In recent decades policies aiming at work-family reconciliation, at social integration and at the development of children’s human capital have strongly influenced the expansion of early childhood education and care throughout much of the Western world. There are, however, striking differences between national regimes regarding the extent of these services, their organisation and their position within the welfare state and educational system. Many of these differences cannot be satisfactorily explained by reference to recent policy decisions, but must be understood in the context of the historical background of provisions for children below school age. This book focuses on long-term developments in early childhood education and public child care, to the extent that it was institutionally intertwined with early childhood education, starting with the first initiatives in the early nineteenth century. Its comparative overview demonstrates that salient features of present-day national regimes have their roots in critical historical junctures, times at which societal conflicts were settled – at least temporarily – by new policy arrangements. These arrangements then directed development down a path which it could only leave given a new crisis.

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