Building a coordinated strategy for parenting support

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Introduction

In parenting support, this Peer Review focuses on a domain of policy which is expanding rapidly in Europe. Member States are explicitly prioritising parenting support above and beyond measures for children and childcare. Traditionally, parenting was taken for granted except in 'problem cases' and parenting support where it existed officially was provided around the time of childbirth, often in the form of health advice and counselling around early child development. In contrast to this, the notion of parenting as a set of skills that can be learned is now widespread. Views about what constitutes good and responsible parenting are now widely debated and many questions have been opened up about the possible ways in which parents and families more generally can be assisted with the tasks and pressures associated with bringing up children and the role of the public authorities in this regard. 'Parental capacities', 'parenting resources', 'parental and child resilience' are concepts that mark out the new terrain of parenting as a universal exigency and challenge. Parenting support policies constitute a very significant development as they indicate a change in perspective about how child well-being is understood and the role of parents and the family in regard to children and society more generally. They are an outcome of a climate of greater concern about how people act in their private lives, and a manifestation of a greater willingness on the part of the public authorities to intervene.

Given its relative newness and the fact that it relates closely to other aspects of provision, one has to be specific about what is meant by parenting support. Parenting support refers to a range of information, support, education, training, counselling and other measures or services that focus on influencing how parents understand and carry out their parenting role. A common goal is to achieve better outcomes for children and young people (and in some instances families as a whole) by providing services that offer information, support and even 'retraining' for parents. In its cross-national research, ChildONEurope (2007: 22) specifies the activities, programmes or measures involved as actions aimed at improving parents' knowledge of children's developmental needs and possible education strategies, as well as actions aimed at helping parents to deal with ordinary as well as difficult situations in family life. The focus of this report is on provisions of mainstream relevance, i.e., interventions aimed at common parenting-related problems of relatively low severity or relatively high frequency. Both universal services (those open to anyone irrespective of their levels of need) and targeted services (those offered only to specific groups or populations, in response to a specific assessed need) are considered relevant.

The paper is organised as follows. The first section aims to set the scene, giving an overview of the policy framework and policy debates at European level and setting out what is known about the development and provision of parenting support in Europe. The second section describes the French case and offers an initial analysis of the transferability of the French measures and reforms. The third section draws the paper to a close. It outlines a set of questions and topics for debate at the Peer Review meeting. An appendix sets out some key messages from existing research about what has been found to be effective in parenting support and it also offers one example of good practice (a commissioning tool for parenting programmes from England).

A.   The policy debate at European level

A.1   The policy framework at European level

There is no EU legal competence in the field. In accordance with the subsidiarity principle, the EU has no formal competence to act in the area of family affairs, except with regard to migrant workers and their family members under the EEC Treaty provisions regarding freedom of movement. Hence, actors at European level are constrained in addressing issues concerned with family life directly. That said, matters relating to family and welfare are present in a transversal manner in a number of EU policy areas, such as social ex/inclusion, active employment, labour law and working conditions, reconciliation of work and family life, pensions, social care, gender equality and migration.

There are four key elements to the policy and institutional framework at EU level.

A first element of the policy framework is the focus on children's rights and the condition of children, in particular as expressed through their recognition as rights' holders in the Charter of Fundamental Human Rights and the 2006 Communication 'Towards a European Strategy on the Rights of the Child.' The latter Communication has the aim of designing a common strategy for children, and, as such, aims to identify matters requiring urgent intervention, to mainstream children's rights in all EU activities, to set up a European Forum for the rights of the child as a platform for discussion and exchange of information, to involve children in decision making, and to appoint a EU coordinator for the rights of the child. A second notable element in EU policy is the focus on early years' provision. This was a strong theme under the Lisbon Strategy. In 2002 governments agreed the Barcelona targets to remove disincentives to female labour force participation and strive to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age'. In a context where these targets have not been reached in most countries, under the Belgian Presidency in 2010, a Ministerial Declaration was adopted calling for more and better early years services and a European Commission Communication on early childhood education and care was adopted in February of this year.

