

Night and day – 7 days a week: Gepetto

This EQUAL Development Partnership (DP) was a direct response to the lack of childcare provision for parents who work in sectors or settings that demand atypical schedules such as catering, the hotel trade, the performing arts, public transport, hospitals and call centres. This problem is particularly acute for lone parents, and for women as they manage 85% of the single parent households. According to a study by INSEE, the French national statistical office, 835.000 children under 3 years of age live with parents who have irregular schedules. Stimulated by the findings of this official report, Gepetto decided to become the piece that was needed to finalise the childcare jigsaw puzzle that up to then had included bits provided by collective crèches, registered maternal assistants, leisure centres without accommodation and extra-curricular centres.

Flexibility is key

Gepetto is a service catering for children up to the age of 13 years of age for whom there is no existing structure that offers appropriate care. In cases of shift work, flexible working hours, business



travel, training courses, gaps between their children's timetables and their own, parents may call on Gepetto to help at home, 24/7. Staffed by trained professionals including nursery teachers, child welfare auxiliaries and early childhood assistants, the service is provided in close cooperation with the various childcare organisers in the neighbourhood. The fees that Gepetto charge are proportional to the income of the family.

So far, the project has provided 43.000 hours of childcare to 1480 children from 913 families. Examples of the varied types of support that Gepetto can provide include: a childminder arriving at 5:30 when the parents leave for work, to get the children

ready for school and to cook them a good breakfast; overnight babysitting when a single mother is away on training; picking up children after school, helping them with their homework, preparing supper and then reading them bedtime stories until their parents come home.

Only with trained, qualified staff

Given the growing interest in this innovative solution to a problem that continues to grow, Gepetto has spared no efforts in disseminating its experiences, through a series of meetings with regional and municipal



authorities and public and private decision makers. A vast array of "tools" has been developed with the support of EQUAL. These tools are available to all newcomers to the Gepetto approach and include: the national and transnational web sites with intranet for network members; software for planning and managing the support service to families; publications and a DVD; an educational tool kit – packed in a "the red suitcase" – and a film entitled "The ways of life change, so does childcare".

After successful experiments in Lorient and Vannes, Gepetto has expanded its "Bambino-Service-Service-Plus", to eight partner towns. The same approach has been used to launch each new site:

- Hire professionals with recognised qualifications;
- Follow a common training on methodological and educational aspects;
- Contribute to the development of new tools;
- Agree to pool experience to support the transfer of good practices.
- Public authorities acknowledge the "missing piece in the puzzle"

At national level, the National Fund for Family Allowances (Caisse Nationale d'Allocations Familiales or CNAF for short) has recognised the type of childcare developed by Gepetto and it is now officially known as "accueil en relais" (interface between parents and childcare providers). This form of individualised childcare has now been accepted as being the piece that was missing from the overall provision.

CNAF is currently working on introducing such a service into its 3-year budget planning system. However, as CNAF's system of family allowances operates through decentralised services, with autonomous branches (CAFs) at local level, the DP approach is now being disseminated in eleven districts (départements). The arguments used to convince each CAF are the same as those that have been successful at national level. DP Director Anne-Karine Stocchetti believes that "Social equity requires that working parents who are all contributing to the Caisse, must be able to benefit from the same or equivalent services." This means that while the CAFs contribute to financing public childcare provision which usually does not meet the needs of parents working atypical hours, it has not so far supported individualised, home-based services such as those created by Gepetto.

Success factors... leading to the next step

The success of Gepetto results from an interesting combination of three elements:

- It responds to the specific needs of parents who wish either to find or maintain a job with atypical hours and reconcile it with their family responsibilities and at the same time it respects the life patterns and rhythms of their children. Childcare at home appeals to everybody, including the children;
- The quality of the service provided is ensured by using only qualified staff, with the appropriate professional status, pay and working conditions. Additional training, team work and effective planning all help to reinforce the staff's commitment to the project;
- Setting up "round tables" with decision-makers that are used to draw their attention to both the needs and the potential solutions, to demonstrate complementarity with existing

services and to highlight the relevance of making a financial investment in the new service, from public expenditure.

Anne-Karine Stocchetti adds "the name itself rings nice bells of childhood stories in our adult mind!" So does the new EQUAL project called ALICE that is working to build cooperative platforms between all forms of childcare provision, as a way of promoting employment and combating poverty. In the second round of EQUAL, ALICE, as the successor to Gepetto, is taking the idea of the "missing piece" in childcare even further. In two regions, comprehensive territorial approaches to childcare are being developed that will ensure cooperation between all the providers of these services and the different funding agencies such as CAF, local authorities in charge of public crèches and associations in charge of private crèches. The first steps include mapping out all forms of care for children up to 13 years of age, setting up a communication system amongst all key actors, pooling human resources and informing parents. Bringing enterprises on board was a strategy that was encouraged by the French National Thematic Network on Reconciliation, which has always emphasised the importance of working with firms. This new EQUAL project is now making use of that lesson, as major companies such as the French Railways (SNCF), the Postal Services and Adia Temp Work will be directly involved in these new territorial approaches .

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