

# More and better childcare

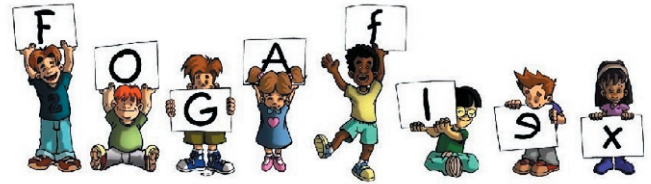
In Luxembourg, as in many other EU Member States, there is not enough high quality childcare that is easily accessible, affordable, and flexible. This is particularly true for lone parents or those working atypical hours. Sometimes the need for flexible needs-tailored childcare is so urgent, that parents turn to informal services provided by childminders who don't have any kind of formal qualifications. Many of these carers are working in the "grey market" and this has a number of negative aspects for parents and children. There is no control of the quality of the service, and public authorities have no possibility of intervening if problems arise. Also childminders are running a number of risks, as they have neither social security coverage nor any safety insurance cover on their premises. Furthermore, working completely on their own, they lack the any exchange with professional colleagues, which helps their counterparts in mainstream childcare to reflect on, and improve, their performance.

At the same time, there are unemployed and inactive women, who have left the labour market and now, after having raised a family, they are trying to return to gainful employment. Many of them are interested in working as carers, but as they haven't completed upper secondary school successfully they don't have the entry qualifications for the normal training courses in childcare. There are also no short or modular training courses catering for students with lower qualifications.

The FOGAfex Development Partnership (DP) addressed all these crucial issues and created a national network connecting all the different forms of qualified childcare, both home-based and in kindergartens.

## Developing a national childcare strategy

Led by the Caritas Confederation, the DP forged a powerful coalition that brought together the National Ministries of Education and of Family Affairs, municipalities, care providers and educational institutions. The remit of this coalition was to improve both the quantity and quality of childcare services in the country.



### New training

FOGAflex developed a training model that enabled people with low or no formal qualifications to work as auxiliary educators and childminders of children who are 4 year of age or younger. The training was designed as a "second chance" for unemployed or inactive people who wished to return to the labour market. This target group included women and men who had not finished school, but wished to continue or re-begin their studies, and women who, after having raised a family, were seeking to build a new career in childcare. The approach was particularly geared to the needs of these returners who had no formal training or educational background, but had relevant life-experience and so a balanced mix of theoretical knowledge and practical skills were provided. Structured in modules, the theoretical part was spread across 240 hours and dealt with teaching and learning methods, the psychology of child development, nutrition and hygiene and it also covered legal issues in the field of childcare. The practical training was work-based and lasted for at least 400 hours. A total of 17 unemployed or inactive women beneficiaries were employed in two new kindergartens and were supported by the project team in their daily, work-based training that covered all the relevant childcare tasks.

### New childcare centres

Thanks to EQUAL funding, the DP was able to set up two new childcare centres in districts where flexible services were badly needed. Whilst expanding the offer of places, these centres are also introducing a new system of childcare that differs from the existing "traditional" infrastructures in the composition of its staff and its flexible opening hours. The FOGAfex centres are opening earlier in the morning and closing later in the evening than most other childcare facilities in Luxembourg. Childcare is also offered on Saturdays, and if children are ill, home-based care can be provided.

Half of the staff team comes from the FOGAfex target group. But unlike the private sector childcare institutions, in which most staff members are not qualified, they have been obliged to participate in the FOGAfex training. In fact, a new category of “semi-professional” employees has been created. To achieve the best quality childcare, the tasks are shared amongst two groups of personnel: pedagogical activities are mainly led by “educators” (childcare workers with a college degree), whilst other activities less related to pedagogy are mainly carried out by the new staff.

### **Valuing and certifying informal care skills**

Creating a recognised occupational profile of a “day-mother” and having it integrated into the range of the country’s care professions was another major concern of the project. FOGAfex developed and tested the first Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) scheme in Luxembourg. The ambition of the project was to run a successful pilot programme in the childcare sector and to mainstream this example of good practice into other sectors. The first step towards sustainability and transfer was an agreement between the Ministry of Education and the DP, which officially recognised the FOGAfex training.

The DP also found that valuing talents and skills of “undeclared” childcare workers and providing them with a recognised certificate increased their interest in becoming part of the regular childcare system, which guarantees state supervision and a minimum of social security coverage. The approach also helped the Government to respond in the best possible way to parents’ growing demands for quality control and more flexible services.

## **Making a difference**

At the end of the project, 29 people had participated in the training and 23 certificates were awarded. Two of the FOGAfex beneficiaries are now undergoing further education to obtain

the national diploma of “educator”. Another ten have successfully completed the family helper training (aide socio-familiale), which is a recognised vocational profile that is in great demand. These figures clearly show how the motivation to acquire knowledge and skills has developed amongst members of the DP’s target group.

After the end of the project, the Ministry of Family Affairs and Integration took on the responsibility of funding the two new childcare centres that are called “Maisons Relais”. In fact, just six months after the DP’s lifespan ended, the Ministry issued a decree (règlement) which makes most of the FOGAfex-ideas sustainable. It is now much easier for the FOGAfex-target group of people with no or low formal qualifications to work in childcare once they have completed the basic training that is required to guarantee the quality of this care. In the future, the municipalities will decide when the childcare centres in their local areas should open. The FOGAfex partners are actively promoting this new model and many more Maisons Relais have already been established and others are planned for the coming years.

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Link to EQUAL database description: LU-3