

# Access to pre-school care for children with special needs

Sylva Höhne – Jana Paloncyová, September 2023

Survey of Children's Groups and Parent, Family, and Community Centres in the Czech Republic

## Summary



Majority of children's groups and family, parent, and community centres (hereinafter referred to as family centres) in the Czech Republic work with children with special needs and their families. These include children with disabilities as well as children from different socio-cultural backgrounds or disadvantaged localities.



One in four children's groups enrolled refugee children from Ukraine. More than half of the surveyed family centres also provided their services to refugee children and parents.



Family centres have been implementing various activities for refugee children and families, including Czech language courses, counselling on child development and education, adaptation programmes for children before the entry to kindergarten or primary school; counselling for parents on employment and available aid/financial assistance.



Family centres are struggling with finances. While available state funding is not sufficient at the time of increasing prices, the support is also unstable and difficult to predict, hindering longer term planning. The lack of funding is a major barrier in development of services, especially related to staffing.



To improve the access to children's groups by children with special needs, it is necessary to secure the position of caregiver assistant. Children's groups currently do not have sufficient funds to allocate for this position, nor are the qualification requirements defined.



Vulnerable families would also benefit from wider support provided by different specialists (psychotherapy, speech therapy, financial counselling, etc.) and networking activities. Insufficient capacity and long waiting times for these services is one of the persistent challenges at the family centres. Further support of these services by local and regional governments will be important to ensure wider accessibility, particularly for the most vulnerable families and children.

## Introduction

Measures to support balancing work and family life are among the key themes of modern family policy. One pillar is the system of childcare services, especially for the youngest children, which enables parents to be active in the labour market and hence, financially provide for the family. Despite the general trends, there are substantial differences between European countries in terms of the types of services, quality, and availability of early childhood education and care services. There are also significant differences in the intensity of children's attendance of ECEC services and in the level of public support. According to Eurostat statistics<sup>1</sup>, the highest attendance rates for children under three years of age at childcare facilities is in western and northern European countries. By contrast, in southern countries, and even more so in eastern Europe, the proportion of children of this age attending non-family care facilities is significantly lower. The Czech Republic holds the lead in this respect with only 5% in 2021. The formerly relatively wide network of day-care nurseries in the Czech Republic has gradually shrunk since 1989 due to lower demand and family policy measures, such as parental leave. A renaissance of service-based childcare, especially for children under three years of age, began in 2014 with the legislative act on the provision of childcare services in children's groups (Act No 247/2014 Coll.). These facilities focus on provision of childcare for children aged six months to the start of compulsory schooling.

In addition to the fact that non-family care allows parents of young children to work, research shows that it is particularly beneficial for children with special needs. For the purposes of this study, we define two main groups of children with special needs: the first is related to the health of the children (mental or physical disability, sensory impairment, developmental dysphasia, hyperkinetic behavioural disorders, autistic spectrum disorder, specific learning disabilities or exceptional gifted), while the second is related to social background (socially disadvantaged environment, different mother tongue, different ethnicity, foster family care, parents with mental health issues, poverty,

divorced families or dysfunctional partnerships, unstimulating environments, etc.). Young children's participation in quality ECEC can reduce the inequalities and enable their optimal development (e.g. Shpancer, 2022; OECD, 2022; Palonciová et al., 2014; Hašková et al., 2012; Florin, 2004). Hence, ensuring children with special needs access ECEC is of critical importance, particularly access to children's groups, but also other services provided by family centres, which, among others, play an important role in the primary prevention of negative outcomes for the families.

## Main findings

According to the survey of children's groups and the family centres carried out by RILSA with the support of UNICEF, majority of the services have some experience of working with children with special needs or their families. **Only 15% of the children's groups have not yet encountered children with special needs in their services.** According to the representatives of these children's groups, this was mainly due to the low level of demand from the families with children with special needs (95% of respondents with no experience with children with special needs), however some services name staffing and material/space availability as a barrier to the admission of the children requiring special care (13% and 15% respectively). On the other hand, 56% of providers have worked with both groups of children with special needs (health related vs social background), while 11% of children's groups have so far accepted only children with health-related special needs and 18% only with social needs. Among the health or development related special needs, children's groups most often encounter specific learning disabilities (Chart 1). These are followed by autism spectrum disorders, developmental dysphasia (a disorder affecting speech development) and hyperkinetic behavioural disorders (ADHD, inattentive and impulsive behaviour patterns). If we focus on the specific needs of children related to their socio-cultural background, the children's groups most often work with children with a different mother tongue, but also children from

