

Early Childhood Education and Care in Israel: An Overview

Sarit Silverman and Carmel Blank

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The Taub Center's *Initiative on Early Childhood Development and Inequality* is tasked with examining the effects of the young child's environment on future achievements and disseminating the latest research on this subject. The Initiative's goal is to assist in the advancement of effective policy to improve the environmental conditions of children in Israel during their early years of life, in order to improve their outcomes and reduce disparities due to socioeconomic background. The researchers involved in this initiative draft up-to-date research reports, literature surveys, position papers, and policy papers. As part of its effort to disseminate the latest available knowledge, the Initiative holds an academic seminar to provide a multidisciplinary basis — both theoretical and empirical — for the investigation of early childhood. The activities of the Initiative are supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, the Beracha Foundation, and Yad Hanadiv.

Initiative Head: Prof. Yossi Shavit, Principal Researcher, Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel; Professor Emeritus, Tel Aviv University

Research staff: Dr. Carmel Blank, Dr. Yael Navon, Dana Shay, Dr. Sarit Silverman

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Demographic projections for the next decade: Who is the early childhood population?

While there has been a slight decline in the overall fertility rate in Israel in recent years, one of the unique characteristics of Israel's demography remains its high fertility rate compared to that in Western countries, with 2.92 children born per woman in 2023 compared to the OECD average of 1.58 (OECD, 2023; UN DESA, 2022). In 2022, there were approximately 1,286,000 children aged birth to six in Israel, and by 2032, that same-age population is projected to reach about 1,476,000 (Weinreb, 2020). These trends place Israel in a unique position compared to other high-income countries: rapid growth in the number of young children places ever-increasing demands on early childhood education, subsequent formal schooling, and health services geared toward young children and families. However, as discussed in depth in the demography chapter, fertility trends fluctuate in line with current events, and the impact of this turbulent year on fertility rates and demography projections for the coming years remains to be seen.

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Dr. Sarit Silverman, Senior Researcher, Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel. Dr. Carmel Blank, Senior Researcher, Taub Center; Lecturer, Faculty of Social and Community Sciences, Ruppin Academic Center. We would like to thank the early childhood research team Prof. Yossi Shavit, Dr. Yael Navon, and Dana Shay for their contributions to this paper, Prof. Alex Weinreb for his guidance in the demography section, and Prof. Avi Weiss and Nir Kaidar for their helpful insights.

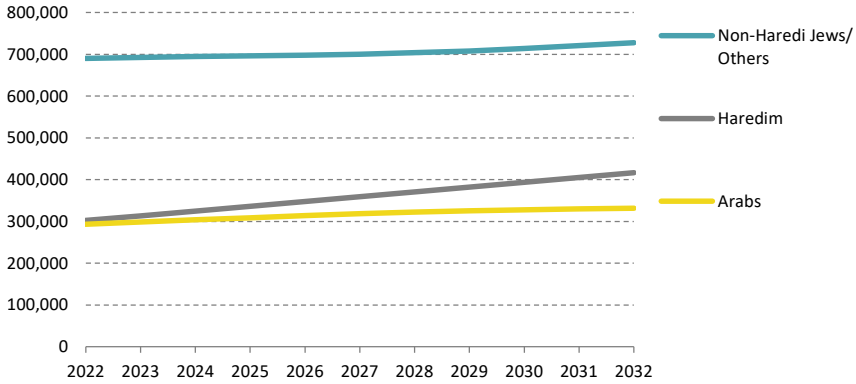
This study was conducted as part of the Taub Center Initiative on Early Childhood Development and Inequality which is generously supported by the Beracha Foundation, the Bernard van Leer Foundation, and Yad Hanadiv.

Figure 1 shows the projected early childhood growth patterns for the period 2023–2032, by three major subpopulations: Haredim (ultra-Orthodox Jews), Arabs, and non-Haredi Jews — the last includes those categorized by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) as *Other* or *Not classified by religion*. The overall annual growth rate is expected to be about 1.4% in 2032, but there is considerable variability across subpopulations, as displayed in Figure 2. Annual growth rates among Haredim and Arabs are greater than among Jews and Others. At the same time, Haredi and Arab growth rates are expected to decline in the next decade, suggesting that the proportion of these groups will increase but at a decreasing rate. Among Jews and Others, the annual growth rate is expected to remain stable in the coming years with a possible increase at the end of the decade, and it may outpace the Arab annual growth rate by 2030.

