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■ Childcare Facilities for Young Children in France: History, Current State, and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

Background. This article delves into the evolution of extra-familial childcare in France since the 19th century, reflecting on the socio-economic pressures and societal values that have shaped its development. It highlights how France's approach to childcare is deeply interwoven with its social policies, economic developments, and changing family structures.

Objective. The main aim is to analyze the historical trajectory and current state of childcare systems in France, addressing the dynamic interplay among policy, societal needs, and economic factors. It also assesses how these elements influence the quality and availability of childcare.

Methods. The study reviews existing data on childcare utilization, policy impacts, and demographic trends affecting children under three years of age in France. The methodology includes a comprehensive review of historical documents, policy analyses, and current statistical data from organizations like ONAPE (l'Observatoire national de la petite enfance) and DREES (Direction de la recherche, des études, de l'évaluation et des statistiques) to construct a detailed picture of the childcare landscape in France.

Results. The research reveals that France has one of the highest childcare coverage rates in the OECD, facilitated by a mix of public and private provisions. However, recent shifts towards privatization have sparked debates concerning the quality of care and commercialization risks. Current systems face challenges due to economic constraints and changing demographic patterns, with a notable trend towards increased private sector involvement in childcare services.

Conclusions. While France has made significant strides in providing childcare, ongoing economic pressures and evolving social norms continue to shape its landscape. The balance between public welfare and private enterprise, alongside the quality of childcare, remains a critical area for future policy and societal debate. As France continues to adapt to these challenges, the trajectory of its childcare systems will likely serve as a bellwether for broader social policy shifts in the country.

Keywords: France, early childhood care, family policy, maternal assistants, micro-daycares, daycares, history, prospective

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In France, about 60% of the 2.1 million children under three years old have a place in one of the various "formal" childcare modes (daycare centers, maternal assistants, preschool, or home employment) (ONAPE, 2024). France is thus among the OECD countries with the highest coverage rates (Collombet, 2022; Collombet, Math, 2023). It is also the European country with the highest number of women working outside their homes¹. Additionally, it has maintained a birth rate higher than the European average for a long time. The correlations between these data can be compared with those of a country like Germany, which has

¹ In 2023, 49.0% of the working-age population (15 to 64 years old) in France are women. This rate is 46.8% across the 27-country European Union. Source : INSEE, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/5350628>.

not engaged in a sustained family policy and whose birth rate is so low that the birth deficit is no longer compensated by immigration (Salles, 2006, 2022). Childcare solutions for young children outside the family in France are highly diverse: collective micro-daycares, drop-in micro-daycare centers, kindergartens, preschools in “very small sections,” family micro-daycares, and maternal assistants. Rather than presenting them side by side, it is relevant to study them as a whole, whose different modes have emerged and evolved (or regressed) in interaction with each other, complementing or competing depending on the evolution of society, and more specifically, the forms and social representations of the family.

Childcare arrangements for young children have profoundly evolved over the past two centuries, reflecting and facilitating societal changes. The rise of women’s wage labor necessitated childcare outside the home, a need intensified by families spreading geographically due to rural exoduses and workforce mobility. This shift challenges traditional in-family care, reflecting changes in family dynamics, gender roles, and the division of labor within households. Such changes have spurred ongoing debates about the legitimacy and organization of childcare (whether public, associative, or commercial), concerns over child mistreatment, and issues around funding.

Focusing on France within a broader European context, we observe the historical and contemporary shifts leading to the establishment of formal childcare systems. We explore the development, current state, and challenges facing these systems, including their societal impact and future prospects.

The Socio-Historical Context of the Emergence of Childcare Systems in Europe

To comprehend the complex socio-economic and political implications of childcare systems for young children, it is essential to consider their historical development since the 19th century within a broader anthropological context. Child-rearing not only ensures the survival and continuation of society, but also evolves with societal transformations. In traditional settings, childcare is a communal responsibility shared among extended family and community members. However, as societies have urbanized and grown more complex, the need for specialized education has shifted childcare responsibilities to formal institutions, defining early childhood as the period before school begins.