---

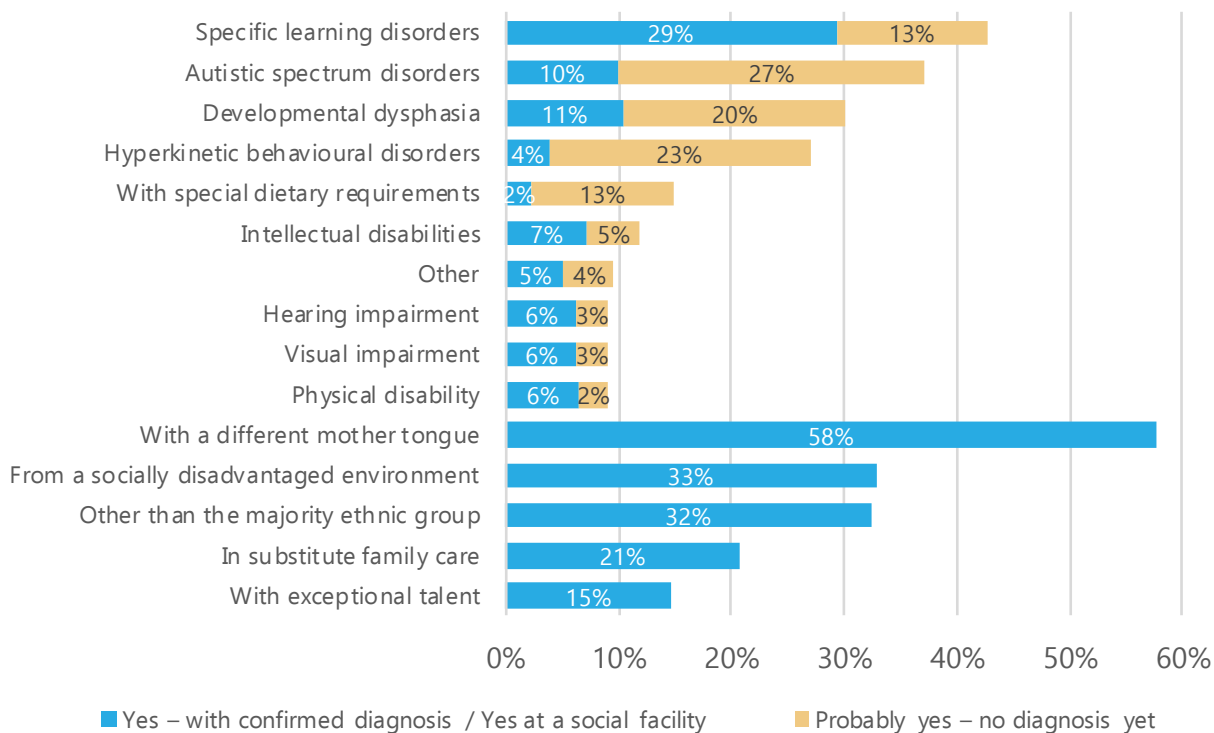
1 The data are based on the EU SILC questionnaire survey (Czech Statistical Office, <https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/zivotni-podminky-eu-silc-metodika>).

socially disadvantaged backgrounds or from other than the majority ethnic group (Chart 1). **As of 1 January 2023, 753 children requiring special support or care were enrolled in the children's groups that participated in the study. In relative terms, these children represented 11% of the enrolled children.** In comparison, in the 2022/2023 school year there were 18 925 children with special educational needs enrolled in kindergartens, and these children represented approximately 5% of all enrolled children.

Due to the war in Ukraine year 2022 was marked by the inflow of refugees, mainly women with children, to neighbouring countries, including the Czech Republic. **According to RILSA research, one in four children's groups have enrolled some Ukrainian children.** If a facility did not have such experience, the most frequent reason cited (70%) was lack of demand from Ukrainian parents, while in 43% of cases the providers indicated that their group was already at maximum capacity and could not enrol more children. Ukrainian children were more often accepted by children's groups operating

in municipalities with more than 10 000 inhabitants (approximately 30% versus 15% in smaller municipalities). A total of 137 Ukrainian children under the age of three and 159 older children were admitted to the facilities participating in the research<sup>2</sup>. From the statements made by the representatives of the children's groups, it is impossible to conclude in which period of 2022 the attendance of Ukrainian children was the highest. According to about a third (36%) of them, demand from such families did not vary by month in 2022, while another third (35%) responded that the demand was highest in the spring, with the other 29% saying that their experience with attendance by Ukrainian children was higher in the second half of 2022. The refugee children mostly attended the children's groups daily and for the whole day. To facilitate their integration, specific adaptation plans have been developed for them in a third of the facilities. In all the children's groups, where Ukrainian children were enrolled, there were clear efforts for full inclusion, so no separate activities were organized for them.

