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Fostering children's opportunities:

What Germany can learn from its European peers

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Executive Summary

This paper discusses administrative fragmentation as an impediment to children's opportunities in Germany and compiles promising policy responses inspired by expertise from across Europe.

In less than a decade, Germany dropped from the best- to the worst-performing third of EU countries regarding severe material and social deprivation of children.

Access to childcare is regionally unequal in Germany; while all East German municipalities surpass the 2030 EU targets for enrolment under the age of three, 97.6% of West German municipalities fall short.

To improve children's opportunities, we stress the value of policy learning, specifically under the European *Child Guarantee*. We present seven policies that German decisionmakers should consider:

- Three *low-hanging fruits* fit well to Germany's institutions and political discourse alike: simplifying education and participation benefits, establishing a Child Wellbeing Office, and exploring a framework regulation on family centres.
- Three *contested matches* fit well into the German system in principle but operate in politically contentious realms: increasing permanent funding, overhauling parental leave benefits, and constitutionalising children's rights.
- A *paradigm shift* requires institutional change but follows recent trends in Germany's social policy debate: introducing proactive family policy.

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1. Introduction

Children are our future. This simple yet powerful sentiment is echoed in societies across the globe – but what does it mean for policymaking? At the face of it, it is a call to action. Children's wellbeing is a bedrock of free and fair societies. Social justice hinges on it, as equal opportunities can crumble early in life. Economically, supporting our children is an invaluable investment, as they are the workers and entrepreneurs of the future. Politically, we cannot afford neglecting children either (see, e.g., Weißenfels 2026). After all, trust in a free democratic system among the generations to come requires ensuring that the system delivers for them, too.

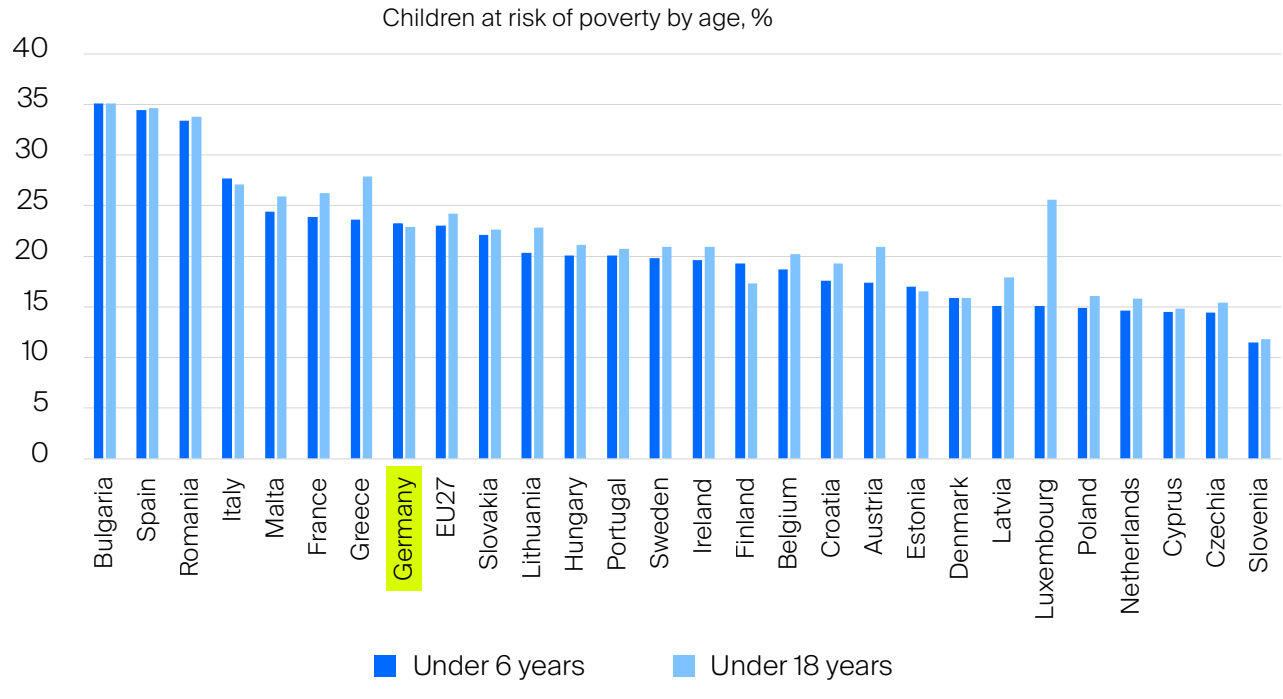
Still, children's concerns are often underrepresented. Focusing on Germany, we therefore explore what we can do to improve opportunities early in life. We argue that one important part of the answer is that states need to learn from each other. Paying special attention to early childhood education and care (ECEC), we propose a range of measures that can lead to a more child- and family-centric policy landscape.

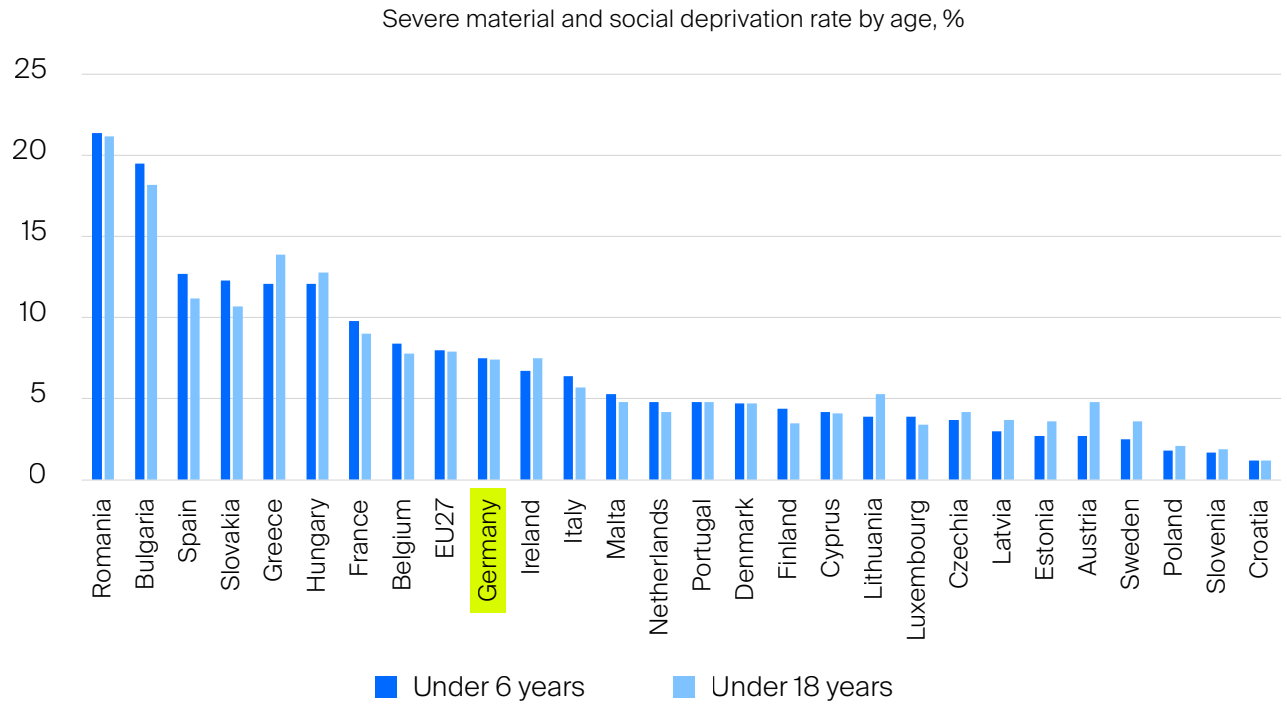
The sticky issue of child poverty

Insufficient opportunities persist even in richer states. Germany arguably has all the necessary economic means and demographic incentives to act swiftly and decisively in favour of its children. Yet, two thirds of EU states report lower at-risk-of-poverty rates among children under the age of six (Eurostat 2025b) (see Figure 1). What is more, the world's third-richest country barely outperforms the EU27 average regarding severe material and social deprivation (Eurostat 2025c) – child poverty proves sticky.

