In France, childhood was considered quite early to be a ‘common good’ and a source of human capital, mainly because of the demographic challenge that the country was facing at the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time, children were the expected results of a probirth family policy. Then new social problems emerged, new public debates took place and new political measures were implemented throughout the century. Indeed, family policy is not restricted to child care. It also includes many other issues: civil law, women’s rights, social and gender equity, support for disadvantaged households, same-sex couples, etc. Depending on the priorities, different periods can be identified (Commaille and Martin, 1998). But if we consider public child-care policies specifically, what about these changes? How can they be defined? Do they correspond to what Peter Hall calls ‘third-order change’, marked by radical changes and associated with ‘paradigm shift’? Or to ‘normal policymaking’, that is, a process that adjusts policy without challenging the main objectives of a given policy paradigm, which defines first- and second-order change (Hall, 1993)? In this perspective, can these changes be defined as a ‘path dependency process’ (Pierson, 2004)?

In this chapter, we argue that incrementalism is a major component of the evolution in this public policy sector since World War II, but also that, during the 1990s, the move towards reconciling work and family responsibilities and the introduction of an objective of ‘free choice’ for parents in a context of severe unemployment can be analysed as a shift in public child-care policy. Indeed, at that period, not only did the
policy setting change, but the hierarchy of goals and use of instruments also shifted radically. Organised interests, political parties and policy experts were all involved in this change. Yet, if we consider a specific aspect of child-care policy in France – preschool – continuity is a main dimension of the evolution since the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the roots of an institution do not disappear, and the choices made at the beginning of the twentieth century still have an impact on today’s policy. In fact, at each different period, new objectives have been added on top of the old ones.

The question of change in this public policy domain is thus complex. Public child care offers a very interesting angle to understand it, as it seems to be at the root of the French welfare system and, after a long period of adjustments and marginal adaptations, has again become a public challenge. But we have to keep in mind the gap between the role of preschool and the development of new instruments and even new arguments, not to mention new paradigms for organising and implementing these instruments.

1 Public child care as an element of a larger domain: family policy

In France, child-care policies have traditionally been integrated within a larger public policy domain: family policy. So it is sometimes difficult to isolate public child-care policies from this larger explicit domain of public intervention. Looking back helps to understand the crucial problem of defining these domains. Public child-care policies are part of family policy, but not all of it, as family policies also include civil law concerning the family as an institution (marriage, divorce, parental authority, etc.), family allowances, housing benefits, means-tested benefits for poor households and child-care allowances and services. At the same time, preschool, which is undoubtedly a crucial part of the French public child-care system, is often considered part of another sector of public intervention: education. When considering public child-care policies, we have to keep this jigsaw puzzle in mind.

French family policy is indeed generally considered one of the most explicit and intensive in Europe. It has even been said that family issues could be the basis of the French social security system, just as poverty was a cornerstone of the Anglo-Saxon welfare state, and workers’ status that of Germany’s Sozialstaat (Merrien, 1990). This is why family benefits were first regarded as an extension of the ‘family wage’ and, in a way, as one of the main pillars of the French social welfare system (Friot, 1998).