The simple majority of the early childhood population of children from birth through age six held by Jews and Others may dip just below 50% by 2030. Looking at trends among infants (children under one year old), the population projections for the coming years suggest that the tipping point in the simple majority will occur sooner among infants than among the total early childhood population (birth to six), as shown in Figure 3. Currently, a simple majority of new birth cohorts are non-Haredi Jews (including Others). According to the projections, a majority of infants will be Haredi or Arab as early as next year.

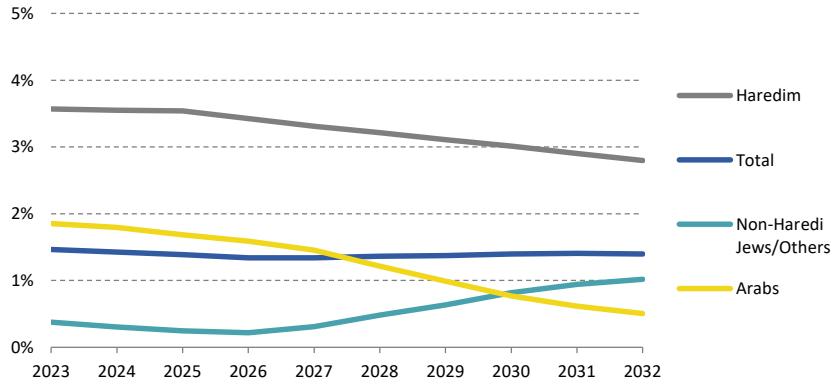
This ongoing change in the demographic composition of the early childhood population has ramifications for social and economic policy as it requires shifting significant resources from their original allocation to the development of educational institutions. In addition, since poverty rates among young children from Arab and Haredi families are higher than among families from the Jews and Others group (Navon & Bowers, 2023), an increase in the relative proportion of these groups among young children is likely to require increased support and services in the future for families living in poverty.

Figure 1. Projected early childhood (birth to age six) population, by sector

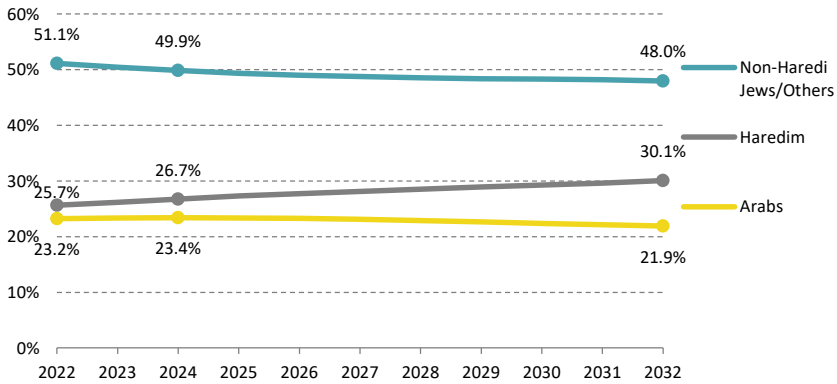


Source: Sarit Silverman and Carmel Blank, Taub Center | Data: CBS

Figure 2. Projected early childhood (birth to age six) annual growth rates, by sector



Source: Sarit Silverman and Carmel Blank, Taub Center | Data: CBS

Figure 3. Relative proportion of sector in projected birth cohorts

Source: Sarit Silverman and Carmel Blank, Taub Center | Data: CBS

Early childhood education frameworks

Early childhood education and care includes daycare centers for children from birth through age three (hereinafter ECEC) and preschool for children ages three to five. The following section presents data on these education frameworks from the past year.