Figure 1

Indicators of child poverty, 2024

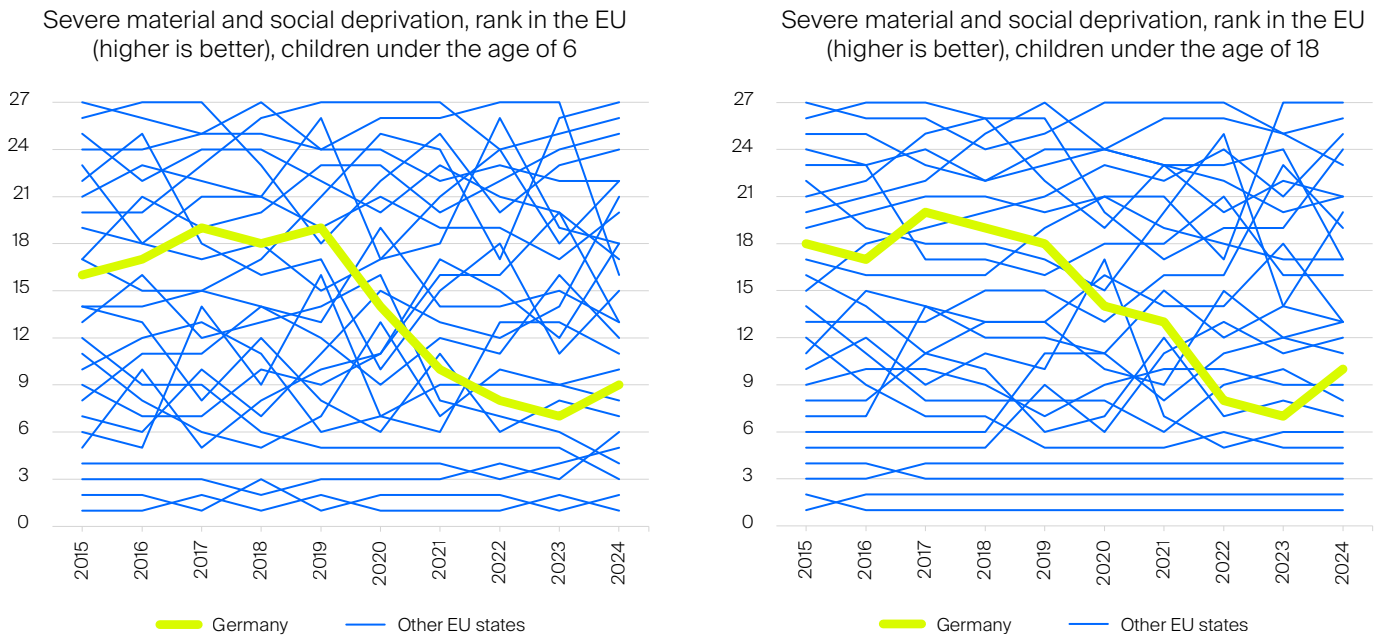




For severe material and social deprivation in Germany, the past ten years mark a time of falling behind. Still among the strongest performing third in 2017, Germany's rank within the EU for both age groups declined consistently since (see Figure 2), entering the lower third by 2022. A statistical break in the time series (2020) and small differences between states' data points play into this development, but the overall trend remains troubling.

Figure 2

Relative performance of Germany in the EU on severe material and social deprivation

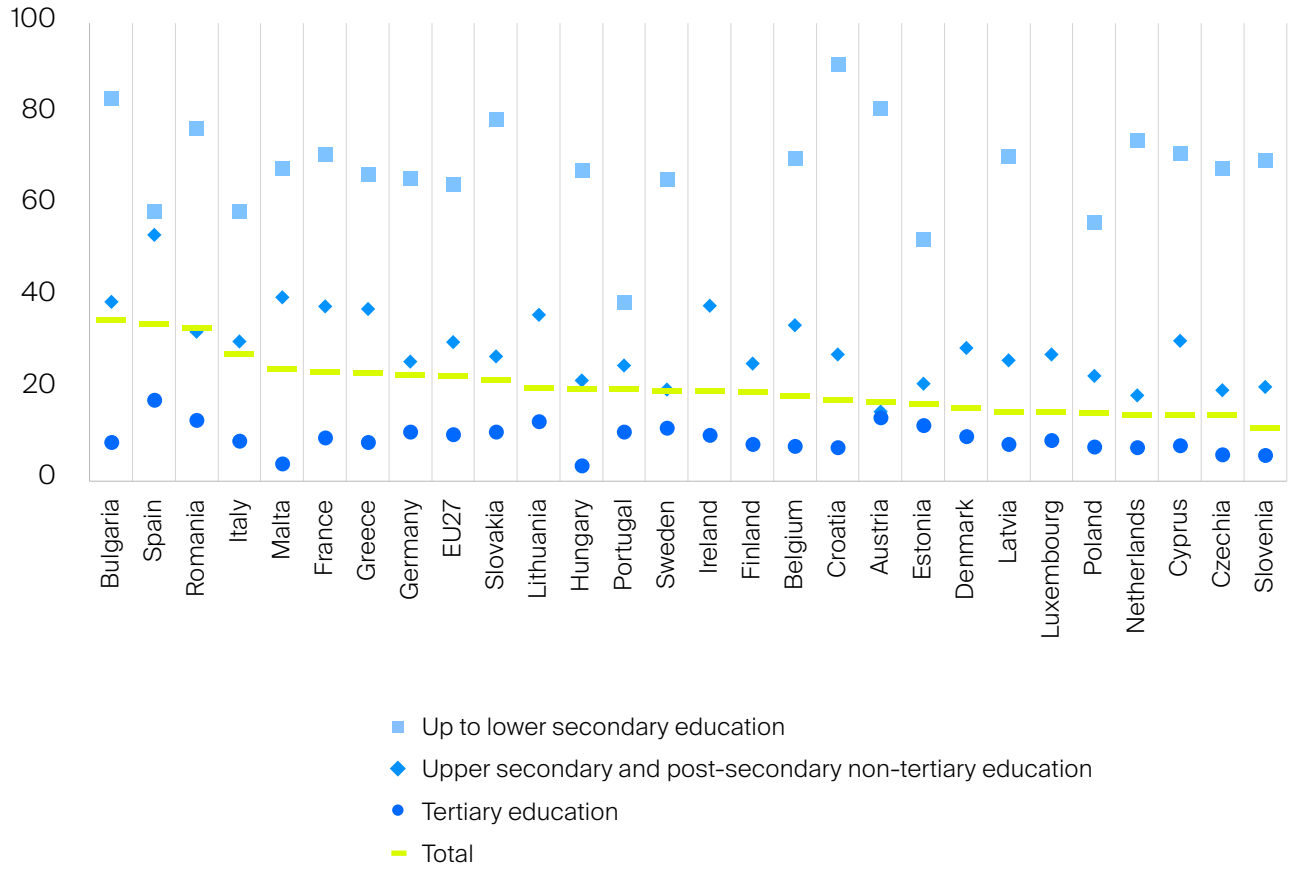


While poverty puts children at a disadvantage for the rest of their lives (Lesner 2018), it also strongly depends on early life stages of parents. In Europe, the educational attainment of parents correlates with child poverty (Eurostat 2025a; 2025d) (see Figure 3). While education is a crucial factor in combatting intergenerational poverty, it is troubling that child poverty in lower educated families remains high even where it is low overall. Key cognitive skills for high educational attainment, in turn, are affected by education and care early in life (Morabito and Vandenbroeck 2020, 12). This implies a vicious cycle where early disadvantages can have inter-generational ripple effects. ECEC and child policy more generally hence play a key role in forging societies that enable individuals to live self-determined lives based on meaningful, positive freedom.