A third noteworthy development is the European Alliance for Families which was agreed at the European Council of March 8-9, 2007 (having been proposed under the German EU presidency). The quality of family life is a focal interest of the Alliance, especially in light of the difficulties and challenges facing families within and across European countries. The Alliance, with the participation of the European Commission, serves as an arena of discussion and exchange of opinions and information about family-friendly initiatives between the Member States.[1] The intention is to foster extensive co-operation and partnership between all stakeholders in order to achieve a better balance of professional, family and private life in Member States. The kinds of issues that have been prioritised by the Alliance include the well-being of children, reconciliation of work and family life, childcare and care of the elderly, gender equality.

The EU's activities in the field of family-oriented measures more broadly are also relevant. A Communication on Family Policies was issued in August 1989. A European Observatory on National Family Policies was set up in 1989 (renamed in 1999 the 'European Observatory on Family Matters'). Its field of action was mainly to monitor trends and developments of family policies in Member States. Also significant is the Directive on Parental Leave in 1996, which

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[1] See http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/emplweb/families/index.cfm?langId=en&id=1

recognised the need for Community measures to reconcile professional and family obligations. A Council Resolution followed in 2000 on the balanced participation of women and men in family and working life. There was the Commission Working Document on the mutual recognition of decisions on parental responsibility in 2001 in which special attention was dedicated to the conditions of children and the necessity to adopt family law at European level, with the aim of making more provisions for new and diverse situations regarding family life.

The broad field is defined, then, at one end by a concern about the quality of family life and at the other by the growth of a rights culture in relation to children. Parenting is an important bridge or link between these two and to the extent that it has been developed within the auspices of the EU this has happened especially at a discursive level.

A.2   Overview of the related policy debate at European level

Families, parenting and the quality of family life have become more prominent in policy debates and discourses in the EU (and elsewhere) in the last 10 to 15 years as compared with earlier periods. Seeing a need for more support and monitoring of family, Governments and international organisations have become more interested in the functioning and capacities of families. The rights and well-being of individual family members, especially children, led this debate but in recent times the debate has extended to parents and how they carry out their parenting role. The ability and capacity to parent is problematised in this debate. Interest in (and critique of) parenting has been driven especially by research on child development, child health and child well-being (especially from medical and psychological sciences on early brain development) which highlights the role of parenting in successful child development and adult functioning (Bronfenbrener 1979; Hosking et al 2010; O'Connor and Scott 2007). But it also has other roots. An important underlying concern focuses on problem or dysfunctional families and poor family practices. While Europe has always had such families, their numbers seem to be increasing and the costs of dealing with such families seem to be higher. This also touches upon concerns about social disorder and anti-social behaviour and, indeed, about risk as a feature of contemporary life and whether interventions to affect the risk factors associated with family breakdown are worthwhile (Oates 2010).

Several factors have been instrumental in pushing these themes to the fore. One major influence has been the international organisations (in particular the UN through its Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Council of Europe through a number of Recommendations which manifest a long-standing interest in the field of child and family well-being). Another important factor which has been instrumental has been the EU's increasing social policy focus (especially under the Lisbon Strategy from 2000 to 2010). The emerging 'social investment' approach – which makes a strong case for social policy as investment in children and their future – also strongly propels the debate in the direction of addressing risks in relation to children and families (Vandenbroucke et al 2011). This dovetails with concerns raised from a social inclusion perspective on the transmission of dysfunctionality across generations and the fact that families experiencing or at risk of social exclusion face multiple layers or levels of difficulty. Another factor that might also be said to be exerting an influence is the increasing participation of mothers in employment – which has been widely planned for in the EU. As well as creating constraints around the time availability of parents for children and family, this has served to raise questions about whether parenting in a context of two-earner families is sufficiently supported and emphasised.