There have been several changes in recent years in the oversight of ECEC facilities, including the passing of the Supervision of Daycare Centers for Toddlers Law in 2018, the transfer of responsibility for ECEC to the Ministry of Education as part of the coalition agreements of the Bennet-Lapid government, and the supervisory standards for the Daycare Supervision Law 2021 were implemented. This law was the first to regulate the operation of private daycare centers, requiring daycare centers with seven or more infants/toddlers to comply with certain standards including safety measures, accompaniment by an education counselor, the setting of a minimal amount of physical area per child, an improvement in the child-to-staff ratio, and staff training, including first-aid training. Oversight of these daycare centers was transferred to the Ministry of Education in January 2022. The different kinds of ECEC frameworks and the government body that oversees them are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Types of ECEC and their oversight

Daycare type	Supervisory authority	Operating authority	Subsidy availability
Certified daycare center, 7 or more children	Ministry of Education	Private and public entities, local authorities	Yes
Recognized home care, fewer than 7 children	Ministry of Labor	Private and public entities, local authorities	Yes
Private daycare centers, 7 or more children	Ministry of Education	Independent parties	No
Private home care, fewer than 7 children	None	Independent parties	No
Rehabilitation daycare centers, infants/toddlers with disabilities	Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs and Ministry of Health	Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs and Ministry of Health	Yes
Private nannies in their homes	None	Independent parties	No

Source: Sarit Silverman and Carmel Blank, Taub Center | Data: Rabinowitz, 2023

Until recently, data regarding ECEC frameworks have been extremely limited (to be expanded upon below). Currently, data are available regarding the frameworks under the supervision of the Ministry of Education — certified daycare centers, private daycare centers supervised by the Ministry, and rehabilitation daycare centers — but there are no organized administrative data for unsupervised and unregulated private daycare centers. Thus, the data presented below refer only to those institutions for which data are available through the Ministry of Education. In the last section of this chapter, we will discuss some of the challenges that stem from the dispersion of supervision responsibilities across ministries.

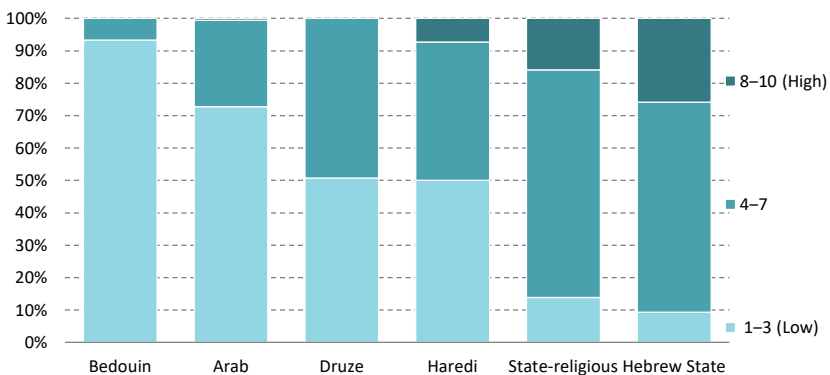
Number of supervised daycare centers

In July 2021, the government decided to transfer the responsibility for supervision of daycare centers to the Ministry of Education. This was implemented in the 2021/2022 school year, and the Ministry website, *A Wide Perspective*, began publishing data on daycare centers. These data include the number of supervised daycare centers (including subsidized certified private daycare centers) and information on the centers, such as geographical location, local socioeconomic ranking, and sector. However, it does not include data on the number of children in the daycare center or on the daycare center's staff, and there is no information about unsupervised daycare centers.

In the 2022/2023 school year, there were 4,452 recognized, supervised daycare centers, which is a substantial increase from 2,000 in the 2021/2022 school year. The distribution of supervised daycare centers by sector and local socioeconomic status (SES) clusters is presented in Figure 4. Without the number of classes and the number of children per class, we cannot estimate the percentage of children per sector or SES cluster who attend supervised daycare centers. More detailed data collection on daycare centers is necessary to obtain a clear picture of what is occurring in daycare centers, ensure quality is being maintained, and learn where ECEC frameworks can improve.