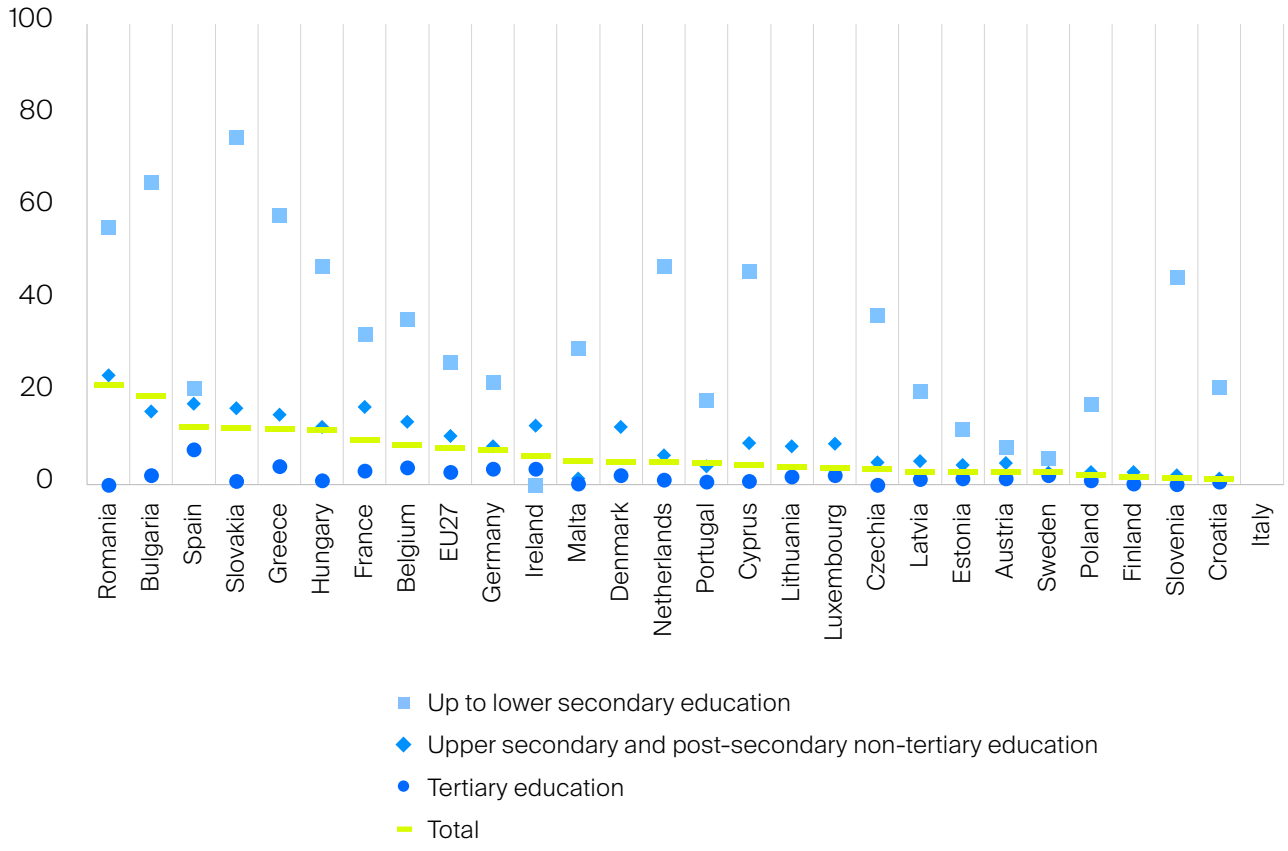
Figure 3

Indicators of child poverty by parents' educational attainment

Children under 6 years of age at risk of poverty (%) by parents' education, 2024



Severe material and social deprivation among children under 6 years of age (%) by parents' education, 2024



Exchanging Ideas

Breaking the cycle of disadvantage requires more than a large GDP and political agreement on the "deservingness" (see van Oorschot 2000) of children. Both must be accompanied by good policymaking – and for this, we need the right ideas. If ideas are political "blueprints" in times of uncertainty (Blyth 2001), the exchange of ideas can be a key part in fostering political progress (Afscharian 2025).

To contribute to this exchange, this paper explores promising policies from across Europe that bear the potential of improving children's opportunities in Germany and beyond. Exchange and learning are also at the heart of our methodology. We pair statistical data with document research and exchanges with 12 esteemed experts from academia, politics, policymaking, and non-governmental organisations. We triangulate the insights from these conversations with notes taken during several conferences while incorporating expert contributions directly in the paper.

In the next section, we reflect on the exchange of ideas in greater detail. We elaborate why policy learning matters and how it can be done effectively. Furthermore, we argue that the European "Child Guarantee" is a unique opportunity for Germany and its European peers to put the idea of policy

learning into practice (Afscharian et al. 2025). Building on these reflections, we explore two broad categories of policy reform that currently matter for Germany, one concerning governance, and the other concerning services themselves. In both categories, we discuss pressing challenges and potential solutions. Finally, we summarise implications at a glance.

The individualism of children

Underpinning our recommendations is the need to take children's role as individuals seriously. Too often are they not at the centre of policymaking despite equally being members of society. In the "here and now" they deserve a decent life irrespective of the conditions into which they are born. Regarding their future, they must then be put on a path of equal opportunities – the bedrock of meaningful freedom.

As we outlined above, ECEC is a particularly important element of breaking the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage, hence why we place a special emphasis on it. However, no part of child policy must be addressed in isolation. After all, if we take the goal of enhancing opportunities seriously, we need to think about policies with the individual at the centre. For child policy, this substantively implies a recipient-centric perspective that revolves around children and their families. As their lives are not neatly compartmentalised into different policy areas, we explore policies that can improve opportunities from different angles.

2. Policy learning and the European Child Guarantee

A space to learn: Objectives and key elements of the European Child Guarantee

As child policy is an area that requires quick and decisive action to buffer against the imminent risks of demographic change, mutual learning is crucial. The EU has set up a framework that explicitly encourages such learning: the European Child Guarantee. It aims to foster equal opportunities and combat social exclusion among children by pushing for effective access to free ECEC and education, healthcare, healthy nutrition, and adequate housing (Council of the European Union 2021).

As a recommendation, the Child Guarantee is not binding. To facilitate implementation, it explicitly encourages policy learning (Council of the European Union 2021, 9) and asks member states to appoint so-called Child Guarantee Coordinators (European Commission 2025a) along with developing national action plans (NAPs) (European Commission 2025b). Thus, the Child Guarantee can be seen as a space of ideational innovation (Afscharian et al. 2025) from which Germany, too, can benefit.

However, policy learning is no matter of course (Kerber and Eckardt 2007) and past experience has shown (Stone 2012) that it does not always work seamlessly. While the German NAP formally refers to the Child Guarantee, many actions merely repackage already existing policies and programmes, often without concrete timelines or measurable targets (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der deutschen Familienorganisationen e.V. 2025). The first biennial report shows limited evidence of systematic learning and transfer of ideas from other member states (Eurochild 2024).

This reluctance might stem from Germany's general self-perception as a leader in the EU (Schramm and Krotz 2024), a rule-maker rather than a rule-taker. While there was a period in which Germany readily embraced policy learning to great success, the country has since diverged from this path (Windwehr and Fischer 2021). However, given the profound challenges facing the country and its children, it is important to remain receptive to innovative approaches. With the Child Guarantee in place, it is now an ideal moment for Germany to rediscover the benefits of mutual learning.