Internationally, the UN – especially with its Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989 – has played a major role. Like a stone dropping into a pond, the CRC has transformed the discourses about the respective roles of the child, parents, the family and the state. At its core, the CRC expresses and elaborates a vision of the child as an agent or actor with individual rights rather than a passive recipient of guardianship and benevolence from adults and the institutions of adult society. The CRC underlines parents' primary responsibility in their children's upbringing and places strict limits on both State intervention and any separation of children from their parents. Articles 5, 3(2), 18 and 27 taken together make clear that parents have primary responsibility for securing the best interests of the child as their 'basic concern', but that this responsibility is circumscribed by the child's rights under the CRC and may be shared with others such as members of the wider family. Paragraph 2 of article 18 emphasises the State's responsibility to provide appropriate assistance to parents. The duties on states include: rendering appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities; ensuring the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children; taking all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities for which they are eligible. The CRC is generally credited with introducing a paradigm shift – from family as a collective entity and the site of parental authority to children as individuals with their own agency and rights and parenting as mediated if not defined by the rights of the child.

A second very important actor in the field has been the Council of Europe which has been adopting recommendations on family matters since the 1970s with an explicit focus on parenting and the quality of family life since the 1980s.[2] For example, Recommendation (84) 4 drew up a list of 11 principles on parental responsibility and advised Governments to adopt legal provisions complying with them and guaranteeing legal equality between parents within the family. Recommendation (94)14 recommended that Governments support the implementation of coherent and integrated family policies on the basis of the principles of consultation, coordination, efficiency and flexibility. The key initiative from the Council of Europe relevant to parenting support and education was Recommendation (2006)19 on positive parenting. The Recommendation provided a definition of 'positive parenting' identifying it as the parental behaviour ensuring the fulfilment of the best interests of the child "that is nurturing, empowering, non-violent and provides recognition and guidance which involves setting of boundaries to enable the full development of the child". This Recommendation underlines the importance to children of growing up in a positive family environment and the State's responsibility to create the right conditions for positive parenting (Daly 2007). It encourages an integrated approach, including cooperative action between the public authorities, the social partners and civil society. The national programmes and policies envisaged in the Recommendation are those with the intention to achieve three main objectives:

- facilitate access to appropriate and variegated material, psychological, social and cultural resources for all of those rearing children;

- remove all the existing obstacles to positive parenting;

- promote positive parenting through awareness-raising actions.

In particular for the third objective, public authorities are invited to promote initiatives aiming to make people aware of the value and importance of positive parenting and take a pro-active
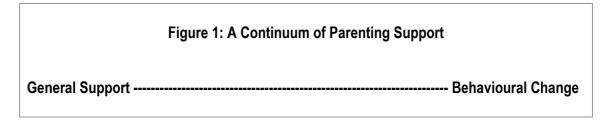
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[2] For example, Recommendation (84) 4 on parental responsibilities; Recommendation (85) 4 on violence in the family; Recommendation (87) 6 on foster families; Recommendation 94 (14) on coherent and integrated family policies; Recommendation (97) 4 on securing and promoting the health of single parent families; Recommendation (98) 8 on children's participation in family and social life.

approach to promoting awareness of parenting issues and to normalising participation in parenting programmes. It recommends the adoption of an empowerment approach – based on consultation and dialogue with parents and their voluntary involvement and participation in the spirit of a working partnership.

The EU has not elaborated a position on parenting as such but it has articulated on child and family policies more generally in an attempt to modernise the European social models. There are three main emphases in the EU discourse that are relevant: the reconciliation of work and family life (which is interpreted to have strong gender equality elements); demographic renewal and sustainability; social investment in the sense of interventions that build up children's capital and reduce their risk of exclusion and of poverty. The Lisbon Strategy played host to a number of relevant discourses also. In particular, the Open Method of Coordination in the field of social protection and social inclusion devoted special attention to the condition of poor children and their families and long-term care for dependent people of all ages. A recommendation on the matter of child poverty is expected in 2012.