The 19th century’s surge in capitalism, industrialization, and urban migration disrupted traditional roles, expanding women’s labor outside the home and necessitating new forms of childcare such as wet nurses and daycare centers. This shift provoked debates on their legitimacy, viewed through lenses of hygiene, care, and education, reflecting the deep social changes of the era, including the move towards nuclear family units and the separation of families across geographies.

The Structuring of the Field

The 19th-century rise of industrial capitalism triggered a mass rural exodus to urban centers, where factory jobs were concentrated. This led to placing children from impoverished families in *refuges* or micro-daycares to allow mothers to work, aiming to reduce infant mortality and prevent infanticides and abortions, while imparting bourgeois family values. Catherine Bouve (2010) illustrates that micro-daycares initially navigated between contrasting views of family and motherhood: a conservative view sanctifying motherhood and supporting impoverished mothers, and a progressive view advocating for women’s economic participation and equality in domestic roles. This progressivism, however, was marked by an ambiguity that both promoted women’s emancipation and saw the expansion of childcare as a means to meet labor market demands, eventually fostering the commercialization of early childhood services and the rise of private, for-profit childcare entities. Thus, one can observe a dual articulation in the structuring of the field of early childhood, both in terms of the economic and social forces that place it under tension, and in terms of the representations — moral, social, and even scientific — that express them. Antagonism between conservative (Catholic, bourgeois, etc.) and progressive conceptions of the family, particularly expressed in opposition between the Church and the State;

Within the progressive conceptions themselves, an antagonism between the objectives and the logic of the commercial sphere, and social concern for the emancipation of women and the care of children.

The evolution of childcare systems over nearly two centuries has been shaped by this tension between antagonistic conceptions. The first *refuge* halls and micro-daycares in France, the *Kinderbewahranstalten* in Germany (Budde, 1999), or the *presepi* in Italy were initially created by churches or wealthy philanthropists. These initiatives took different paths, depending on whether they remained weak and dispersed among multiple private actors, as in Germany, or whether the public authorities, competing with the Catholic Church, gradually took charge of them, as in France, where the *refuge halls* were already hosting some 644,000 children when they were transformed into preschool classes in 1881 (Christian, 2020).

The war of 1914–1918, due to the toll it took on the population (nearly 19 million deaths, particularly among men, in addition to the wounded and disabled, as well as the victims of the subsequent Asian Flu), accelerated the process of integrating women into wage labor in the early 20th century. This shift contributed to their emancipation as they began to claim their rights to equality with men, including the right to vote and equal wages, changes that occurred very gradually and must be emphasized. The expansion of childcare facilities is both a result of these achievements and a facilitator of them.

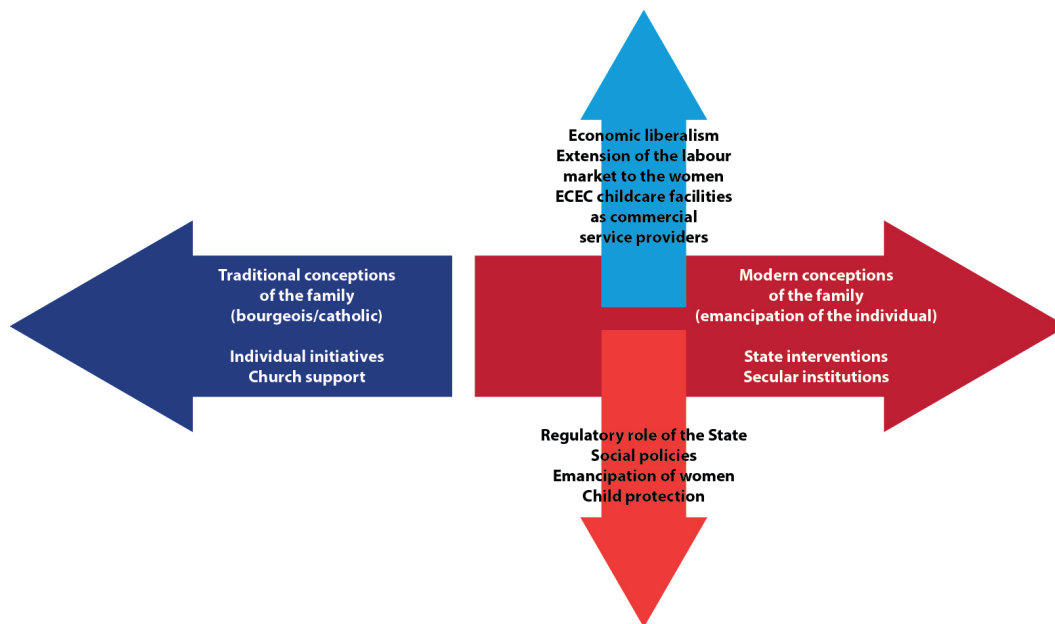


Figure 1
Structural Tensions in the Field of Early Childhood Care Modes

Two models of childcare then became prominent (Christian, 2020):