Figure 4. Distribution of supervised daycare centers, 2023, by sector and SES cluster

N = 4,452



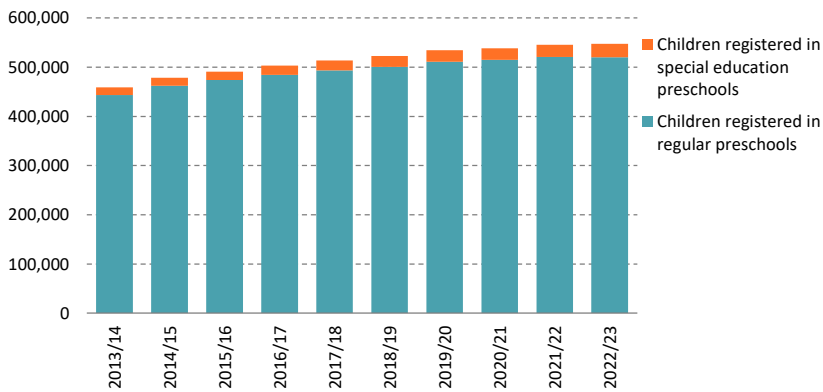
Source: Sarit Silverman and Carmel Blank, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education, A Wide Perspective

Preschool participation rates and trends

Preschool participation rates for children ages 3–5 are close to 100%. According to data from the Ministry of Education’s A Wide Perspective website, in the 2022/2023 school year, approximately 520,000 children were registered in regular preschools and 27,000 students were registered in special education preschools. Figure 4 presents the rise of registered preschool students in the past decade. The rise at the start of the decade was due to the implementation of the Trajtenberg Committee’s recommendation (2011) to expand mandatory education for children ages 3–4. The data also display a rise in the relative

proportion of students registered in special education preschools, which constituted 3.3% of preschoolers in 2013/2014 and 5% in 2022/2023. The growth in regular preschool students between 2018/2019¹ and 2022/2023 was 3.9%, compared to 20.3% in special education students.

Figure 5. Number of children aged 3–5 registered in regular and special education preschools in the past decade



Source: Sarit Silverman and Carmel Blank, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education, A Wide Perspective

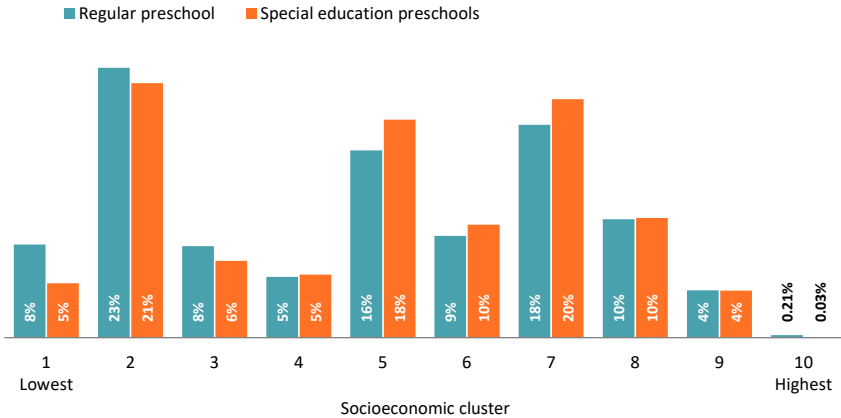
Sociodemographic analysis of regular and special education participation in Israel

To further understand the growing trend in special education preschools, we examined the proportion of registered students in special education preschools by sector and local SES and compared them to the same proportions among students registered in regular preschools (Figures 6–7). These proportions should theoretically be similar, as the distribution of students registered in special education preschools should reflect the overall composition of preschoolers by sector and SES level. Figure 6 shows that by local SES, the distribution of children registered in special education and regular preschools is fairly similar. On the other hand, Figure 7 shows significant over-representation

1 We compared the change in growth rate from 2018/2019 and not 2013/2014 since most of the rise at the beginning of the decade was due to expanding mandatory preschool for children ages three to four. In 2018/2019 the growth stabilized and is a clearer indicator of cohort growth rates.

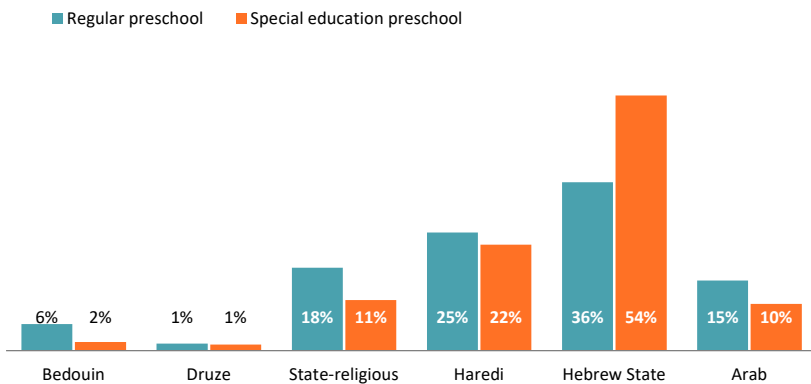
of children registered in non-religious, State-run special education preschools, and underrepresentation in the remaining groups (besides Druze).