A.3   Comparative aspects

All available research suggests that countries are moving beyond the rhetorical level and introducing measures that focus on supporting parenting (Boddy et al 2009; Oates 2010). When one looks at the field overall, the extent of diversity and variation within and across countries is very striking. There is also the fact that, while parental support is relatively well-established in some countries as an aspect of health-related services, in other countries it is just emerging as a field of social policy. To help make sense of a highly-varying field, I suggest that it is useful to frame the range of interventions in terms of the following continuum.

Figure 1: A Continuum of Parenting Support

General Support --- **Behavioural Change**

At one end are provisions oriented to general 'parental or parenting support'. These tend to be non-interventionist and aim to better equip parents with resources such as information and knowledge so that they can improve their own performance in the parenting role. Provisions at the opposite, right-most end are much more directive and seek actively to intervene in and change the way that parents act and behave towards their children (and maybe even parents' behaviour in general). Here we are in the realm of solutions for childhood conduct problems and parental dysfunction through behaviour management techniques and skills. The term 'parenting programmes' – highly organised, interventionist and frequently targeting particular types of problem solving and parental effectiveness in families – captures the central intent here.

The continuum loosely encapsulates the many variations there are in the field of parenting support policies and provision. These include whether provisions are:

- Universal or targeted;

- Oriented to prevention or intervention;

- Degree of intensity;

- Underlying philosophy;

- Whether the focus is on the parent only, the parent and child, the mother and/or father, the extended family;

- Providers and modes of governance;

- Source of funding and amount of funding;

- Conditions of access to the programme/provision (e.g., compulsory or voluntary);

- Whether the provision is home grown or programmes 'imported' from elsewhere;

- The age of the children targeted.

In terms of explaining why there is such variation in the type of parenting support offered within and across EU Member States, this is greatly influenced by factors in the national context such as: the welfare state model, the prevailing philosophy and approach to child welfare and family, the traditions of service organisation, and the degree of importance attributed to interventionist as against preventive policies.

Given the complexity, I propose to simplify by identifying and discussing the main lines of variation in the policies and provisions and what appear to be common trends if not matters of consensus.

Looking across countries, there are four main sources of variation in how countries (and various actors within them) understand and make provision for parenting support.

(1)   The aim, content and focus

The variation here is encapsulated by the type of support which is provided and what type of change (if any) is envisaged by the programme or measure. Accepting the continuum sketched above as representing the range of variation in the field, we can identify various points on the continuum (going from left to right from the least to the most interventionist) on the basis of the type of support they offer:

1. Provision of information and awareness raising – through advice and information services, information campaigns, helplines, parenting courses, etc;

2. Provision of material and social support – through networks, role models, support services, social work aid, etc;

3. Bringing about retraining and cognitive and attitudinal change – through targeted parenting and other programmes that aim to change beliefs, attitudes and self-perceptions;

4. Bringing about behavioural change – through parenting programmes and other usually intensive interventions that aim to change how parents perform their parenting roles.

(2) This obviously encapsulates also the degree and intensity of intervention involved, varying from non- or minimal intervention to highly interventionist programmes. It encapsulates another line of variation also in regard to whether the focus is universal (problems or challenges facing all families) – which tends to be types 1 and 2 above - or targeted (families with serious problems requiring 'retraining' and 're-education') – interventions along the lines of types 3 and 4. Whether programmes are standardised or evolve from the local or specific setting

This distinction essentially differentiates between evolutionary and bottom-up initiatives and those which are top-down, evidence based and expert led programmes (Boddy et al 2009: 97).

The more evolutionary approaches (located more towards the left side of the continuum sketched above) emphasise the specificity of local need and partnership working (with local stakeholders including parents) and the content of the programmes tends to be more open, varied and needs specific. Right across Europe there are myriads of such programmes but because of their local nature they are difficult to research and rather little is known about them. Much more is known about the standardised programmes (not least because there are far fewer of them).