Chart 1 **Experience of children's group providers with children with special needs (%)**

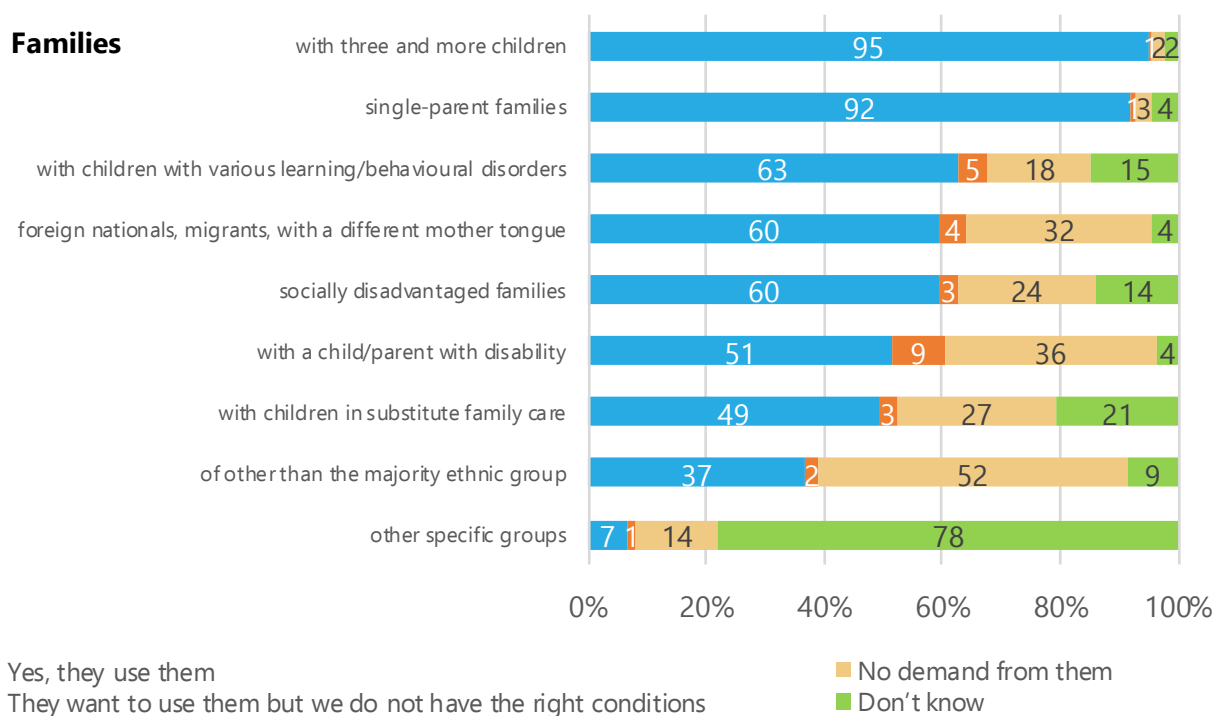


Source: Children's groups 2023

**Family centres also have relatively ample experience with families with specific needs.** Their regular clientele includes families with three or more children and single-parent families (Chart 2). Approximately three fifths of the centres provide their services to families with children with learning disabilities, behavioural disorders, autism spectrum disorders, etc., to families of foreign nationals and/or to socially and economically disadvantaged families with social disadvantages. In approximately half of the centres, children with disabilities and often their parents, and families with children in substitute family care (foster care, etc.) participate in the activities offered. Families from non-majority ethnic backgrounds attend about one in three centres. From the perspective of service providers, the reason why families or children with special needs do not use the services of such centres is more likely to be a lack of demand on their part, rather than inadequate conditions or availability of targeted services in the centres, however in some cases the latter might not be entirely negligible. Moreover, the lack of interest by the families concerned may reflect the lack of needed services, lack of trust in the offered activities, concerns about affordability, etc.

**More than half of the family centres involved in the research (57%, or 77 centres) had experience with Ukrainian refugee children and families. The Ukrainian children were overwhelmingly of pre-school age** (in 35% of the centres, Ukrainian children were most often three years old or younger, in another 36% of the centres, children were mainly four to six years old), similar to the usual beneficiaries of the centres' programmes. Two fifths of the centres offer, or have offered, Czech language instruction and counselling related to children's education to Ukrainian families. Almost one in three centres that worked with refugee families had an adaptation programme<sup>3</sup> for young children before entry to kindergarten or primary school. However, the centres also provided parents with employment counselling to improve their economic self-sufficiency. Material assistance provided to refugee families was very common and was offered by 57% of the centres.