How to learn better: Policy transfer and implications for the German reform agenda

The explicit goal of the European Child Guarantee is "to facilitate mutual learning, share experiences, exchange good practices and follow up on the actions taken" (Council of the European Union 2021, 9). Common in areas with limited regulative EU competences (Caracciolo di Torella and Masselot 2010; Lütz 2007, 133; Windwehr 2022, 322–327), this approach allows for flexibility and adaptation to national contexts without imposing hard governance instruments.

Groundbreaking reforms in Germany's child and family policy such as the expansion of childcare services (e.g., the 2008 Kinderförderungsgesetz) and the 2007 introduction of parental allowance (Elterngeld) were strongly shaped by policy learning from EU-level initiatives (e.g., the 2002 Barcelona Targets on ECEC) and Scandinavian countries, particularly Sweden (Blum 2014; Windwehr and Fischer 2021). Germany's own past thus shows how openness to external ideas can translate into tangible progress. For the country to revisit such successes, the question is: What are the ingredients for effective policy learning in the context of the Child Guarantee?

We focus on a specific kind of policy learning often referred to as "policy transfer", i.e., "a process by which knowledge of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system" (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000, 5) is used for policymaking in another. Research has identified relevant factors for (successful) policy transfer (Lütz 2007; Minkman et al. 2018): endogenous factors are cultural, institutional, and political attributes of the receiving country or jurisdiction. Exogenous factors refer to the mechanisms of policy transfer and the role of (external) actors in the process. Finally, qualities of the transfer object refer to the characteristics of the policy itself.

For our purposes, the last aspect, referring to the transferability of policies (Minkman et al. 2018) is particularly relevant. Three key factors (Lütz 2007; Benson and Jordan 2011; Minkman et al. 2018) in this respect are:

1. Reputation: The degree to which a policy is seen as an innovative solution to a widely accepted domestic problem of political priority.

2. Institutional fit: The degree to which a policy can be coherently adapted or integrated into the domestic political and institutional context.

3. Normative fit: The degree to which a policy has the potential to gain sufficient political support among relevant stakeholders and the public.

Along this framework, we examine areas where learning from other member states could unlock benefits for Germany, focusing on (a) fragmentation of institutional competences and responsibilities and (b) the complex patchwork of child-related benefits and services.

3. Two reform perspectives

3.1 Governance perspective: Dealing with institutional fragmentation

Situation in Germany

A key challenge for child policy in Germany consists in institutional fragmentation. Following the principle of subsidiarity, tasks are divided between the federal government, the states, municipalities, and civil society actors. While the federal level holds crucial legislative competences in the area of child policy (Wissenschaftliche Dienste Deutscher Bundestag 2019), implementation of services such as childcare, youth welfare, and social support services – along with major parts of the associated costs – is largely the responsibility of municipalities (see, e.g., BMFSFJ 2023, 22–24). In the area of education more broadly, legislative competences are partially detached from fiscal responsibility, thus (potentially) overburdening municipalities (Merki 2025). Service provision itself is often delegated to civil society, while some key fiscal competences fall in the hands of higher levels of governance. Within the federal government, several ministries have a say in core areas of the Child Guarantee, all the while federal social security law is divided into 13 different legal codes.

This institutional division leads to significant program fragmentation. As long as the services in question are well coordinated, fragmentation is not necessarily a problem. In fact, the Child Guarantee stresses the importance of taking regional and local circumstances into account (Council of the European Union 2021, 4, 5, 6). However, in many areas of child policy, Germany sees significant coordination gaps and regional differences in quality and scope of services, as we elaborate further below. For individuals, this can lead to a lack of knowledge of the services they are entitled to – and thus to non-take up. What is more, moving from one municipality or state to another can easily result in a considerable downgrade of availability and quality of services.

Incomplete information is also a problem for governance itself. Germany's response to the Child Guarantee exhibits a lack of politically binding and quantifiable targets against which progress could be measured and policy steering processes aligned (BMFSFJ 2024, 357). Hence, monitoring remains largely descriptive and detached from concrete policy implications. What is more, available data is often insufficient or incomplete, especially for particularly disadvantaged groups (BMFSFJ 2024, 7). Key areas such as child and youth health, non-formal education, domestic violence, and the actual use of social services are not systematically recorded (BMFSFJ 2024, 18). The lack of a federally harmonised education registry exacerbates this problem (BMFSFJ 2024, 358). Individuals may therefore experience severe micro-level disadvantages in some regions or areas without real prospects for improvements, as the disadvantages in question may easily be overlooked at a macro scale. While the "ServiKiD" unit at the German Youth Institute collects and analyses relevant data to mitigate this issue (BMFSFJ 2024), institutional fragmentation poses structural limitations.

Promising policies

Institutional fragmentation is a challenging impediment to equal opportunities. In German public discourse, a common response is *Föderalismuskritik* (see, e.g., Der Spiegel 2023), i.e., demands for more centralised governance. However, there are plausible arguments in favour of a multi-level governance approach in child policy. First, regional and local authorities may know the specific needs of their constituencies best. Second, the idea of competition between regional policies (Grasse 2012, 22) follows the spirit of policy learning (see Dolowitz and Marsh 2000) that we ourselves promote. Third, the German federal government has more far-reaching competences in ECEC than in education in general (Wissenschaftliche Dienste Deutscher Bundestag 2019; BMFSFJ 2023, 22–24), rendering critiques of multi-level governance less salient in this area. Fourth, even if radical change was desirable, it would take considerable time and resources and is thus politically unlikely in the short term. Given the immediate pressure of demographic change, economic stagnation, and social precarity of children, Germany cannot afford to lose time.

Horizontal and vertical coordination between government actors

Not dismissing the importance of long-term reform, experiences from other states show that there are also other, arguably more pragmatic ways of navigating the complexities of federalism.

One such area of action concerns coordination between government actors. Unclear or redundant responsibilities can negatively affect public budgets and diminish state capacities of enhancing children's wellbeing. As Ally Dunhill (Eurochild) emphasises below, some states are therefore making active efforts to improve coordination between government actors, both horizontally and vertically.

Ally Dunhill

Director of Policy, Advocacy, and Communications at Eurochild

Multi-agency collaboration in Ireland and Portugal

The Child Guarantee is a Council Recommendation, meaning its adoption and implementation are not legally mandatory for EU member states. Nevertheless, the practice of integrated working (multi-agency collaboration) is widely recognised by the European Commission, national governments, and civil society organisations such as Eurochild as an essential and effective operational strategy for achieving the Child Guarantee's core objectives (Eurochild 2021).

One such objective is to ensure children in need have free and effective access to a range of key services. Since children's needs are interconnected and child poverty is multidimensional, this requires an integrated approach that is not achievable by services working in isolation. The Child Guarantee's policy documents, therefore, consistently call for cross-sectoral action to address these complex challenges.

Child poverty involves not only income deprivation but also barriers to education, healthcare, housing, nutrition, and social services. However, legal and administrative frameworks often address these issues in silos, thereby limiting the effectiveness of interventions. Key inefficiencies include a lack of mechanisms for cross-sector coordination and fragmented data management. While the Child Guarantee encourages integration, many countries still face outdated laws or missing protocols for effective service connection.

Many countries are piloting or institutionalising integrated service models, recognising that poverty is multidimensional. Notable examples include Ireland and Portugal.

In 2023, Ireland established the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office, within the Department of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister's Office), which takes a whole-of-government approach to tackling child poverty (Irish Department of the Taoiseach 2025). This office works across departments in six key priority areas: (1) income support and joblessness, (2) early learning and childcare, (3) reducing the cost of education, (4) family homelessness, (5) service integration, and (6) participation in arts, culture, and sport. Ireland's approach combines political authority, multidimensional coordination, and a holistic focus on children's well-being. By situating the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office within the Department of the Taoiseach, child poverty is elevated to a national priority, ensuring strong political backing and inter-ministerial coordination.