Figure 6. The relative proportion of local SES in regular and special education preschools, 2023



Source: Sarit Silverman and Carmel Blank, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education, A Wide Perspective

Figure 7. The relative proportion of sector in regular and special education preschools, 2023



Source: Sarit Silverman and Carmel Blank, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education, A Wide Perspective

Aside from children learning in separate special education frameworks, there are children with special needs who are integrated into regular classrooms. The data from the A Wide Perspective website does not classify these students separately; rather, it includes them with the other children registered in regular preschools. The latest available data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) on integrated special education preschoolers are from the 2017/2018 school year and show that a significant portion of special education students are registered in regular preschools: 18,000 students versus 22,700 registered in special education preschools.

Despite the high number, data on integrated special education preschoolers have not been reported in the last five years. The CBS also reports data on types of disability among preschoolers in special education frameworks, but does not distinguish by sector or SES level. In sum, comprehensive data on special education preschoolers, including children registered in special education preschools and those integrated into regular preschools, along with sociodemographic indicators and disability type, are necessary to assess the special education preschool system and ensure that children across sectors and SES levels have equal access to preschool frameworks that suit their needs. Figure 7 suggests differential access to special education preschools by sector, but more data are needed, such as data on integrated special education preschoolers by sector, to support this claim.

The rise in the proportion of special education students suggests that the preschool system will require more special education teachers in the coming years. Taub Center publications have examined the trend of the rise in special education students in the school system (Blass, 2022a, 2022b, and see the Education Chapter in this publication), and future research should delve deeper specifically into this trend in preschools and aim to uncover possible differences in access to special education preschools by sector and SES. The outcomes for children with disabilities and developmental delays are much better if they receive early intervention, which attendance to special education preschools can provide — differential access to services can help improve outcomes for children in different sectors.

Early childhood policy developments in the past year

The changes in oversight of ECEC facilities described in the previous section increased the public discourse on early childhood. The increased attention on early childhood reached new heights this past year with campaign promises for free early childhood education from birth. The government also presented its five-year ECEC plan this year, a plan that aims to reduce out-of-pocket daycare center fees, improve the quality of care, and expand the subsidized daycare center system. The five-year plan is summarized in Table 2. The key takeaway of the program is that it addresses improving daycare center quality head-on, thus continuing the process that began with the 2018 Supervision Law and transference of responsibility to the Ministry of Education: demonstrating a new national awareness that ECEC is not only a means to encourage women's employment, but rather is also the first station in children's educational journey that has a meaningful impact on children's development and well-being. The main limitation of the five-year plan is that it fails to effectively address the most pressing problem in the ECEC system: the acute, ongoing manpower crisis and extreme shortage of ECEC staff. Following a brief review of the five-year plan, we present troubling findings on the current manpower crisis.

Table 2. Ministry of Education's five-year ECEC plan

High cost of living

- Tax credits for working parents with young children, worth approximately NIS 940 a month based on tax bracket

Expanding construction of subsidized daycare centers

- Multi-year construction plan
- Construction of new ECEC classrooms
- Focus on areas with high demand

Improvements in daycare center quality

- Improve child-to-staff ratio
- Increase caregiver salary
- Expand staff training
- Expand supervision

Source: Sarit Silverman and Carmel Blank, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Addressing the cost of living

Despite the campaign slogan for free early childhood education, the program does not provide free education. We believe that at the current time, this is a positive development: providing free childcare would increase demand and overburden an already overstretched ECEC system and possibly lead to its collapse, as described in our previous position paper (Blank & Silverman, 2023). The two elements of the five-year plan aimed at addressing the cost of living include expanding subsidies for subsidized daycare centers and providing tax credits for working parents with children under age three. Beginning in January 2024, working parents with children ages birth to three will receive two tax credits per parent with a maximum value of about NIS 940 for families with two working parents with income qualifying them for tax credits or who are eligible for negative income tax every month.