Chart 2 **Use of services by families with special needs (%)**



Source: Family and maternity centres 2023

<sup>3</sup> Adaptation programmes for young refugee children frequently focused on daily care, play and learning opportunities for prolonged periods of time, which many families used as an alternative to children's groups or kindergartens where capacity of enrolling new children was limited.

With many of the special needs listed, it is usually very difficult to have a specific diagnosis confirmed by a specialist, especially for children under the age of three. Caregivers are often the ones who bring various behavioural manifestations or other needs to the attention of the parents, who then either independently or in cooperation with the facility, seek out a specialist (paediatrician or other health specialist, psychologist, pedagogical-psychological counselling centre, etc.). However, this research also highlighted complaints from family services providers about the insufficient capacity of the follow-up specialized services to address the needs of their beneficiaries in a timely way.

Providers of childcare services in children's groups highlighted the feasibility of ensuring individualized approaches to support children, including those with special needs, as the caregiver-child ratio in children's groups is lower by law than in kindergartens. On the other hand, they also mentioned some more or less significant barriers to children's groups that limit the access for children with special needs. In this context, some focus group participants mentioned, for example, the reserved or even dismissive attitude of parents of children without special needs, which may manifest in pressure on the provider to keep children with special needs out of the group (especially if the child's behaviour is aggressive), but also in the dissemination of negative reviews of the facility. However, funding was far more frequently mentioned as a barrier, especially for children's groups, as the inclusion of children with special needs requires more qualified caregivers and, in some cases, adapted material equipment and resources.



## Recommendations for family policy

State support for services for families with children, such as children's groups and maternity/family/community centres, should be based on comprehensive data. While considering the number and capacity of available services is important, it is also critical that the state support is informed by the demographic characteristics of families using these services, characteristics of the demand, and the analysis of needs for matching the services with the demand. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind the local needs. RILSA research has shown that children's groups and family centres are an important link in the inclusion of young children with special needs and their families, including refugees. To support and further develop these services, the following can be recommended:

At the national level, to strengthen the system of services for young children and families that is affordable and accessible, including for children and families with special needs. The development of the system will require active engagement and cooperation among all relevant ministries, in particular, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Regional Development.

To ensure adequate funding for these services. These services are partly financed by the families themselves, but sustained state funding is also needed to ensure their quality and access for vulnerable children. This is the task of negotiations between the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Finance or may be the subject of a change in the budgetary allocation of municipal taxes, such as redistribution of funding among the state, regions, and municipalities.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, regions, and municipalities, to extend the period covered by a subsidy beyond the usual one year and increase the amounts allocated to the subsidy titles, possibly considering the background of long-term and successfully functioning centres and revised definitions of supported activities and wage requirements in the subsidy titles.

In the case of children's groups, adjust the period for the disbursement of the state funding to the school year, instead of the calendar year, and index its amount reflecting the increase in consumer prices, similar to the capping of parental payments, or derive its amount from family income, if there is no risk of exacerbating inequitable access for the vulnerable groups.

At all levels of state and local government, support operation and networking of specialized family support services of non-profit organizations. The support is crucial to ensure accessibility of the services particularly for the most vulnerable, including counselling in crisis situations (economic security of the family, loss of employment, illness, etc.), psycho-social support services, as well as services focused on integration and inclusion of children and families with other nationalities, cultures, and languages.

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport in cooperation with local authorities and other relevant institutions (National Pedagogic Institute, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Health, etc.) to provide methodological guidance and support for pedagogical-psychological counselling centres and other specialists (paediatricians, etc.) in assessing needs and supporting children and families with a different mother tongue.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs should motivate local governments and regions (e.g., through examples of good practice) to support services provided by children's groups and family centres.

Based on discussions between service providers and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, define the qualification requirements for caregiver assistants in children's groups to support inclusion of children with special needs, and allocate necessary funding for establishing this position (e.g., by increasing the existing state contribution for operation of children's groups). Support the capacity building of caregivers and caregiver assistants in children's groups through provision of methodological guidance and allocation of required funding.

Providers of services for families, but also the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, should support increasing awareness of families, including refugees on available support mechanisms and services, including children's groups and specialized family support activities. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs should also improve the awareness of providers of children's groups and family centres on the need for training of staff, cooperation with different specialists (e.g., psychologists and interpreters), provision of needs-based educational and methodological materials, etc.