1. an educational model, that of the preschool, attached to the school institution, which became widespread in France, England, and Belgium, then in Italy and Spain, for children aged 3 and older;
2. a model of child care and service to mothers, which pertains to early childhood regardless of age, and which took hold in Scandinavian countries as well as in communist countries from the 1960s, gradually taking on educational missions. The collective care of children also created jobs, predominantly for women.

Educational, Hygienic, and Scientific Challenges

From their inception, daycares have sparked debates due to differing family conceptions—ranging from maternal roles to gender equality. Celebrated initially by 19th-century European philanthropists, they later faced criticism for separating children from mothers, fostering neglect, and imposing communal care detrimental to child development, despite the economic logic favoring specialized labor. Such critiques prompted reassessment of childcare practices amid high infant mortality and the necessity for dual-income families in urban settings, where traditional familial support structures like grandparents were absent. Key figures such as Rollet (1978) highlighted the era’s reliance on wet nurses, with half of Paris’s children in such care by 1860.

The late 19th century also saw hygiene becoming pivotal after Pasteur’s discoveries, leading to lower infant mortality through vaccinations and improved public health measures, including the establishment of dispensaries and initiatives like the “Milk Drops” for sterilized milk distribution. These changes, coupled with declining birth rates, prompted policies like family allowances and maternity leaves (Christian, 2020).

Post-WWII Europe saw expansive national health policies aimed at boosting birth rates and reducing war-exacerbated infant mortality (Rollet, De Luca, 2005), with systematic vaccination against diseases like measles. The century also transformed the scientific understanding of early childhood development, influenced by psychoanalytic theories from Freud, Klein, Bowlby, and Spitz, and cognitive theories from Piaget, Wallon, and Vygotsky, acknowledging the complex stages of psychological development (Willekens et al., 2015; Norman, 2017; Komarova, Tischenko, 2023).

Historical Development of Childcare Facilities in France

In the early 19th century, wet nurses dominated external childcare. In 1844, Firmin Marbeau, deputy mayor of Paris’s first arrondissement, established the first daycare center to support working-class mothers by providing care for children up to age three. This initiative expanded with the Catholic Church’s support, aiming also to reduce infant mortality and prevent infantile diseases and rickets. The Parisian Daycares Society, founded by Marbeau in 1847, was declared a public utility in 1869, although his proposal for widespread micro-daycares was rejected. By 1887, disparities in daycare usage were notable, with wealthier districts having better services.

The 1874 Roussel Law enhanced child protection, particularly against risks associated with wet nurses. The post-WWII era saw the establishment of Maternal and Child Protection (PMI) in 1945 to address infant mortality and population health. By 1964, PMI had expanded under departmental oversight to include comprehensive prenatal and early childhood care.

From 1946 to 1975, the number of daycares surged from 360 to 1,167, reflecting women's increasing workforce participation and the influence of 1960s feminist movements. This period also saw the rise of "parent-led daycares," promoting pedagogical innovation over strict hygiene focus. In 1977, legislation redefined wet nurses as "maternal assistants," enhancing childcare's formal structure.

By 2010, new regulations allowed private for-profit micro-daycares, accommodating up to 10 children, reflecting a shift towards commercialization. By 2020, private micro-daycares grew to represent 31% of facilities, underscoring significant shifts in childcare management and funding, further deregulated by the 2021 decree to increase flexibility and capacity in the sector. Decree No. 2021-1131 of August 30, 2021 further relaxed constraints by increasing the maximum number of children from 10 to 12 accommodated simultaneously and by allowing more flexible diploma requirements.