For the majority of families whose children attend private daycares, around 75% of the children in ECEC frameworks, this does not sufficiently address the burden of high daycare costs. It does not control for the rising costs of private daycare, which can be as much as NIS 5,000 per child. Even if a family qualifies for a NIS 940 monthly tax credit, private daycare centers can continue to raise prices, and the financial burden would continue to increase along with it.

For families with children in subsidized daycare, a minority of only 25% of the children who attend daycare, the average increased subsidy will be an additional NIS 500 a month. Together with potentially a NIS 940 tax credit, this provides substantial support for families in subsidized daycare centers. However, the number of families who qualify for both benefits is low. Due to a combination of tax bracket structure, subsidy qualifications, and lower capacity in subsidized daycare centers, many families do not qualify for either benefit, particularly low-income families who do not earn enough to receive the tax credits. In addition, there are not enough subsidized daycare centers (which is also addressed in the five-year plan), so even if a family wishes to send their child to a supervised daycare center, there is not always a local, viable option. Lack of access is a particularly pronounced problem in Arab communities, discussed in greater detail in the next section.

Expanding construction of subsidized daycare centers

The proposed plan is expected to cost approximately NIS 5.3 billion over five years. The plan's largest budgetary element is expanding the construction of subsidized daycare centers, with an estimated cost of NIS 2.2 billion. The multi-year construction plan aims to build thousands of ECEC classrooms, improve the bureaucratic process for regulation, and focus on regions with high demand.

Increasing access to supervised, subsidized daycare centers is certainly a noble goal, but allocating the funds does not guarantee implementation. The five-year plan allocates funds for building new subsidized daycare centers, but does not address the barriers that local authorities face in constructing such centers. Experience has shown that even when localities had the available budget for building daycare centers, the construction was not always realized for bureaucratic reasons, especially in Arab communities. Madhala et al. (2021) found that utilization of the daycare construction budget in Arab local authorities was only 50% of their allocated budget compared to 61% in Jewish, non-Haredi local authorities, and 79% in Haredi authorities. In addition, even if the construction is completed, the new classrooms would remain empty if the staff shortage is not addressed.

Improvements in daycare center quality

Regarding improvements in daycare center quality, the five-year plan aims to expand training programs and increase regulation and safety measures. Specifically, the number of on-the-job training hours given to ECEC caregivers by an educational instructor will increase from four to ten hours a month. These hours will include observation hours, aimed at identifying children with developmental delays and other difficulties. Localities will be responsible for providing the increased training and supervision of ECEC staff, while the financing will be provided by the government. In addition to increased education training, courses given to the staff are to be expanded to equip them with more professional tools for the handling of their day-to-day work. The Ministry of Education, who is responsible for these training courses, will issue a call to the education colleges to conduct the training.

But this is not enough. To improve daycare center quality, it is necessary to reduce the child-to-staff ratio, one of the most important indicators of ECEC quality. Table 3 displays the ideal child-to-staff ratio by age group based on the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP et al., 2019; Adi-Yaffe & Sagi-Schwartz, 2023) recommendations, and compares it to both the current situation in Israel, and the improvements proposed in the five-year plan. As evident from the table, the improved child-to-staff ratio does not meet the ideal standards nor lessen the maximum group size, which is also important for optimal care. In addition, it worsens the ratio for children aged 12–15 months by categorizing them in the toddler age group instead of in the infant age group, thereby increasing the child-to-staff ratio for these children from 6:1 to 8:1, based on the five-year plan. Given the number of infants born in recent years and maternal employment rates (OECD, 2020), reaching the optimal child-to-staff ratios the ECEC would require approximately 100,000 staff members, while currently there are only an estimated 50,000. Given the severe staff shortage, improving the child-to-staff ratio in the near future is unattainable, but should be viewed as a future goal to strive towards.

