Early childhood education and care is divided between child day-care facilities and day-care families for children under 4 years (childcare), and pre-school or the first learning cycle for children over 4 years as part of compulsory education.

**Childcare**

Childcare supports families, helps balance family and working life, serves the integration and socialisation of children and promotes their development. These are voluntary services which parents use at their discretion and pay a share of the costs.

The Swiss Civil Code (Article 316) and the Federal Ordinance on the Placement of Children in Foster Care and for Adoption (FCAO) lay down the legal framework conditions governing childcare. The FCAO mainly regulates the approval requirements for childcare and the supervision [1] of such services. The cantons are responsible for the specific application of these provisions. They can perform these tasks themselves or delegate them to the communes or third parties. Childcare for children under four years falls within the sphere of family and social policy. In this context the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Social Affairs [2] (SODK) assumes a coordinating role for the cantons. The SODK has adopted recommendations [3] on early childhood childcare.

For day-care centres in the sphere of compulsory education including pre-school please see the comments on primary education [4]. The SODK has adopted, together with the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education [5] (EDK), which undertakes key coordination tasks in education for the cantons, a joint declaration [6] on day-care centres for children. Most cantons mention the promotion of childcare in their constitution or in cantonal laws. Only in one canton do parents have the right to have their children offered a public or private place in childcare within a reasonable time.

**Pre-school or First Learning Cycle**

Article 62(4) of the Federal Constitution obliges the cantons to coordinate various benchmarks in the education system throughout Switzerland. This includes the school entry age, compulsory school attendance. Through the Intercantonal Agreement on Harmonisation of Compulsory Education (HarmoS Agreement) the cantons have assumed this constitutional obligation and integrated two pre-school years into compulsory education.
Pre-school or the first learning cycle is therefore part of compulsory education and forms part of the primary level. In the first years of the primary level individual development and social learning are promoted. Skills are developed through stimulating playing and learning environments. Children gradually acquire basic social skills and learn about school routines.

There are a few German-speaking cantons in which attendance of pre-school is not mandatory, or attendance is mandatory for one year only, but even in these cases the vast majority of children still attend pre-school for two years. In a few German-speaking cantons the communes can operate a Grundstufe or a Basisstufe (a form of the first learning cycle). In this organisational form, children aged four to eight, or four to seven, attend the same class. In the French-speaking part of Switzerland, the two years of pre-school are part of the "cycle 1" or "cycle primaire 1", which lasts four years. In the canton of Ticino, in addition to the two compulsory pre-school years, (from the 2015/2016 academic year) a further optional year is offered for children from the age of three.

The cantons lay down the starting age for pre-school or the first learning cycle. Children reaching the eligible age by the fixed qualifying date (this is generally the 31st of July) start primary at the beginning of the new school year (autumn). The children are usually between four and five years old. Parents may request that their child starts primary school earlier or later.

Attendance of pre-school or the first learning cycle is free of charge. The cantons are responsible for pre-school, or the first learning cycle, and regulate them in the cantonal education acts. The communes are responsible for operating them.

Legislative References

Bundesverfassung [7] [Federal Constitution]

Schweizerisches Zivilgesetzbuch [8] [Swiss Civil Code]

Verordnung über die Aufnahme von Kindern zur Pflege und zur Adoption (PAVO) [9] [Ordinance on the Placement of Children in Foster Care and for Adoption (FCAO)]

Interkantonale Vereinbarung über die Harmonisierung der obligatorischen Schule (HarmoS-Konkordat) [10] [Intercantonal Agreement on Harmonisation of Compulsory Education (HarmoS Agreement)]

Kantonale Schulgesetzgebung [10] [Cantonal education acts]