Childcare Services in France Today

In France, there are three main forms of micro-daycares during the day on weekdays:

Traditional Family Childcare: Children are cared for at home, primarily by their parents, or occasionally by their grandparents or other family members.

Maternal Assistants (formerly known as nannies): Today, this is a professional role where individuals are paid to look after children at their own home or in a "Maison d'Assistantes Maternelles" (MAM: an association of several maternal assistants who share a common facility).

Childcare Facilities for Young Children (EAJE²): This includes various forms of micro-daycares that can be categorized into three groups:

- **public collective daycares** (municipal and departmental, accommodating up to 60 children), funded by public organizations and communities. This category also includes, in the same spirit, family micro-daycares (maternal assistants employed by the municipality rather than by parents) and drop-in micro-daycares, historically the oldest.
- **parental daycares**, generally in an associative form (parents manage the structure and participate in caregiving);
- **private micro-daycares**, some of which are the size of collective micro-daycares, but mostly under the regime of the 2010 decree on micro-micro-daycares, managed by companies. This category has seen the emergence and development of franchise networks over the past 15 years; corporate micro-daycares set up by a company for its own staff can also be included in this category.

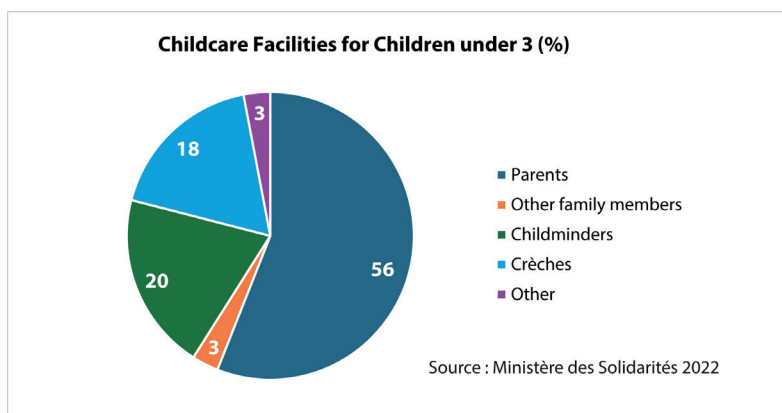


Figure 2

Who is taking care of the children?

As mentioned in the Introduction, about 60% of the 2.1 million children under three years of age had access to a place in a formal childcare arrangement in 2021 (ONAPE, 2024). However, this figure can be misleading, as not all children are accommodated every day of the week, nor all day long, in a daycare or by a maternal assistant. A child may need several places in different arrangements to be cared for throughout the week. Therefore, it is important to consider what the primary mode of care is.

² Etablissement d'Accueil de Jeunes Enfants

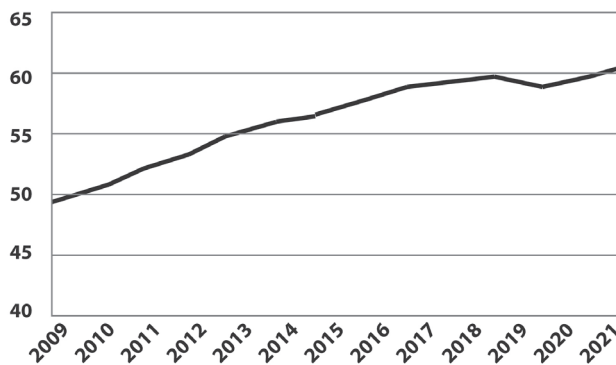
When parents are asked about their childcare mode, the reality looks different. According to the DREES survey “Modes de garde et d’accueil et scolarisation des enfants âgés de moins de 6 ans” (Caenen, Viro, 2023), in 2021, in metropolitan France, the majority (56%) of children under three are primarily cared for by their parents, with grandparents or other family members caring for an additional 3% of children. In total, therefore, nearly 60% of children under three only partially use a formal childcare arrangement, or not at all. The remaining 40% are in daycares (18%), with a maternal assistant (20%), or are cared for at home by a paid employee (3%).

On the other hand, according to the DREES survey, the declared mode of childcare is the first choice for only 7 out of 10 parents: that is, if all parents had obtained their first choice, children would be far less often primarily cared for by their parents (36%) and much more often accommodated in EAJE (Childcare Facilities for Young Children) (35%). Family-based care is often only a default solution due to a lack of available places and also due to the financial constraints of the parents. Moreover, this trend is continually declining: it represented 74% of children under three in 2002, compared to 56% in 2021.