Table 3. Child-to-staff ratio comparisons

Optimal child to staff ratio according to the American Academy of Pediatrics		
Age	Child:Staff ratio	Maximum group size
Under 12 months	3:1	6
13–35 months	4:1	8
3-year-olds	7:1	14
Current child to staff ratio in Israel		
Age	Child:Staff ratio	Maximum group size
Under 15 months	6:1	20
15–24 months	9:1	24
Over 2-years-old	11:1	30
Improved child to staff ratio according to the Ministry of Education's five-year plan		
Age	Child:Staff ratio	Maximum group size
Under 12 months	5:1	20
12–24 months	8:1	24
24–33 months	10:1	30

Source: Sarit Silverman and Carmel Blank, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education; AAP et al., 2019

ECEC manpower crisis

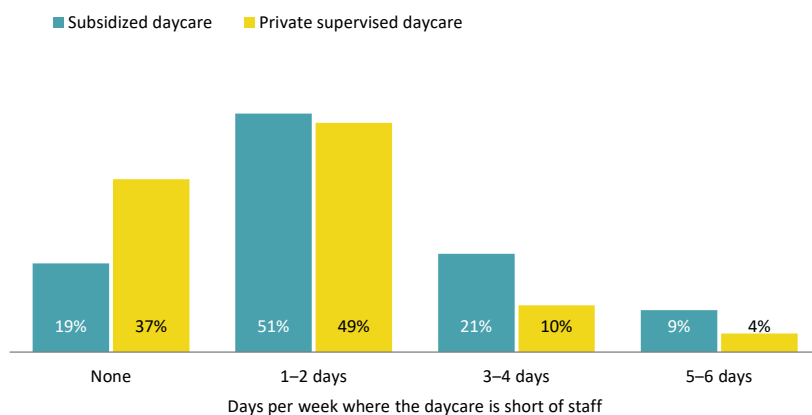
The five-year plan proposes financial benefits to improve the employment conditions of ECEC caregivers in subsidized (*semei*) centers. First, all daycare staff (including caregivers, cooks, etc.) will receive a retention bonus of NIS 8,000 for a full-time position, which will be spread over a year and a half and be prorated according to the employee's number of working hours. At the same time, the tuition rate in the subsidized daycares increased this year, which helped cover the wage increases for the caregivers by a few shekels per hour. As explained in the previous section on the cost of living, the increased subsidy for the supervised daycare centers was financed by the State and did not increase the burden of payments placed on the parents. This limited, one-time financial benefit only applies to staff in subsidized daycare centers. The plan does not include additional measures that would improve the employment conditions, such as providing opportunities for career growth, additional benefits, nor does it improve the employment conditions of caregivers in private daycare centers, which are the majority of the main ECEC frameworks for ages birth to three. In light of this, the plan does not sufficiently solve the manpower problem, and, therefore, its ability to improve ECEC quality is limited.

Recognizing the seriousness of the manpower crisis in daycare centers serving children from three months to three years old, Dr. Carmel Blank surveyed daycare center caregivers and managers. The survey was distributed from January to March 2023 in Hebrew and Arabic, using a snowball sampling method: ECEC staff and Taub Center early childhood seminar alumni distributed the survey on social networks and WhatsApp groups. A total of 663 ECEC caregivers and 387 ECEC managers completed the survey.

Although this is not a representative sample of the population of caregivers and managers in ECEC frameworks in Israel, it covers widespread geographic areas and different populations (Jewish secular, religious, Haredi, and Arab). Its findings paint a worrying picture: over 80% of subsidized and two-thirds of private daycare center managers reported that they are understaffed at least one or two days a week (Figure 8). Many respondents reported that they operate with missing staff three days a week or more. As stated, the child-to-staff ratio in Israel is far from optimal, and the survey findings suggest that in reality, the situation is even worse, with young infants and toddlers likely receiving poorer quality care. Over 90% of responding daycare center managers reported difficulties recruiting new staff, while almost 60% of caregivers in

subsidized and 40% of caregivers in private daycare centers reported that they often considered quitting. The most common reasons for considering resignation among caregivers (chosen by about 80% of the respondents), both Hebrew and Arabic speakers, was the low salary, followed by *the work is too difficult* and *too many children (in the group)*.