In the case of such standardised and intensive parenting interventions, there are a number of parenting programmes that tend to be exported and imported around the world. A very popular one is Triple P – Positive Parenting Programme. This is a programme which was developed in Australia. Its main objective is to prevent behavioural, emotional and developmental disorders in children by enhancing the knowledge, skills and confidence of parents (Sanders and Ralph 2004). The programme operates with a multi-level framework in order to tailor advice and professional support to the needs of individual families. These levels range across very general information (for all parents), advice and information on parenting concerns (for parents with particular needs or difficulties), to parenting skills training, and intensive family intervention (for parents considered to be in high need). A second popular standardised programme is HIPPY (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters). Of Israeli origin and now utilised in Germany among other countries, this is a two-year intervention, aimed at supporting school readiness through trained peer support for parents of four- to six-year old children. It combines home visits with group activities (Boddy et al 2009). A third programme is PEKiP (Prague Parent-Infant Programme), a programme for parents with infants from one to 12 months, who attend weekly with their babies. It is based on social pedagogical group work, combined with play and exercise activities with the children (ibid).

(3) Whether provisions target individual members or whether they are more group-based and target members of the family as a whole

A first distinction is whether the activity or intervention is individual or collectivity focused. An alternative to the individual parent focus is to work with the family as a whole. This is required by legislation in some countries, such as Denmark and Italy (Boddy et al 2009). A second important relevant point here is that there are strong gender connotations in the field. It used to be the case that support and information around child development was targeted on the mother. While this is still the case in some types of provision, the newer

understanding of parenting support tends to be focused either on the parents as a couple or parents and children together. There may still be a gender subtext though.. The particular family member(s) targeted tends to depend on the scale of the problem – in families in which parenting is just one of a number of difficulties the behaviour and functioning of the entire family tends to be the focus of intervention.

(4) Modes of organisation

One size does not fit all (Oates 2010: 17). The parenting support measures, diverse as they are within and across countries, do not easily or readily fit in with existing service frameworks. Some are part and parcel of universal services whereas others are either additional services and/or offered on a targeted basis to particular groups of the population. For classificatory purpose, the framework offered by Boddy et al (2009) is helpful. It distinguishes between four levels of accessibility in parenting support:

- support embedded within universal services, delivered by workers in the universal setting;

- support activated as part of a universal service (e.g., health, education or childcare), delivered by workers linked to the universal service;

- universally accessible support - delivered through open-access services, whereby the service is open to all, but with a 'come-structure' that requires the parent or family to access the service on their own initiative;

- targeted specialist support, whereby parents and families must be identified as meeting certain criteria and referred to the service.

This differentiation also denotes variation in modes of access. Garbers (2008, cited in Boddy et al 2009: 95) offers a potentially useful distinction between services with a 'go-structure' – whereby professionals go to the family – and those with a come structure – whereby service users come to the service setting and therefore themselves initiate contact.

It is also possible to identify some common trends and transversal issues in the field of parenting support.

(1) Multi-disciplinary working tends to be an important feature of provision across countries, especially in the highly interventionist services operating at the right-most end of the continuum above. Multi-disciplinary work can be organised differently, for example through multi-professional teams and/or inter-agency networks (Boddy et al 2009).

(2) A range of providers is usually involved and the field of parenting support provision overall tends to be marked by strong public/private partnerships. Across countries the local authorities and NGOs tend to be prominent providers (with central government often in the role of funder).

(3) The evidence base is very important in the general field of parenting support. 'Finding out what works' has been an important driver of developments. This is part of the reason why some programmes are imported from elsewhere in that these have been validated (albeit usually in their country of origin rather than the setting into which they

are being imported). Many national and international standards exist for the purpose of validating programmes (Moran et al 2004; National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence 2007). Four elements have been said to be foremost in defining high-quality parenting initiatives according to Oates (2010: 42). These are:

- The specification of the target population and its match to the programme;

- The programme content, processes and material;

- The training, supervision, support and implementation processes;

- The evaluation of the degree of effectiveness of the programme in achieving its targeted outcomes.

A.4   Related previous Peer Reviews

This Peer Review will build on or add to the lessons learned in several earlier reviews. While none is located in the exact field, there are a number which are relevant. Among these are: Federal Foundation Mother and Child for Pregnant Women in Emergency Situations (DE 2010); Access: Cottonera Community Resource Centre (MT 2007); Sure Start (UK 2006); Local Alliances for the Family: Reconciliation of Work and Family Life (DE 2004).