The initiative tackles the interconnected causes of poverty—such as income, education, and housing —through an integrated, cross-sectoral strategy. Crucially, its emphasis on well-being, including participation in arts, culture, and sport, reflects a comprehensive understanding of children's rights and development, aligning with the Child Guarantee's holistic vision.

Portugal ensures "effective access" at the local level by creating Local Child Guarantee Units within the existing Social Network (Segurança Social 2025), where local partners, including social services, health centres, and schools, work together to identify and support children. To ensure consistency across policy areas, the Technical Committee for Monitoring the Child Guarantee (Serviço Nacional de Saúde 2025) brings together representatives from traditionally siloed ministries, including justice, labour, social solidarity, youth, and culture. Portugal's model for implementing the Child Guarantee is particularly promising because it directly tackles the two main barriers to effective social policy: fragmentation at the top (ministerial level) and disconnection at the bottom (service delivery level).

Coordination between government actors is highly actionable, as it is largely an administrative issue. The approaches chosen by Ireland and Portugal are particularly instructive because they facilitate coordination through a high-ranking political office, take the multifaceted nature of children's and families' needs seriously, and work both horizontally and vertically.

Germany has already put systems in place to enhance coordination. For instance, a NAP Committee (*NAP-Ausschuss*) brings together representatives of the different levels of governance along with non-governmental organisations to foster exchange. Other long-standing institutions such as working groups of state-level ministers complement such efforts. With the recent change of government, children's concerns and family affairs are now addressed by the same ministry as education. The role of Child Guarantee Coordinator was further placed in the hands of a state secretary both by the Scholz and the Merz government, thus receiving considerable political weight. Various experts lauded this practice in our exchanges.

Nonetheless, Germany has considerable potential for improvement. After the 2025 elections, the crucial role of Child Guarantee Coordinator was vacant for nine months. Drawing on the Irish case, strengthening and stabilising this position seems promising. Specifically, Germany could expand the resources and capacities of the coordinator and set up a fully-fledged Child Wellbeing Office in the Federal Chancellery. Ideally, this office should be staffed with some permanent employees to ensure consistency when governments and coordinators change. This could be accompanied by efforts of reducing dual responsibilities between and within ministries wherever possible to avoid phases in which it is unclear what elements of a particular portfolio belong to which ministry.

Vertically, Germany faces long-standing frictions concerning the relationship between the federal government and municipalities. Federal laws often require local implementation which, in practice, can quickly overburden local authorities (Merki 2025). This is especially difficult to address when local needs vary and the federal level faces information gaps. Inspired by experiences from Spain and Portugal, the Child Guarantee Coordinator could thus directly engage with regional and local authorities to co-develop and calibrate individualised Child Guarantee action plans. An establishment of local Child Guarantee units similar to the Portuguese case could go along with this step. This overall process may make local needs transparent and strengthen commitments. A somewhat similar philosophy underpinned the "*Gute-KiTa*" law, where the federal government signed individual development agreements with the 16 German states (BMBFSFJ 2025). While most likely insufficient for achieving convergence by itself, individualised cooperation seems promising as one piece of a broader child policy strategy.

Funding

Even within a well-coordinated system, appropriate funding is indispensable. However, the size of a budget alone is not everything. As Ivanka Shalapatova (former Minister of Labour and Social Policy of Bulgaria) explains, a child-centric perspective leads to specific requirements regarding funding, some of which are still insufficiently addressed in Germany.

Ivanka Shalapatova

Former Minister of Labour and Social Policy of Bulgaria

Predictable, fair, and transparent budgets: Lessons from Bulgaria and beyond

General Comment No. 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child clarifies how states must use public budgets as a tool to realise children's rights (OHCHR 2016). It provides clear principles such as effectiveness, efficiency, equity, transparency, and sustainability to guide the planning, allocation, and monitoring of resources for children.

A child-focused public finance approach aims to make national and local budgets more effective for children. It links budget planning, allocation, implementation, and monitoring directly to child outcomes, thus reducing poverty, boosting equity, and ensuring access to quality ECEC (also see OECD 2025; Chai and Nieto 2019). Throughout Europe, public finance systems have frequently been criticised for inefficiency, fragmentation, and short-term focus. Scientific reviews emphasise that even where funding for children exists, it is often poorly designed, delayed, or unsustainable, diminishing the impact of early intervention programmes.

The key policy potential is simple but powerful: align the entire budgeting process with children's needs, so that resources are not only allocated but also used predictably, fairly, and transparently. This requires long-term, cross-sectoral planning; fair fiscal transfers to municipalities; and performance-based financing tied to quality standards. Successful approaches combine stable public funding

with clear accountability for outcomes such as inclusion, workforce competency, and progress in child development.

The Bulgarian experience demonstrates both progress and ongoing systemic flaws. Through European Union funds, national authorities have supported municipalities and civil society organisations in developing innovative, high-impact practices to reduce child poverty and deliver integrated early childhood development services. These initiatives have yielded measurable benefits, including enhanced school readiness, increased parental involvement, and early prevention of social risks. However, once the EU-funded project cycle concludes, most of these effective practices tend to vanish. The national budget and public finance management system seldom incorporate them into regular funding streams. Instead of scaling up, successful models remain local pilots.

This recurring pattern exposes a structural weakness: Bulgaria's fiscal system still sees innovation in social policy as temporary, dependent on external funding, rather than as an investment in the country's human capital. The failure to maintain and expand proven early-intervention and prevention programmes contradicts decades of research showing that preventing risks in early childhood is much more effective and cost-efficient than responding after harm has occurred. When funding mechanisms end at the project level, they forgo the economic and social benefits of prevention and perpetuate inequality.

A reformed child-sensitive public finance management approach would close this gap. By integrating early-childhood and poverty-reduction objectives into long-term, recurrent budgeting, and linking EU investments to sustainable domestic co-financing, Bulgaria and other European countries facing similar challenges can turn short-term successes into structural change. This approach is innovative because it extends beyond projects to systemic reform, viewing early investment not just as social spending but as intelligent economics that foster fairer, more resilient societies.

Despite social and economic differences, these fundamental logics and principles also apply to Germany. First, many initiatives in Germany are project-based (BMFSFJ 2023, 62–174) and often lack permanent, reliable, and predictable funding (see, e.g., BMFSFJ 2023, 8; Vardanyan 2025). Second, Germany still struggles to see social policy as an investment (Hemerijck and Mushövel 2025), constantly subjecting it to worries about fiscal constraints. This is paired with a legal challenge: while local authorities often bear major financial burdens of implementation, Germany's federal government is legally limited when it comes to directly funding municipalities (Wissenschaftliche Dienste Deutscher Bundestag 2006, 3).

