyment by children with disabilities of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children; and the equal right of autistic children to live in the community is also covered by ‘Article 19: Inclusion into the communities’.

The **United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child**¹⁰ (UNCRC) also recognizes the rights of children with disabilities and the right to education “on the basis of equal opportunity” in articles 23 and 28, respectively.

Moreover, the **UN’s Sustainable Development Goals** (2015-2030), and in particular SDG4 Quality Education, highlights the necessity to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote

⁴ Autisme : *Stratégie nationale pour l’Autisme au sein des troubles du neuro-développement*. 2018.

https://handicap.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/strategie_nationale_autisme_2018.pdf

⁵ *La stratégie nationale pour l’autisme et les TND dans les territoires*. (2021)

<https://handicap.gouv.fr/presse/dossiers-de-presse/article/la-strategie-nationale-pour-l-autisme-et-les-tnd-dans-les-territoires>

⁶ Alves, I., Campos Pinto, P. & Pinto, T.J. Developing inclusive education in Portugal: Evidence and challenges. *Prospects* 49, 281–296 (2020). <https://dre.pt/web/en/home/-/contents/115652961/details/normal>

⁷ Agnieszka Żyta, Stanisława Byra, Katarzyna Ćwirynkało: Education of children and Youth with Disabilities in Poland and The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *Hrvatska Revija za Rehabilitacijska Istrazivanja*, suppl. Supplement; Zagreb Vol. 53, (2017): 244-251.

<https://media.proquest.com/media/hms/PFT/1/jvT4?s=xgJElFUDrppg0rVfrORe3ELfA3w%3D>

⁸ 19 April 2021. See: <https://monitorpolski.gov.pl/M2021000037901.pdf>

⁹ UNCRPD, 2007. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

¹⁰ UNCRC, 1990. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

lifelong learning opportunities for all”. This can only be achieved when childminders are properly trained to deal with the specificities of disability, such as the specific needs of autistic children.

At the EU level, “Chapter I: Equal opportunities and access to the labour market’ of the **European Pillar of Social Rights**, outlines that “everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning”. The Action Plan¹¹ for its implementation recommends to “invests in high-quality and inclusive education, training, skills and innovation, and ensures adequate social protection for all” in order to “to strengthen the European social dimension across all policies of the Union as enshrined in the Treaties¹²”.

Inclusive education has been put high on the education agenda by the EU. One of the six axes of the **European Education Area**¹³ is dedicated to inclusive education and lifelong learning for all, starting with early childhood education and care. Education policies will continue to be supported by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education¹⁴. In the framework of the **Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030**¹⁵, the Commission will collect policies and practices promoting educational achievements of persons with disabilities in the Member States to feed into policymaking. Synergies with a view to access and promote quality education including early childhood and care will be fostered by the new **EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child**¹⁶ and the **European Child Guarantee**¹⁷.

At the same time, the **European Skills Agenda**¹⁸ aims at boosting skills and Vocational Education and Training (VET) , in order to guide COVID-19 recovery efforts in the fields of employment and social policy in 2020¹⁹. The agenda sets out a five-year action plan with 12 actions to help equip people in Europe with better skills and the importance of the care sector as a whole is specifically mentioned.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ensure appropriate training, continuing professional development and support for childminders
2. Support the acquisition of competences related to the care of children on the autism spectrum for effective inclusion
3. Harmonise and recognise childminding across Europe and strive for a common curriculum

¹¹ European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, 2021

¹² Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union 2016/2020-03-01, cfr Art. 3 and Art. 9

¹³ Commission Communication (COM(2020) 625 final): Achieving the European Education Area by 2025

¹⁴ European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education is an independent organisation that acts as a platform for collaboration for the Ministries of Education in its member countries.