As well as shedding light on national initiatives and debates relevant to family and parenting, these and other previous Peer Reviews have highlighted some key policy messages that should also inform this Peer Review. These include:

- The need to pay special attention to vulnerable groups and the importance of early intervention in this context and more widely. The possible role of tailor-made programmes for groups with different needs has also been underlined;

- The need not just for strong family policies but for innovation and reform in many of the existing policies to allow for: equal opportunities; balancing the rights of children and other dependent people with those of able-bodied adults; policies that alleviate the burden on women in terms of reconciling professional, family and private life; increased incentives for men to take up more caring tasks and share family responsibilities;

- The benefits of services that cater for a wide range of needs and those which focus on outreach and empowerment;

- Recognition that family and children's policy are complex fields and so may require policies that are complementary and multi-layered and careful planning and negotiating (given that they operate in a very sensitive field);

- The contribution of holistic and life cycle approaches to matters relating to family and private life;

- Local needs must be thoroughly assessed and identified before a (new) set of services is established;

- There are strong advantages of co-location and co-operation among several services in the same location;

- An integrated approach, building partnerships and involving local communities, is crucial, as are political commitment and a guarantee of continuity;

- The mobilisation of all relevant actors is an important issue in successfully designing and implementing family friendly policies.

B.   Description of the main elements of the policy/good practice

B.1   The key elements of parenting support in France

Parenting support is also a relatively recent policy in France, emerging in the late 1990s. It is a policy focus emphasised strongly by the current government. In the French context, parenting support refers to the various actions in place to help support parents in their parental roles. There is a strong universalist cast to the actions which are intended to reach all parents, regardless of status and social background. Diversity, too, is common in that parenting support in France is the subject of a wide variety of schemes which have given rise to a large range of services and actions, encouraging a multiplicity of partnerships at both national and local levels. This means that parenting support actions are implemented and run by a large variety of actors and that no single model of service provision prevails. There is a strong regional and local element in provision and hence the coordination and planning of various actions providing assistance to families need to be improved especially for the purpose of steering reform at a national level.

The story of the development of parenting support tools in France is a trajectory from local to national, of programmes being developed initially locally and often on the basis of private initiatives in response to requests from parents for help with their educational role. Such requests were initially met by local associations and in many cases, parents themselves organised and started developing new solutions in already existing associative structures (e.g., parents' cafés, round-tables in social centres, schools for parents). They are therefore 'bottom-up' in the true sense of the term. In the late 1990s, public actors (the central State especially the General Directorate of Social Cohesion (DGCS) and its services, local councils, municipalities, the family branch of the social security (CNAF) and its local services) started to take an interest in these initiatives. The central State in particular began to give financial support to relevant actions and asked its local services to become involved (for instance, by launching calls for proposals or participating in local steering groups). Over time therefore, parenting support actions in France became progressively included in the field of public policy at national level.

As emphasised in earlier parts of this paper, France, too, is host to a variety of tools, schemes and actions in the field of parenting support. These actions are financially supported mainly by the family branch of the social security (CNAF) and the ministry in charge of families. But other stakeholders such as local authorities or other ministries can also co-finance some of the actions.

The best-known schemes and those emphasised for the purposes of the Peer Review include the following:

1.   Assistance and Support for Parents: REAAP

The parental support and guidance network (REAAP) was set up in March 1999 on the basis of two main principles: supporting initiatives for parents and creating a network of participants. REAAP offers expertise and resources to parents to help them carry out their

parental roles. A number of fundamental principles inform the REAAP activities. In particular the actions are aimed at all parents, regardless of status and social conditions and they are free of charge and function on a voluntary basis. They take into account the diversity of family structures and variation in forms of parenting. Hence, a 'REAAP' action is not a pre-defined or standardised action (unlike some of the programmes outlined in the discussion in the earlier part of this paper). They use a preventative and supportive approach and are based on the assumption that parents are the primary educators of their children. Actions are aimed at parents who have questions or are vulnerable, or even in difficulty, and utilise dialogue and exchange to help them in their parenting duties. They are therefore non-directive. In 2009, some 539,000 parents benefitted from 8,000 actions.