Thus, despite federal pushes for universal childcare, there are massive gaps in de facto access (Geis-Thöne 2025). Reliable and permanent funding remains a problem that needs to be addressed to ensure that families "on the ground" can plan their everyday lives. One very specific recent example concerns the budgets of the Ministry of Family Affairs for ECEC and hig-

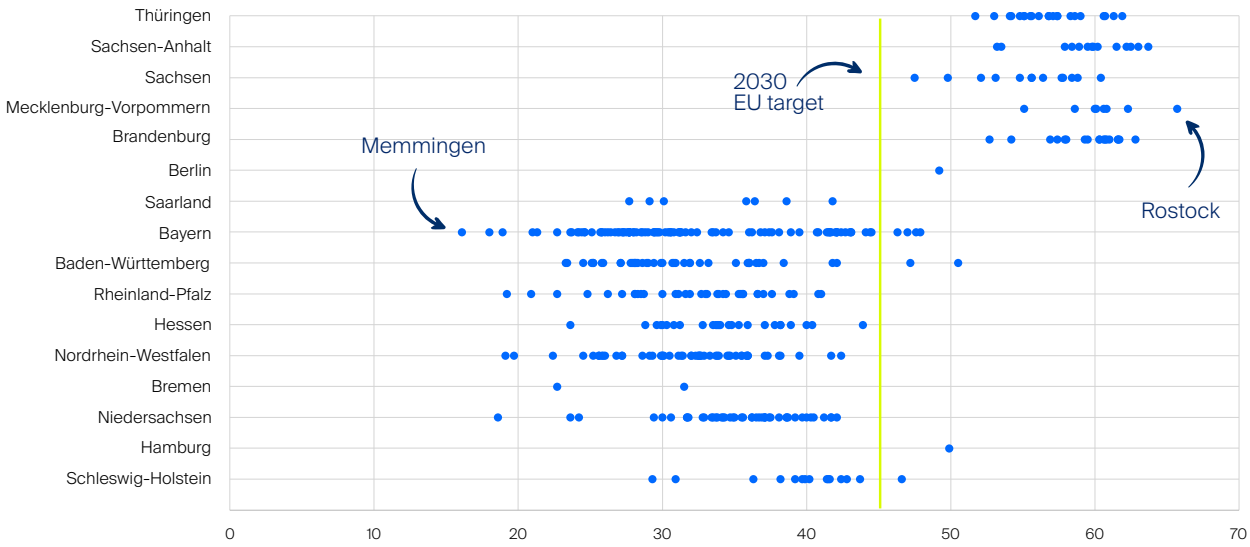
her education. Funds for both can be used interchangeably, hampering predictability for actors on the ground (Table.Media 2025b). Resolving such sources of uncertainty, making more project-based funding permanent, and treating spending on ECEC as an investment would go a long way in reassuring and supporting young families.

3.2 Recipient perspective: Life-world-oriented services

Situation in Germany

Crucially, Germany's complex governance architecture is not merely an administrative issue – it directly affects the everyday lives of dependent children and families. It leads to massive differences in de facto children's rights between states (Stegemann 2025), and it creates a confusing patchwork of services and benefits with varying levels of quality and availability. For instance, coverage (Geis-Thöne 2025) and opening hours (Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2024, 8) of daycare facilities in East Germany far surpass those in the West. As shown in Figure 4, the share of children under the age of three in formal care and education drastically varies between municipalities (Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder 2025). The highest enrolment rates in West-German municipalities are barely above the lowest ones in the East. A child under the age of three living in Rostock, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, is four times as likely to be enrolled in formal care or education as one living in Memmingen, Bavaria. While all East German municipalities surpass the 2030 EU target of 45% of enrolment (Council of the European Union 2022), 97.6% of West German municipalities fall short of it.

Figure 4 Children under the age of 3 in formal care or education by state and municipality (%), 2024



Local differences are also apparent regarding the application, approval, and utilisation of educational and participation benefits (*Leistungen für Bildung und Teilhabe*, BuT) (Bogumil and Gräfe 2025, 3) which aim to improve the educational, social, and cultural opportunities of disadvantaged children and youth. While these are just a few examples, regional inequalities are a considerable problem in Germany's child policy landscape more generally that put young families in some regions at a severe disadvantage and exist in tension with the constitutional duty of the state to ensure equal living conditions across the republic (also see Wissenschaftliche Dienste Deutscher Bundestag 2023).

Civil society recognises distribution gaps and responds with roughly 100 additional offerings and projects. Together with the approximately 230 measures and services provided by the federal government, states, and municipalities, this creates a system of around 330 measures and services (based on a compilation in BMFSFJ 2023). These vary regionally and locally and sometimes overlap. Not only does this patchwork lead to regional inequalities, but it also subjects dependent families to a maze of benefits and services. With over 500 benefits (Blömer et al. 2025), Germany's welfare system is notoriously difficult to navigate. This can lead to high non-take up rates, especially among disadvantaged individuals (also see Bruckmeier and Wiemers 2018; Baisch et al. 2023).

Promising policies

Taken together, these issues are indicative of a system that does not sufficiently revolve around recipients. A child- and family-centric approach could inspire steps towards overcoming barriers and fragmentation. In the following sections, we take a look at three elements of such an agenda: simplifying access to services, as well as pooling and enhancing them.

Simplifying access to services

International experience shows that there are ways of drastically lowering the hurdles individuals face if they want to use services. If done well, such approaches come together as effective agendas for early childhood development. One example for such a policy consists in the Flemish "House of the Child" model, as researcher Christian Morabito explains.

Christian Morabito

International expert on early childhood education and care

Integrated early childhood development services: The Flemish "House of the Child" model

Early childhood development supports the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth of children. Evidence consistently shows that quality interventions in this area generate substantial and lasting benefits, improving school readiness, academic performance, health, and social outcomes. Early childhood development is also one of the most cost-effective public investments, fostering human capital formation while enabling parents' participation in the labour market. These returns are particularly strong for children growing up in vulnerable households, such as those with low income, a migration background, or disabilities.

To fully realise these benefits, especially for disadvantaged children, coordination across related sectors such as health, nutrition, early learning, and social protection is crucial. Children with multiple or complex needs benefit most when services work together toward shared goals through joint planning, information sharing, and ideally, co-located service delivery at the municipal level. This integrated approach is also at the core of the Child Guarantee.

The Flemish *Huis van het Kind* ("House of the Child") initiative offers a promising and operational example of integrated early childhood and family support services. It was developed to overcome institutional fragmentation between health and social care by providing "one-stop" access points where families can receive coordinated support. Nearly all 300 municipalities in Flanders have established a House of the Child, managed through partnerships between local authorities and multiple organisations and institutions. These centres are open to all families but are particularly beneficial for those facing social or economic vulnerability, offering co-located services as well as referrals to complementary programmes.

Services are organised around three main pillars: preventive healthcare, parenting support, and social interaction and cohesion. Staffed by multidisciplinary teams such as nurses, family support workers, and social workers, they promote shared training and data exchange as well as coordinated planning and actions, ensuring continuity of care throughout the perinatal and early childhood period. Coordination is also established with ECEC programmes to support parents in accessing services and to assist staff in managing complex child or family situations.

The House of the Child model, demonstrates that integration can be achieved through joint governance, planning, and a shared professional culture. It simplifies navigation for families, particularly those with greater needs, enhances equity of access to early childhood services, and effectively translates the principles of the Child Guarantee into practice.

In abstract terms, the House of the Child model can sensitise policymakers to the importance of (a) enhancing coordination between existing services and (b) providing centralised access. Existing initiatives show that adopting the House of the Child model in Germany is all but far-fetched. A similar concept is implemented through family centres (*Familienzentren*) that

use childcare facilities as nodes to support families in accessing education and support systems (see, e.g., Bauer 2025; Engling et al. 2023; Senatsverwaltung für Bildung, Jugend und Familie Berlin 2024). The family- and child-centric "House of Education" (*Haus der Bildung*) is a specific example from the city of Krefeld that just opened its doors to the public. In its fundamental approach, it is reminiscent of the House of Child model, uniting a family centre, daycare, and an elementary school under one roof (Haus der Bildung 2025). More generally, so-called "chains of prevention" (*Präventionsketten*) are being adopted in various municipalities to coordinate and pool efforts to tackle the fallout of child poverty (Qualitätsverbund Präventionsketten 2024).

While such initiatives are a step in the right direction, Germany's patchwork problem shows here, too (e.g., Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband Berlin 2023). Notwithstanding the merit of sub-federal variation, decisionmakers could take inspiration from the far-reaching rollout of the House of the Child model in Flanders to scale up adoption of family centres and chains of prevention. Specifically, exploring options for a federal framework regulation that creates a baseline regarding quality standards and geographical coverage could be a promising step (for a similar approach, see Haarmann et al. 2025).