Thus, only a third of children under three are exclusively cared for by their parents, while half combine a formal paid childcare mode (maternal assistant, EAJE, home care) with parental care. However, parental care is only really feasible if at least one of the parents is available during the day. Considering the case of both parents working, the proportion of children primarily entrusted to a maternal assistant or a micro-daycare rises to 7 out of 10 for those with both parents working (Caenen, Viro, 2023).

The provision of childcare outside the family has progressed from the late 2000s to the early 2020s. The theoretical number of places increased from 48 in 2009 to 60.3 in 2022 per 100 children under three years old (1.31 million places for 2.17 million children)³. However, in recent years, this number has stagnated even as the number of children decreases due to the declining birth rates. The collective care capacity relative to the number of children under three years rose from 17% to 24% between 2012 and 2022. The number of maternal assistants dropped during the same period.

Capacity of all formal childcare facilities



Number of places per number of children under 3 (%)
Source : DREES (Caenen & Viro 2023)

Figure 3

Theoretical Capacity of Formal Childcare Modes

Non-familial childcare modes are increasingly developing, linked to the employment rate, which in France is at its highest level since it began being recorded by INSEE (l’Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques): 73.6% of those aged 15-64 (INSEE Reference 2023, pp. 116-117), largely due to the employment rate of women. The two main forms to consider are care by a maternal assistant and care in EAJE.

Maternal Assistants

As of December 31, 2022, there were 309,400 maternal assistants accredited by PMI services in France, excluding Mayotte, with 248,000 of active, reflecting a continuous decline since 2013 (Caenen, Viro, 2023). Accreditation has decreased by 6.7% in 2022 alone, averaging a 3.9% yearly decline since 2013. Currently, these assistants provide 795,400 childcare places, a number that has also been decreasing by an average of 2.8% annually since 2014. Despite this, they still represent 62% of the formal childcare capacity (ONAPE, 2024).

³ *Vie Publique*, 19 décembre 2024 : <https://www.vie-publique.fr/en-bref/296609-modes-de-garde-des-enfants-de-moins-de-3-ans-quelles-evolutions>

Professionalized as “maternal assistants” by Law No. 77-505 on May 17, 1977, this predominantly female profession (99.4% women) requires 120 hours of training to begin work, yet it struggles with social and economic recognition. These assistants earn below minimum wage, making €3.8 per hour in 2022, and often must manage their own employment contracts (Perseil, Perseil, 2020). They were only granted access to occupational health services in 2021, with implementation set for January 2025 (Ordinance No. 2021-611).

The field’s attractiveness is waning, with a 4.2% drop in active professionals in 2022 alone, leading to a workforce age increase from 44.6 in 2006 to 48.5 in 2022. The decreasing number of maternal assistants and the increase in their allowed child capacity are causing shifts in the sector, with a notable decline in available places by 33,800 between 2020 and 2021 and another 14,200 between 2021 and 2022 (ONAPE, 2024).

Childcare Facilities for Young Children (EAJE)

Collective childcare continues to experience growth: in 2023, there were 12,815 EAJE providing 507,000 places, an increase of 16,000 places from 2021 (+3.3%) and 57,000 more than in 2017 (ONAPE 2024). This growth is primarily driven by private micro-daycares.

The vast majority of EAJE, in terms of number of places, are daycares funded through the Unique Service Provision (Prestation de service unique, PSU) system: parents pay a uniform rate nationwide, in return for which EAJE are financed by the Family Allowance Funds. These are predominantly public community-managed daycares (especially municipal daycares), which can accommodate up to 60 children and represent 420,600 places. However, the number of facilities managed by local authorities is tending to decrease, while the number managed by associations remains stable. The private for-profit sector, though still in the minority, is the most dynamic, having increased by almost 30% between 2019 and 2023, from 1,510 to 1,943 establishments.