¹⁵ Brussels, 3.3.2021 COM(2021) 101 final

¹⁶ Brussels, 24.3.2021 COM(2021) 142 final

¹⁷ Brussels, 24.3.2021 COM(2021) 137 final

¹⁸ Brussels, 10.6.2016 COM(2016) 381 final

¹⁹ COM/2020/274 final

ChildIN strongly recommends European institutions, relevant public authorities and social partners of EU Member States, in particular those bodies related to child rights, disability rights, and training and certification of home care professionals to ensure the development of effective childminder training to respond to the support needs of autistic children across Europe, in line with the project's findings.

Specialist training for childminders is an effective way to contribute to better outcomes for autistic children as well as to improve their quality of life, and inclusion in society. Public authorities and other relevant stakeholders should therefore foster policy actions at national/regional level and ensure that adequate resources and funding are dedicated to this issue as investing in education will have a significant impact on the outcomes of autistic children.

1. Ensure appropriate training, continuing professional development and support for childminders

The evaluation of the project highlights the **added value of autism-specific trainings** for childminders. In line with EU priorities, ChildIN thus recommends to develop and ensure the availability of appropriate training, including practical and field-based experiences, as well as continuing professional development and support for childminders in relation to autism.

To this end, ChildIN recommends:

- ensure that such training is designed to address the needs of childminders and autistic children;
- adequately address the knowledge gap and provide upgrading pathways for childminders;
- involve learners in the design of the trainings;
- equip both learners and educators with adaptability skills in order to suit new professional situations;
- and tackle the COVID-19 specific VET issues raised by the pandemic.

“In the ChildIN Mobility Days, I have learnt about the different kinds of intervention programmes and models as never before” (Social worker and childminder, Portugal)

2. Support the acquisition of competences related to the care of children on the autism spectrum for effective inclusion

ChildIN found that it is essential to develop appropriate training, including practical and field-based experiences, as well as access to current research and best practice regarding childcare strategies to ensure inclusion pathways for autistic children since early years. Emphasis should be placed on **upgrading knowledge and regularly refreshing practice** with respect to childminders' experience to enhance their competence and confidence. Training in autism should be provided on an ongoing basis so that all **childminders are empowered** to work with children on the spectrum.

To this end, ChildIN recommends:

- providing evidence-based approaches to teaching and learning for children on the autism spectrum;

- systematically involve autism representatives and experts in the design of the training;
- adequately reflect the diversity of people on the autism spectrum (e.g.: with and without a learning disabilities) and of their support needs;
- fostering the acquisition of digital skills for a successful use of blended and/or e-learning training or exchanges for professionals.

3. Harmonise and recognise childminding across Europe, striving towards a common curriculum

“I think that developing a training is necessary because autism is a very diverse spectrum, and we need to prepare caregivers for this diversity and to act in accordance with the individuality of each person.” (VET provider, Portugal)

ChildIN has directly contributed to the VET field priority of providing upgrading pathways for a profession whose impact **is largely underestimated**. ChildIN work is carried out across countries, according to European standards and in compliance with the learning outcomes approach, to contribute to an overall aim of **recognition of the profession**, which is certified in some countries, but not yet in others.

ChildIN recommends:

- developing a European dimension for the profession and focusing on neglected profiles, e.g. those childminders providing care at home, building up on the basis of the ESCO existing profile (5311 Child care worker²⁰);
- ensure full recognition within the national qualification frameworks, like in France and Portugal, where a specialization has been submitted to the relevant national authorities;
- ensure sustainability and quality of childminders training and certification thanks to ChildIN guidelines available in the project dedicated website²¹;
- ensure that outcomes of this project are used to further develop adequate training for a wide range of professionals in Europe across relevant sectors, including for teachers and educators.

“The most important result for me after participating in the ChildIN training, would be to have professional recognition and to consider the childminders as being real professionals and part of the team caring for children with autism”. (Childminder from France)

Implementing these key recommendations will ensure childminders across Europe are better equipped to meet the needs of autistic children and fulfil the European countries legal obligations regarding inclusion and the rights of people with disabilities.

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²⁰ See: <http://data.europa.eu/esco/isco/C5311>.

²¹ See: <https://childin.eu/>