When developing such a regulation, policymakers should consult with experts to identify what design decisions can cause family centres to be particularly successful. For instance, physical location matters. Not all Houses of the Child actually offer all services in a single building – some are simply administratively connected. However, to improve service coordination and simplify access, physical location makes a major difference (Emmery et al. 2025, 9). Furthermore, and tying back to Ivanka Shalapatova's elaborations above, funding is key. If the federal government chose to push for a nationwide adoption and partial standardisation of family centres, it would need to provide states with sufficient funds to enable implementation at the local level.

Pooling services and benefits

In addition to simplification of access, services and benefits themselves can be streamlined and pooled. After all, equal opportunities require a material basis. Many countries such as Germany already have welfare benefits for families in place – they are just often inaccessible for procedural reasons. As Eric Großhaus (Save the Children) elaborates, streamlining benefits and services can improve the experience of families and children by reducing bureaucracy and access barriers all the while reducing complexity and costs for the state.

Eric Großhaus

Advocacy Manager for child poverty and inequality at Save the Children Germany

Navigating the labyrinth: Challenges and solutions in accessing social benefits

Living in poverty or being at risk of it is a life full of challenges for children and families. How can everyone get enough to eat? Will there be enough money left to buy the book my child wishes for? Can my parents afford the trip I want to take with my friends, or should I cancel? These questions reflect the ongoing struggle for social participation and a healthy daily life. A functioning social infrastructure and access to services, as outlined in the Child Guarantee, can mitigate many of these burdens. But beyond that, a social system is needed that provides families with financial security to cover basic needs and social participation– thus upholding children's rights under all circumstances.

Given all the challenges of everyday life, access to financial benefits children and families are legally entitled to should not be another hurdle. And yet, all too often, bureaucratic obstacles and complex application procedures stand in the way of claiming benefits. In Germany, for example, the multitude of parallel services, application forms, and responsible authorities leads to real confusion, and it takes considerable effort to navigate this labyrinth. This, among other factors, leads to high non-take-up rates, denying families essential support (Baisch et al. 2023).

To ensure that every child receives the benefits to which they and their families are entitled, the following would be a step forward: simplification, consolidation, and, where possible, automation. The aim: a unified system replacing fragmented benefits, multiple application forms, and responsible authorities. Public agencies would synchronise existing data in the background, so families no longer need to repeatedly submit the same information. Application forms would be reduced to a minimum. This serves a dual purpose: benefits reach all families in need, and administrative burden and costs are reduced. The system should be simple, universally accessible, and means-tested. It guarantees basic security for all and extra support for those most in need—promoting participation and well-being at all times.

In Germany, this kind of reform—known as “basic child allowance” (*Kindergrundsicherung*)—has sparked intense debate in recent years. It seeks to merge and simplify existing benefits like universal child benefit (*Kindergeld*), supplementary child allowance (*Kinderzuschlag*), and basic social benefits for children (*Bürgergeld/Grundsicherung*), and to recalculate the minimum subsistence level for children realistically to guarantee a level of benefits which meets children’s needs (see Der Kinderschutzbund Bundesverband e. V. 2024).

Although the previous government failed to agree on such a reform, the approach remains important. The core ideas of the basic child allowance should guide debates about the future of the welfare state. After all, getting the support one is entitled to should not feel like navigating a labyrinth.

In an ideal scenario, pooling benefits and services can be a win-win for the state and recipients alike. Importantly, a family- and child-centred perspective would not lead to cost cutting for its own sake, but rather to simplification that follows a social rationale. Such an agenda could streamline benefits and services wherever it helps families and children and emphasise the value of one-stop shops.

An area currently open to reforms concerns benefits under the umbrella of "*Bildung und Teilhabe*" - benefits provided for education and participation in social life (Schabram et al. 2025). So far, accessing such benefits is associated with bureaucracy for recipients and changing responsibilities depending on the specific support claimed (Bogumil and Gräfe 2025). The government is considering to reduce bureaucracy and to pool responsibilities (Table.Media 2025a) – an opportunity that should decisively be used for meaningful change. Beyond simplification itself, ideas of organising provision through an app (Sterz 2025) could further be pursued. Access might also be simplified through dedicated cards inspired by the Swedish "*Fritidskortet*" (leisure card) (Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs 2024, 4), though reducing non-take up, stigma, and inequalities may better be achieved if basics such as school meals are made universal.

Automation can be another powerful tool to foster opportunities. Here, the Estonian model of proactive family benefits can serve as inspiration. This system registers newborns to automatically offer parents benefits via an online platform once they are entitled (Sotsiaalministeerium 2025, 2; Huppertz et al. 2024, 153; Bachmann et al. 2024, 76–81). While such a system requires considerable willingness for reforms and cross-institutional access to personal data, it almost entirely eradicated non-take up and reduced the need for interactions with government agencies by 88% (Bachmann et al. 2024, 80).

Enhancing and expanding rights

Beyond streamlining and pooling, Germany has potential to improve on social rights themselves as well. In practice, such rights are often expressed through benefits and services. Concerning the goals of the Child Guarantee, Sonja Blum outlines how Germany can look to its Nordic peers to learn what a child-centric perspective implies for the crucial area of parental leave (also see Keizer et al. 2020).

Sonja Blum

Professor of Comparative Politics and Public Policy at Bielefeld University

Parental leave benefits: Learning from a child-centred perspective

Parental leave and the parental leave benefit (*Elterngeld*) are central elements of Germany's family policy. Considering their importance for making work and family life compatible as well as fostering mothers' labour market integration, many European countries have expanded these social rights in recent decades. When Germany introduced its parental leave benefit scheme in 2007, Minister of Family Affairs Ursula von der Leyen called it a "*Schonraum*" (protective space), enabling parents to take time for their newborn without financial pressure for the first year after birth (Bundesregierung 2006, 3). However, child-centred perspectives on parental leave benefits are largely lacking. From applying this perspective, at least three things can be learned.

First, the "financial *Schonraum*" has slowly eroded in Germany. With a maximum of two thirds, the income replacement rate of the parental benefit scheme is at the low end of what can still be considered as "well-paid leave" internationally (for an overview, see Dobrotić et al. 2025). In the Nordic welfare states, replacement rates are rather around 80%. What is more, the German scheme features a cap at 1,800 euros per month that has not been increased since 2007. Retroactively and continuously adjusting this cap to inflation would be a necessary condition for enabling that children's mothers and fathers can actually afford spending parental leave time with them.

Second, increasing fathers' participation in care responsibilities has always been an explicit goal of Germany's parental leave benefit. To achieve this, two "partner months" were introduced. Compared to the scheme that was previously in place, these months were a success: the number of fathers claiming parental leave benefit has increased. However, international comparisons typically do not measure whether fathers take parental leave at all, but how much leave fathers take relative to mothers. Here, Germany still features a relatively "traditional" distribution of work. Making larger shares of entitlements to parental leave benefits non-transferrable between parents, i.e., granting leave as an individual right, then matters not only from a perspective of gender equality, but also from a child-centred one. After all, this perspective highlights the child's right to spend time and build a relationship with both carers.

Third, Germany is one of the few European countries in which there is no dedicated paternity leave (Dobrotić et al. 2025), i.e., the fathers' right to paid leave during the time around birth. For instance, Austria offers around four weeks, while Denmark and Sweden offer two respectively. A common justification for this gap is that fathers can claim parental leave benefits after birth as an equivalent to paternity leave. This, however, is misleading. First, taking parental leave instead of a paternity leave diminishes the available "*Schonraum*" at a later point in time. Second, many fathers still refrain from claiming parental leave benefits due to the associated loss of income or for fears of negative career impacts. A dedicated paternity leave of, for instance, two weeks would send a different signal, both to fathers and employers. It could thus enhance children's welfare after birth.