Micro-daycares represent another significant sector of EAJE, associated with a less demanding regulatory framework and a specific funding model. The vast majority (86% of the 7,100 micro-micro-daycares) are not funded by the PSU but are indirectly supported by the Choice of Childcare Mode Supplement (Complément de libre choix du mode de garde, CMG), paid to families: parents pay the micro-daycares at the rate set by it (which is, however, capped), and they are reimbursed by the CAF (Family Allowance Fund) based on their income. In 2023, the majority of these micro-daycares were part of the private for-profit sector (92%), while the associative sector accounted for only 8%. Furthermore, the private for-profit sector grew by 13% between 2022 and 2023, and the associative sector by only 2%.

Although micro-daycares still represent a minority of the total childcare places available (12% of the total supply), their rapid expansion highlights the interest of a sector open to private operators by the 2010 decree. However, this has also reignited debates and controversies concerning the legitimacy of non-familial childcare modes, with a new focus on the implications for children of the commercialization of a service for a vulnerable population.

Tensions in the Field: A Systemic Approach

Historically, media reports have often highlighted tragic incidents in the homes of maternal assistants, including injuries and deaths from maltreatment or neglect. Despite these being isolated cases, public authorities have always prioritized preventing such tragedies. The isolation of maternal assistants, who work alone with limited oversight from PMI (Maternal and Child Protection services), has prompted calls for more micro-daycares where multiple trained professionals can provide mutual oversight and support. Maternal assistants, however, offer more personalized care, which can be preferable for some children, even as there remains a shortage of micro-daycares places.

The 2010s saw the rise of privately initiated micro-daycares under more flexible regulations, providing a solution by increasing facility-based care that allows for more personalized attention. This growth was largely driven by private operators, some of whom rapidly expanded, forming franchised networks. However, the increase in these facilities has led to a proportional rise in mistreatment incidents, which, while rare, draw significant scrutiny due to their occurrence in for-profit settings, as highlighted by journalist Victor Castanet’s 2024 investigation into the People&Baby micro-daycare network (Castanet, 2024).

On June 22, 2022, 11-month-old Lisa died from poisoning by an employee at one of this network’s micro-daycares in Lyon. This tragic event thrust the management of private micro-daycares into the media spotlight and elicited concern from industry professionals and the many parents who entrust their children to them. The event also resonated with reactions that had been sparked a few months earlier by the publication of a journalistic investigation by Victor Castanet on mistreatment of another vulnerable group, the elderly (Castanet, 2022). The journalist had conducted a three-year investigation implicating the Residential Care Homes for Dependent Elderly (EHPAD) of the Orpea group, and more broadly the contradictions between profit-seeking and the quality of care due to residents. The highly publicized case of Lisa prompted him to begin a two-year investigation that would lead to his 2024 book.

In response, a month after the incident, through a mission letter dated July 25, 2022, the Ministry of Solidarity, Autonomy, and Disabled Persons requested the General Inspectorate of Social Affairs (IGAS) to evaluate the processes and measures implemented to ensure the safety and well-being of children in EAJE. The investigation was conducted during the second half of 2022, and IGAS presented its report in March of the following year (IGAS, 2023).

Beyond the isolated incident involving the particular circumstances or personality of an employee, as in other cases with maternal assistants at their homes, the event rekindles a debate that we have noted is long-standing. It is doubly articulated around the antagonism between family care and professional care, and between economic reasoning and social objectives, now intersected by a new antagonism between the public and private sectors. It essentially reexamines the overall functioning of young child care in France. And the question, in its more contemporary formulation, is essentially the same as for nursing homes for the elderly: are the constraints of market-driven management compatible with quality care for vulnerable populations?

The IGAS report describes the quality of care as “very disparate,” a situation that can lead to “deficiencies in emotional security and in the stimulation” of young children. Despite its cautious phrasing, which notably acknowledges the limitations of the survey’s representativity, the recommendations are clear: IGAS notably recommends strengthening the child-to-staff ratio, increasing the qualifications of professionals, and tying funding to more frequent inspections. However, these recommendations do not take into account the potential additional costs that their implementation might impose on facilities as well as on Maternal and Child Protection services, which are already underfunded. They are formulated in a context where France still lacks 200,000 childcare places, a situation that can only encourage an expansion of the private sector, and which has already led the government to increase the maximum capacity of micro-daycares from 10 to 12 children (Decree No. 2021-1131 of August 30, 2021); in a context, moreover, where staff shortages affect nearly half of all micro-daycares, prompting the government to relax the diploma requirements for working in daycares (Decree of July 29, 2022, published in the Official Journal on August 4, 2022). This report has elicited reactions from sector representative organizations, which insist that blame should not be cast upon all establishments: the alarming dysfunctions would concern only a tiny proportion of the actors. These industry players can only welcome the proposals since they aim to improve the quality of care and risk prevention, but they emphasize the constraints already burdening the sector and consequently call for a reevaluation of public policies as a whole... and, of course, for the necessary funding to follow.

