

# Early Childhood Education for Syrian and Vulnerable Turkish Children

## The challenge

According to the Turkish Ministry of the Interior, the number of Syrians under temporary protection in Türkiye has remained almost constant for six years between 3.4 and 3.7 million (46% female). More than 98% of them currently live in urban centres and rural regions; about 65,000 Syrians still live in camps (Temporary Shelter Centres). More than half of the Syrians under temporary protection are currently spread over five provinces: Istanbul, Gaziantep, Sanliurfa, Hatay and Adana. Their concentration in provinces of the southeast and large cities leads to a high proportion of Syrians under temporary protection in the total population: Kilis - 30%, Gaziantep - 17%, Hatay - 14%, Sanliurfa - 11%. About 1 million Syrians under temporary protection are younger than 10 years (28% of the total population with 49% girls); about half of them are younger than 5 years. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, more than 500,000 Syrian children have been born in Türkiye. In addition to the Syrians, more than 1.3 million people of other nationalities (mainly from Afghanistan and Iraq and more recently from Ukraine and Russia) applied for international protection in Turkey, since 2011.

Already in the school year 2021-22, the Corona-related decline in pre-school attendance was compensated with an increase of more than 650,000 children nationwide. In this school year, 1,9 million children attended pre-school (girls 49%). There are now more children registered in pre-school than before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, at 65%, the enrolment rate for children aged 4-5 (pre-school) remains well below the OECD average of over 90%. Of the 136,011 Syrian children aged 4-5, a total of 64,232 children (47%) are registered in preschool in the current school year 2024/25.

Syrian and disadvantaged Turkish families cannot afford the private and expensive early childhood education. Public institutions are not available in sufficient numbers and are often not able to provide high quality education and services for Turkish and Syrian

children alike. Despite considerable efforts, Türkiye continues to face major challenges in integrating Syrian children into the Turkish school system while guaranteeing all children a place in pre-school in accordance with the national education strategy and the extension of compulsory education to pre-school. The COVID-19 pandemic and the devastating earthquakes in February 2023 have exacerbated these challenges. Early childhood education institutions continue to deal with the effects of the earthquakes. The project remains highly relevant. It also serves to cushion the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the earthquakes.

Project name	Early Childhood Education for Syrian and Vulnerable Turkish Children
Commissioned by	Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung (BMZ)
Project region	Adana, Ankara, Bursa, Gaziantep, Hatay, Istanbul, Izmir, Kilis, Konya, Mersin, Osmaniye, Sanliurfa
Lead executing agency	Vice President's Office
Duration	01.04.2019 – 28.02.2026

## Our approach

The project aims to improve the conditions for the promotion of early childhood education for 3–6-year-old Syrian refugee children and disadvantaged children of the Turkish host population in selected municipalities in twelve provinces (Adana, Ankara, Bursa, Gaziantep, Hatay, Istanbul, Izmir, Kilis, Konya, Mersin, Osmaniye, Sanliurfa).

Based on an implementation agreement between the Ministry of National Education and GIZ, the project implements a comprehensive capacity development strategy. The capacities of institutions for early childhood education are improved to better meet the challenges in implementing the national education strategy, extending compulsory education to pre-schools and integrating Syrian children under temporary protection into the early childhood education system. Selected pre-schools and public



education centres (PECs) are equipped with instructional materials according to needs. A professional development program for pre-school teachers and educators from PECs strengthen their competencies for co-education of Syrian and Turkish children in mixed classrooms. The effectiveness of early childhood education measures is increased by the targeted inclusion of Syrian and Turkish families. Deserving families living in the catchment areas of the selected institutions and not sending their children to these pre-schools or PECs receive instructional materials and toys ("my toy box"). Mothers and fathers are supported in bringing up their children in a way that promotes their development, and information and awareness raising is directed at parents with the help of a smartphone app. To promote co-education and inclusive framework conditions, principals and provincial education personnel are trained and experts and executives from the Ministry of National Education are advised through exchange programs with German specialist institutions. In addition, early childhood education institutions are strengthened regarding coping with disasters and ensuring continuity of learning.