All in all, in the Nordic welfare states, the child-centred perspective is reflected much more clearly in public policy. For instance, universal

childcare is more strongly seen not only as a right of parents to early childhood care but also as a right of children to early childhood education. Parental leave and associated benefit schemes are designed in a less gendered way. For Germany, these policies can serve as guidance for future reform paths.

Improvements and expansions of benefits are not only crucial for the well-being of children (Bünning 2015). Under the paradigm of social investment, they act both as "flow policies" that improve transitions between phases of life (Mushövel and Hemerijck 2025a), and as "buffer policies" that keep up demand in times where personal income would otherwise take a hit (Mushövel and Hemerijck 2025b). More generally, social rights can also be codified legally, as the constitutions of (some of) the Nordics exemplify (Nylund 2020). Following its own period of policy learning (Morabito and Vandenbroeck 2020, 34), Slovenia also shows how "the legal entitlements of children, accompanied by universal and state-funded services" can strengthen equal opportunities in the area of ECEC (Morabito and Vandenbroeck 2020, 36). Inspired by these examples and the recent introduction of a legal right to day-long care in elementary schools (BMBFSFJ 2021), Germany could constitutionally guarantee child rights – something the Scholz government and the SPD committed to recently but conservatives were sceptical of (LpB BW 2025). Similarly, child services or educational facilities could be declared critical infrastructure.

4. A spectrum of options

The Child Guarantee bears great potential for children's opportunities across Europe. Its emphasis on policy learning can help Germany address administrative fragmentation. However, progress does not happen automatically. For the non-binding Child Guarantee to work, policy learning must be actively embraced. This requires fostering and joining spaces of exchange, proactive communication across borders, and openness to new approaches. As Enrico Tormen (Save the Children) highlights, many states are acting accordingly, leading to some of the ideas we discussed to spread across Europe.

Enrico Tormen

Advocacy Advisor at Save the Children Europe

Systemic change through the Child Guarantee: The need for political commitment

The Child Guarantee has shifted the debate on child poverty from intention to delivery. Importantly, it forces systems to organise around children and links rights, services, and funding in a way previous strategies rarely achieved. The Child Guarantee works because it treats access to essential services as non-negotiable, while giving governments a framework to identify who is excluded, why, and what must change.

Across countries, the most visible impact has been political. NAPs have obliged ministries that rarely spoke to each other to sit at the same table. In Ireland, this has reinforced an existing whole of government approach, with the Child Guarantee embedded into area-based anti-poverty plans and overseen through a dedicated coordination structure. In Finland, commitments under the Guarantee have helped protect universal early childhood education and child health services at a time of fiscal pressure, while prompting targeted measures for children facing material deprivation. In Romania, EU funding linked to the Child Guarantee has supported multifunctional community centres that combine education, health, and social support in marginalised areas, including Roma communities.

The Child Guarantee has also helped scale and formalise practices that were previously fragmented. Poland aligned existing social programmes under a clearer child-centred logic, improving consistency across education, nutrition, and housing support. Lithuania expanded access to mental health services for children through nationally coordinated models, addressing gaps long flagged by practitioners. Beyond the EU, enlargement countries have used the Child Guarantee as a reform blueprint. Kosovo expanded community-based early childhood centres and reformed social assistance rules, while Albania integrated Child Guarantee principles into its national social protection strategy. In Ukraine, the framework is shaping recovery planning so that reconstruction does not repeat old patterns of exclusion.

These examples matter because they show how the Child Guarantee can change systems, not just fund projects. Where progress stalls, the reasons are clear. Too many NAPs rely on short-term funding or recycled budgets. Housing, healthcare, and transport remain weak points. Data gaps continue to render some children invisible, particularly Roma children, undocumented families, and children with disabilities. Participation of children is still too often symbolic. The coming year will be decisive. The Child Guarantee has proven its relevance and its potential. What it lacks is political protection and adequate, predictable funding.

While many states have impressively engaged in policy learning under the Child Guarantee, Germany, too, can greatly benefit from such an approach. Hence, we identified a spectrum of promising policies at different degrees of ambitiousness and complexity that the country could embrace. They come together as an overarching reform agenda towards a more child- and

family-centred policy landscape that prioritises opportunities early in life.

Within our framework of policy learning, these measures all fulfil the criterion of reputation to a certain degree, given recommendations by issue experts and international experience. Three of the policies we presented can be considered "low-hanging fruits" as they additionally have a high institutional and normative fit: simplifying education and participation benefits, establishing a Child Wellbeing Office, and exploring a framework regulation to mainstream the logic of the House of the Child model. While the former measure is already on the political agenda, the latter two can latch onto existing reform debates and are not particularly at odds with strong party preferences. If prioritised, all three could be relatively easily adapted to fit Germany's institutional context. Given their considerable potential, the government would be well-advised to take steps towards these measures right away.

A similarly strong institutional fit is given for the second group of policies. These "contested matches" fit well into the German system in principle but operate in politically contentious realms: increasing permanent funding clashes with long-standing fiscal controversies; overhauling parental leave benefits faces similar issues along with political inertia; and constitutionalising children's rights has been demanded by many but recently faced political complications and resistance (LpB BW 2025). Although politically contested, we recommend that the government acts on these measures quickly. Their high institutional fit allows for comparatively swift implementation in principle. However, as fiscal leeway is likely to tighten and political majorities dwindle, time may very well be running out. Constructive changes to the constitution in particular may become difficult in the near future.

Finally, there is the "paradigm shift": introducing proactive family policy would require major institutional adjustments, fundamentally change the logic of how child and family benefits are offered, and likely face concerns over data protection. However, analyses for the German federal government have deemed this approach transferrable (Bachmann et al. 2024, 80–81), with it fitting well to an ongoing political trajectory around simplification and modernisation. Its tremendous potential for simultaneously reducing administrative burdens and simplifying lives for recipients makes this an elegant policy that is certainly worth prioritising. In the short run, the government may focus on creating the administrative and legal conditions in which such measures can be embedded. Subsequently, automated, proactive, and digital social policy provision can be pursued.

Table 1 Policy recommendations by institutional and normative fit

	Institutional fit	Normative fit
Simplify education and participation benefits	High	High
Child Wellbeing Office	High	High
House of the Child framework regulation	High	High
Increase permanent funding	High	Medium
Overhaul parental leave benefits	High	Medium
Constitutionalise children's rights	High	Medium
Proactive family policy	Medium	Medium

Not all of these policy ideas are equally transformative. Importantly, this is a feature of policy learning, not a bug. In times of reform fatigue, smaller changes can yield meaningful improvements and strengthen trust in the ability of the state to make progress. Ultimately, however, children's well-being is too pressing of an issue for ambitious responses to be left by the wayside. While the low-hanging fruits can be addressed in the short run, creating the conditions for paradigm shifts to become feasible is also a condition for future-proofing a welfare state. The policies we present are some examples for what can more broadly be achieved through a mindset of policy learning. The Child Guarantee is a rare opportunity – it is high time to take it.

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IMPRESSUM

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Das Zentrum für neue Sozialpolitik (ZSP) ist ein unabhängiger und gemeinnütziger Thinktank mit Sitz in Berlin. Es entwickelt politiknahe Konzepte für eine moderne Sozialpolitik, die individuelle Selbstbestimmung, soziale Teilhabe und strukturelle Fairness in den Mittelpunkt stellt.

Ausgehend von der Frage, unter welchen gesellschaftlichen Bedingungen Menschen ihr Leben selbstbestimmt und eigenverantwortlich gestalten können, stehen Bildung, soziale Sicherung und Teilhabe im Fokus.

Als interdisziplinäre Organisation verbindet das ZSP wissenschaftsbasierte Analyse mit strategischer Politikberatung und schafft Räume für den Austausch zwischen Akteur:innen aus Politik, Wissenschaft, Zivilgesellschaft und Wirtschaft.

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