In an analysis we conducted on the IGAS report (Bapst et al., 2024), we highlight the methodological limitations of the survey, particularly in the selection mode of the actors surveyed and in the treatment of qualitative data. The relevance of the conclusions and recommendations is limited by the representativity of the respondents, which excludes independent micro-daycares and thus overvalues information coming from franchise networks, and by the scope of the study, which notably omits the economic constraints weighing on the facilities.

Our concerns do not prevent us from recognizing the overall validity of the conclusions of the IGAS report. Specifically, among the many factors that ensure the quality of care, individual interactions and the emotional security of the child are influenced by the organizational constraints of the facility. Management, staffing, and structural constraints primarily reduce the time dedicated to individual bonding with the child, thus limiting stimulating verbal and non-verbal interactions. These constraints can lead professionals to work in a mechanical manner. Interactions play a crucial role, both between professionals and children and between professionals and parents, particularly in discussing the individual rhythm of the child. Although this principle is included in almost every project, current practice is segmented and highly constrained, leaving little room for accommodating children’s varying paces. The reporters consider that respecting the individual rhythm often remains a promotional discourse in educational projects, while structural constraints and organizational practices are incompatible with their effective implementation. Currently, the child’s rhythm tends to conform to organizational and staffing constraints rather than the other way around.

However, we must emphasize that debates and controversies, because they are often formulated in binary terms, overlook the complexity of a global system. A more systemic reading would allow for modeling the state of the sector by revealing feedback loops between different factors, which notably includes addressing the classic “nerve of the war”—money.

The IGAS report, while emphasizing indisputable priorities like quality of care and maltreatment prevention, proposes somewhat “out of touch” solutions by not fully accounting for the associated costs. For instance, enhancing staff numbers, training, and pay in micro-daycares would improve child care quality and working conditions, potentially reducing abuse.

Future Prospects

Our systemic approaches are driven by a concern not only to describe all the components and relationships within a system—here the socio-economic-organizational field of young child care facilities in France—without omitting certain data excluded from the scope but also to use this description to support a forward-looking vision. Without this, the system description does not confirm its predictive capacity, and most importantly, it lacks value for strategic decision-making (Schmoll, 2024).

Moving forward, it is essential to consider how the sector can evolve given the constraints we have outlined. A balanced approach that accounts for the real-world complexities of operating micro-daycares, and their financial realities, will be crucial in ensuring the sector’s sustainability and its ability to meet the needs of families effectively. This may involve rethinking funding models, regulatory frameworks, and the support mechanisms in place to ensure both quality of care and economic viability.

To predict the overall evolution of childcare facilities in France and elsewhere, it’s essential to consider the structure of the field as previously outlined:

The antagonism between family care models and external childcare arrangements is increasingly favoring the latter. It is consistently observed that as societies massify and urbanize, they are subject to a logic of division and specialization of activities as well as the law of comparative advantage. Individuals and groups tend to specialize in activities where they are both most competent/productive and best compensated. Childcare, like other activities traditionally performed by everyone such

as vocational training, elder care, farming, housekeeping, and meal preparation, tends to be outsourced to others and collectives if their remuneration is less than what is earned in specialized activities. The discourse framing parents who entrust their children to maternal assistants or micro-daycares as poor caregivers is becoming less effective in light of this evolution: similarly, no one today would argue against mandatory schooling by citing parental education. In fact, parents continue to fulfill their parental roles, but in different forms that do not require constant presence with their children. All contemporary countries follow this trend at varying speeds: for example, Germany has maintained a more traditional family policy longer than France, to the detriment of the principle of gender equality enshrined in the Basic Law, but the catastrophic consequences of this policy on birth rates are forcing leaders to reconsider this doctrine.