Figure 8. Understaffing in Israeli daycare centers



Source: Sarit Silverman and Carmel Blank, Taub Center | Data: Survey of daycare workers conducted by Dr. Carmel Blank, Ruppin Academic Center and the Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel

These findings highlight what the five-year plan is lacking. It does not sufficiently reduce the number of children per group, improve working conditions for ECEC staff, or significantly improve their wages. The plan minimally increases the salary for caregivers in subsidized daycare centers, but does not bring them close to the wages of caregivers in private daycare centers, who, despite the higher wages, also have a manpower shortage. Since ECEC caregivers, more specifically quality caregivers, are fundamental for proper early childhood care to ensure optimal development of young children, it is necessary for a comprehensive, long-term plan to guarantee their place in the ECEC system.

Additional current challenges in ECEC policy

Beyond difficulties with specific parts of the five-year plan and the manpower shortage, there are additional issues in ECEC in Israel that remain to be addressed. The oversight of ECEC remains fragmented between government agencies, as displayed in Table 1. The division of responsibilities increases bureaucracy and miscommunications between government offices, which slows progress and contributes to things falling through the cracks. For example, the five-year plan does not include early intervention daycare centers for disabled children, which are also on the brink of collapse and require improved conditions, but are overseen by the Welfare and Health Ministries and are not included in the plan (Lerner, 2023).

An additional challenge in early childhood policy in Israel is a lack of longitudinal, nationally representative birth cohort data. Other high-income countries have invested in methodological, longitudinal data collection from nationally representative birth cohorts, such as the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Birth Cohort in the United States, the National Educational Panel Study in Germany, and the 1970 British Cohort Study (Artelt & Sixt, 2023; Brown, 2014; Halle et al., 2009). Israel's unique demographic growth and composition make it difficult to infer policy options from birth cohort data from other countries. Beyond birth cohort data, there are negligible administrative data on daycare centers, largely because supervision of ECEC frameworks by the Ministry of Education began only recently. Data collection in private daycare centers is even more problematic since many of them are not known to the local authorities. The increased supervision is an excellent opportunity to integrate data collection in the supervision process and collect data on daycare quality, attendance, and daycare center staff members. Methodological, longitudinal data collection using a national representative database are critical to tailor early childhood policy to Israel's needs and can inform policy makers, researchers, parents, teachers, and care providers on early childhood development, health, and education.

Summary and conclusions

The size and continuing growth of Israel's early childhood population raises unique challenges for social, economic, health, and education policy. Population projections for the next decade suggest that there may be shifts in the demographic makeup of the early childhood population, which would have future ramifications over time for the Israeli population at large. There have been advances in the past year towards improving and increasing oversight of ECEC. However, the severe manpower crisis, along with other challenges, indicate that more progress is required to provide quality ECEC to all children. Trends in special education preschool rates show an increase in registered students in the past decade and possible differential access to frameworks by different subpopulations. However, more data are needed on integrated special education students in regular preschools to understand the complete picture.

In light of these findings, we propose the following policy options:

1. *Infrastructure investments in educational institutions*: Infrastructure investments are needed to ensure sufficient educational institutions for the growing Arab and Haredi populations. Such investments are particularly critical, because in addition to higher annual growth rates, poverty rates among Arab and Haredi families with young children are higher than among non-Haredi Jews and Others (Navon & Bowers, 2023). Exposure to poverty in the early childhood years has long-term ramifications on life course outcomes including educational attainment, health, and future employment (Duncan et al., 2010, 2012; Shay & Shavit, 2022).
2. *Manpower crisis*: The acute manpower crisis in the daycare system, both quantitative and qualitative, is preventing the expansion of the system and improvements in the child-to-staff ratio. Therefore, the key steps in improving ECEC quality should focus on increasing staff members and ensuring that high-quality caregivers join and stay in the field. To this end, working conditions need to be significantly improved, including salary increases, more training and advancement possibilities and a reduction in the burden falling on staff members because of the large number of children per group.
3. *Special education*: The rise in special education preschools and possible differential access by sector have major consequences for child welfare. Data collection is required to learn more about the pervasiveness of this phenomenon.

4. *Data collection:* The increased oversight of daycare centers is an excellent opportunity to systematically collect data on daycare staff, children in attendance, and details of the center itself. The benefit would be twofold: it would ensure accountability that the proposed improvements in ECEC are effective in producing quality care and it would contribute to research in the field.

Overall, there is a growing recognition of the importance of early childhood education both in the public discourse and among policy makers. Despite recent progress, more steps need to be taken to ensure high-quality ECEC facilities that are affordable and accessible to all families.

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