2. *Information for Families: Family Information Centres (PIF)*

The aim of these centres is to help families access information and to simplify their day-to-day lives. There are 490 family information centres in France, offering information and guidance for families. They receive the "*Point Info Famille*" label, granted by the local service of the General Directorate for Social Cohesion. While oriented in the main to families, they also promote parenting support tools and, as such, tend to be part of the REAAP network.

3. *Resolving Family Conflict: Family Mediation*

There is an aim to help this service to develop so as to assist not only families but also the children of separated couples to move forward without losing touch with either side of family. Parents are given the choice to use this service or not (it will not be imposed by a judge). The State (ministry in charge of families and the ministry of justice) and the family branch of the social security (CNAF) have worked together with the professional organisations in the field to strengthen and institutionalise service provision related to mediation. Other developments include the inclusion of family mediation in the Civil Code, the creation of a state diploma in family mediation in 2003 and in 2006, and the creation of a dedicated grant (issued by CNAF) to help family mediation services to develop their services. In 2010, 14,000 family mediation actions were undertaken for 31,760 beneficiaries (an increase of 10% compared with 2007). Amongst these actions, 57% led to an agreement and 18% have been adjudged to have been helped to smoothen the relationship between former partners.

4. *Academic Support for Children: CLAS (Academic Support Local Contract)*

The aim of the CLAS is to reach both children and their parents. Unlike specific individual mentoring for pupils developed by the ministry of education, the CLAS provide the children with mentoring outside of school, usually at home, so that the family can participate in it. This includes working with the school to define the support and resources that children need to succeed and developing assistance for parents, by helping them to monitor their children's progress in school and with school work. It is oriented to helping to achieve equal opportunities for children and prevent academic failure. Regular meetings are held with the ministry of education to work on the links between the different tools dedicated to children's academic success. The CLAS currently support some 176,000 children and youngsters every year.

5. *Solidarity Networks: Child Mentoring*

For a large number of isolated families, and especially those in difficulty, solidarity networks can offer parenting support, outreach schemes and respite for both parents and children. Mentoring has long been offered to children entrusted to the child protection services. In addition to this type of mentoring, there has been a development in recent years of third sector mentoring as part of parenting support policy. The purpose of this action is to create a special emotional connection between a child and an adult or family in the form of time shared between the child and the mentor. Mentors are volunteers. Parents and children must all agree to participate. The development of mentoring in respect of vulnerable children or families was part of the recommendations of the Forum on Endangered Childhood which was held in June 2010.

Apart from these particular actions and others implemented by the Ministry for Families and the family branch of the social security (CNAF), other ministries have developed parenting support as a form of action for a wide variety of objectives. These actions offer targeted support for parents with specific difficulties, including the implementation of graduated sanctions for parents who are, on varying scales, neglecting their children. There is, then, an inter-ministerial dimension to parenting support targeting a range of situations. In regard to the policy run by the ministry in charge of families, these goals can only be secondary objectives in the parenting support actions. The primary objective of the general policy of parenting support is and remains the welfare of the family and the healthy development of the child. Supporting parents in order to make them self-confident gives children an environment in which they can succeed. To be effective and ethically acceptable, early prevention programs must focus on "considerate" prevention which takes into account individual specificities, without predictive or evaluative behavioural assumptions.

Financial resources for parenting support actions come from a variety of sources that are difficult to consolidate.

Overall, the description of the policy/good practice emphasises that the relevant actions are quite diverse but that they are governed by a clear set of fundamental principles. Locating the services described in France on the basis of the continuum used earlier, the five interventions fall towards the left-most end of the continuum. There is a strong preventive cast to them, the voluntary nature of participation is emphasised and the work is generally non-directive. The paper produced by the Host Country for the Peer Review is underpinned by a philosophy whereby parenting support is generally conceived in non-interventionist terms. A clear separation seems to exist between preventive and corrective activities. Only the former are seen to the appropriate terrain of parenting support. This may be because the lead ministry is that of social cohesion.