The tension between economic priorities and social protection fluctuates with political shifts, often masked by benevolent rhetoric. In practice, economic forces tend to lead while social concerns regulate—a dynamic resembling a reinforcing loop moderated by an inhibitory one. Public intervention can improve childcare conditions, but only within the limits of what the economic system can sustain. In France's redistributive economy, institutions often advocate for tighter control of EAJE without increasing resources, assuming costs will be covered by external—public or private—funders.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is important to consider how France's socio-economic context influences the development of childcare arrangements. Demographically (ONAPE 2024), the population of children under three is declining—dropping by 15% since 2011—and is projected to range between 1.4 and 2.4 million by 2070, depending on birth rates. Against the backdrop of an aging population, the government finds it easier to justify expanding nursing home (EHPAD) capacity rather than childcare facilities, as elderly voters represent a stable electoral bloc.

France currently faces a shortage of 200,000 daycare spots, while the childcare profession is losing its appeal. This threatens women's employment rates and economic growth. The issue is exacerbated by the economic crisis: rising public debt and limited resources are driving a trend toward privatization and outsourcing of services to private entities (2010 decree, IGAS 2024).

In this context, tighter regulations on home-based daycares (micro-crèches) may reduce the availability of non-parental childcare options, as many could close due to non-compliance. We now turn to three alternative non-parental childcare structures that could offer solutions to this crisis:

1. **Micro-daycares** — the model covers diverse situations, from the independent daycare managed by someone from the profession (a former young child educator or early childhood auxiliary) who uses it as their work tool without seeking to expand the activity, to groups managing hundreds of daycares on their own or in a franchised network. The regulatory measures considered would mainly challenge franchised daycares, which, in addition to their own expenses, have to pay royalties to the franchisor regularly. It's possible that the existing franchise networks could give way to small groups of micro-micro-daycares that share their administrative management to reduce costs.
2. **Corporate or Inter-Corporate Daycares** — this model is financed by one or several companies that, in return, reserve places for their own staff. This reservation practice allows the state to shift all or part of the financing of a social service to the private sector. The IGAS report on daycare financing (IGAS 2024) mentions this implicitly: the mission considers that when revenues from the reservation of cribs exceed one-third of a facility's turnover, employers constitute de facto a reserving third party, and from their perspective, maintaining family financing of daycare is no longer justified. In other words, employers who can afford it should finance daycares for their staff. Moreover, one argument for installing a company daycare, by the company itself or through a provider, is that this service offered to employees becomes a human resources management tool, akin to other in-kind benefits, such as a company restaurant, a relaxation room, or covering meal or travel expenses. The advantage for the company is that this indirect compensation in the form of services offered to employees is exempt from the social charges that apply to the salary itself.
3. **Maternal Assistant Houses (MAMs)** — in this context of maintaining or even creating jobs, Maternal Assistant Houses are likely to see significant development.

Maternal assistants are not required to obtain the CAP Petite Enfance (Early Childhood Certificate), although they must complete the first level of its courses. This more flexible regulation of their practice does not align with the pressure from IGAS reports for increased training for professionals in the sector. However, given the economic conditions, political decision-makers will have to make trade-offs, and the regulatory provisions should be maintained as long as the profession struggles to recruit.

However, it is important to remember that the economic model of MAMs rests on a fragile balance between the revenue from the activity and the operational costs of the structure, which are necessarily higher than a professional practicing alone at home. The new work organization (requiring the establishment of a work collective, coordination among professionals for task distribution, sharing educational approaches, etc.) would resemble that of a micro-daycare, with similar organizational and financial difficulties. Yet, it is also foreseeable that this model might be preferred by municipalities and other local authorities, especially in rural areas, which would be willing to finance or provide the necessary premises.

Amid demographic decline, economic instability, and growing shortages in early childcare availability, France faces the challenge of balancing quality, accessibility, and sustainability. Micro-daycares, corporate care models, and shared maternal assistant homes (MAMs) offer flexible, localized responses to families' needs. Their effectiveness, however, hinges on policymakers' ability to avoid over-centralization, support sector professionalization, and preserve care diversity as a pillar of social resilience.

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