## The benefits

Early childhood is a critical period of human development. Syrian children under temporary protection and Turkish children from poor households in host communities in Türkiye are at great risk for not developing their full developmental potential. Investments in early childhood education for these most vulnerable children and their families are essential. Early investments are most effective and efficient with long-lasting positive effects on learning and well-being. In addition, inequalities can be addressed from the outset. In the context of poverty and forced migration investments in early childhood education are essential for developing and strengthening the protective capacity of its institutions (pre-schools and PECs). In turn, high-performing and protective pre-schools and PECs help children developing and strengthening their coping capacities. Moreover, investments in early childhood education with focus on co-education and the inclusion of vulnerable Syrian and Turkish children are conducive to social cohesion in host communities.

The project contributes to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDG): "No Poverty" (SDG 1), "Quality Education" (SDG 4), "Gender Equality" (SDG 5), and "Reducing Inequality" (SDG 10).

## Success factors

In the three academic years between 2020 and 2024, MoNE had selected 561 pre-schools and 134 PECs with a total of 51.366 registered children (40% Syrian). These institutions have been equipped with instructional materials according to need. All principals of the selected pre-schools, PEC heads and education personnel of selected provinces have participated in trainings on

managing heterogeneous groups (co-education of Syrian and Turkish children) and improving parents' engagement. The project supported MoNE in the development of a 40-hour professional development programme for pre-school teachers and PEC educators which has been approved by MoNE officially. Apart from training this professional development programme includes long-term coaching by trainers and peer learning among teachers. 174 senior pre-school teachers were trained as trainers (89% female) accordingly who, in turn, trained 2.929 pre-school teachers and educators (95% female). So far, 2.800 "my toy boxes" have been distributed to deserving Syrian and Turkish families. In addition, MoNE has been assisted in developing 53 children's books (10 of them bilingual Turkish-Arabic). The EU-funded programme "Promoting Integration of Syrian Kids into the Turkish Education System" has printed and distributed these children's books to 6.700 pre-school classrooms in 26 provinces including the pre-schools supported by the project.

## Response to and aftermath of Earthquake in February 2023

In February 2023, devastating earthquakes affected eleven provinces in south-east Türkiye and north-west Syria. According to a recovery and reconstruction assessment by the Government of Türkiye, around 4.5 million students, including 350,000 refugees and 550,000 children aged 4 to 5, were directly affected in these eleven provinces. 72 schools were destroyed, 504 schools severely damaged and 2,864 schools were moderately or slightly damaged. The cost of reconstruction and repair of school buildings is estimated at about 2 billion EUR. In emergency shelters, 418 tents have been set up for the care of children which is provided by 8,500 teachers. 242,904 students have been evacuated to other provinces outside the earthquake area or have fled to safety with their families.

It was agreed with the Ministry of National Education to suspend the measures already agreed for the time being, to postpone them to the second half of the year, and to use the financial resources thus available to support restoring learning continuity in early childhood education. 2.400 pre-school bags with instructional materials and hygiene kits were distributed to pre-school children in emergency shelters and pre-schools in earthquake affected provinces. During the summer holidays, up to 20,000 pre-school children (50% Syrian children) who had to drop out of pre-school due to the earthquakes are offered an eight-week pre-school program in selected pre-schools. The Ministry of National Education supported by the EU-funded program "Promoting Integration of Syrian Kids into the Turkish Education System" (PIKTES) is responsible for the preparation and implementation of the pre-school program. The Early Childhood Education project has prepared 807 pre-school principals required for this in a three-day training course at the beginning of July 2023.

Published by  
Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH  
Registered offices  
Bonn and Eschborn, Germany

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November 2024

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On behalf of  
Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)