It is also necessary to consider a certain level of anchoring of the family centres in the system, e.g., in the area of preventive services for families with children, within the framework of material assistance, etc.

To enable comprehensive planning and support, sociological surveys should also be used to identify the needs of parents of young children with special needs, their experiences, and preferences regarding childcare services.

## Methodology

The study focused on children's groups and parent and family centres was based on **sociological research combining quantitative and qualitative methodology**. The primary goal of this research was to explore the accessibility and barriers to children's groups and family centres for Ukrainian children and their families and other vulnerable groups (see Paloncyová, Höhne, 2023).

Initially, **12 in-depth interviews** were conducted **with ECEC experts** to identify key themes and challenges in provision of service-based childcare and family centre services. Attention was also paid to their experience in caring for children with special needs. The information gathered from the interviews formed the basis for the main **questionnaire survey**, which took place in January/February 2023. All providers of childcare services in children's groups registered in the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs database as of January 2023 (910 children's groups) were contacted through the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The questionnaire for family centres was distributed through Síť pro rodinu (Network for the Family) and Unie center pro rodinu a komunitu (Union of Family and Community Centres) to their members (316 centres). The research team also selected 88 organisations providing services for families from the list of applicants under the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs' subsidy title "Family". The return rate was about one third in both cases, with a total of **318 providers providing data on 447 children's groups and 136 family centres**. At the end of the project, in June 2023, two more **focus groups** were held **with 13 representatives of children's groups** from different regions of the Czech Republic. The main topics were the financing of children's groups, access to these services for children with special needs, and cooperation between local governments and their providers.

## Literature and resources

- FLORIN, Agnès, 2004. **La garde des enfants de deux ans: qu'en dit la recherche? (Childcare for two-year-olds: what does the research say?)** Synthèse pour le PIREF. (Summary for the PIREF programme) Direction de la recherche. (Research directorate)
- HAŠKOVÁ, Hana, Steven SAXONBERG (eds.) & Jiří MUDRÁK, 2012. **Péče o nejmenší. (Caring for the little ones). Boření mýtů. (Myth-busting)**. Prague: Sociologické nakladatelství SLON. 199 p. ISBN 978-80-7419-114-5.
- OECD, 2022. **Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators**, OECD Publishing, Paris. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en>.
- PALONCYOVÁ, Jana, Jana BARVÍKOVÁ, Věra KUCHAROVÁ & Kristýna PEYCHLOVÁ, 2014. **Nové formy denní péče o děti v České republice. (New forms of day care for children in the Czech Republic)**. Prague: VÚPSV, v. v. i. Available from: [https://katalog.vupsv.cz/Fulltext/vz\\_381.pdf](https://katalog.vupsv.cz/Fulltext/vz_381.pdf).
- PALONCYOVÁ, Jana & Sylva HÖHNE, 2023. **Dětské skupiny a rodinná centra – jejich fungování a přístup dětí se specifickými potřebami k těmto službám. (Children's group and family centres – their functioning and the access of children with specific needs to these services)**. Praha: RILSA. Available from: [https://katalog.vupsv.cz/fulltext/vz\\_531.pdf](https://katalog.vupsv.cz/fulltext/vz_531.pdf).
- PROKOP, Daniel, Martina KAVANOVÁ, Michael ŠKVRŇÁK, Michal KUNC, Karel GARGULÁK, Matyáš LEVINSKÝ & Jana BICANOVÁ, 2023. **Hlas Ukrajinců: vzdělávání dětí. (Voice of Ukrainians: children's education)**. PAQ Research. Available from: <https://www.paqresearch.cz/post/vzdelavani-ukrajina-nova-vlna>.
- SHPANCER, Noam, 2022. **Nonparental child care (daycare)**. Reference Module in Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Psychology, Elsevier. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-323-91497-0.00003-5>.

## Ing. Sylva Höhne

(sylva.hohne@rilsa.cz)

works in the family policy department at RILSA. She is primarily an expert on the socio-economic conditions of families, the system of financial support for families with children, family policy and childcare services.

## Mgr. Jana Paloncyová, Ph.D.

(jana.paloncyova@rilsa.cz)

is head of the family policy team at RILSA. She is mainly involved in family policy, demography, sociology of the family, socio-legal protection of children, and substitute family care.



The research that resulted in this Policy Brief was carried out within the framework of the project “Access to pre-school care for children with special needs”; which was implemented with financial and technical support from UNICEF. The views expressed herein do not automatically reflect UNICEF’s viewpoint and positions.