A second key element of the national policy/good practice in France is ongoing reform. The momentum for reform stems from a number of impulses. One such impulse is the need for greater coordination of provision given the strong history of demand-led and local services in response to expressed need on the part of parents. The need for better coordination has been articulated by some key national actors. In 2009, for example, the national court of auditors ("*Cour des comptes*") pointed to the multiplication and sometimes overlapping of programmes and actions and the lack of coordination in the entire system. It advised the General Directorate of Social Cohesion (DGCS) and the family branch of the social security (CNAF) to undertake a reform of the management of parenting support schemes. It also called for a better assessment of the impact of this policy and the improvement of parents' information. In addition, the forum on

Endangered Childhood, held in June 2010, also emphasised the issue of efficiency and governance. The Forum made several recommendations on parenting support, including the creation of a national parenting support committee, the production of a paper on early prenatal care, a booklet on co-parenting and a website for parents.

Some of these suggested reforms have already been activated. A National Parenting Support Committee has been set up. This Committee is responsible for furthering the coordination of and links between the various schemes implemented by the State and the family branch of social security. The Committee also provides coordination at a national level for bodies which steer, organise and finance the various parenting support schemes. It will also try to ensure that parenting support schemes are relevant to all parents. The working programme of this Committee will focus also on the evaluation and legibility of implemented actions. It has 35 members, including 7 ministerial departments, representatives of funds (CNAF) and local governments and associations active in the field of parenting. It is a high-level initiative in that it is chaired by the Minister in charge of family and its vice-chairperson is the President of the family branch of the social security (CNAF).

B.2   Transferability and the significance of the French approach to parenting support

The individual programmes – especially REAAP (parental support and guidance network) – will be of major interest to the participating countries. They are novel and quite broad-ranging in terms of their aims and coverage. Apart from the individual initiatives described, the learning involved from the French approach can be thought of from the perspective of its strengths and also in its challenges.

From the perspective of its strengths, among the most noteworthy features of the French approach to parenting support are:

- The adherence to key principles such as voluntary inclusion/participation on the part of parents, meeting the needs of parents in a non-directive manner, and the adoption of a universal approach;

- The diversified nature of provision;

- Recognition of the existence of an interplay between actors in regard to planning, coordination and delivery and the important role of municipalities and a host of other statutory and non-statutory actors;

- The fact that in many respects this is a policy that is responding to demand from the ground-up (either from parents themselves or from local level service providers or civil society actors);

- The attention given at national level to the coherence of the field and the wish to support the development of new coordinating procedures and systems.

From the perspective of challenges, the push to reform in the French case is revealing in several respects. It highlights the need to:

- Improve the definition and promotion of parenting support actions whilst also maintaining their broad applicability. This raises the matter of how the field should be defined and whether a legal definition of parenting support is necessary;[3]

- Improve the capacity to reach vulnerable groups and develop actions targeted at the most vulnerable families. This raises a whole range of questions but especially shines a spotlight on the limits of parenting support especially as defined in France where it is conceived as general and non-interventionist;

- Ensure better territorial coverage of parenting support actions so that they can become accessible to all parents;

- Improve the evaluation of schemes and select good practice examples. A well-developed evidence base seems especially important. For this other purposes clear objectives, aims and populations or need targeted need to be set out.

C. Key issues for debate at the Peer Review meeting

Reflecting on the good practice example as well as the evidence considered in this paper as a whole (see Appendix 1 also), it is possible to identify a number of key questions or topics for discussion at the Peer Review.

What are the goals of family support?
What processes and end points are envisaged? Is the goal to bring about improved information and knowledge or, more profoundly, to change the way parents (and other family members) think, behave and act?

What is the range of (potential) provision involved in parenting support and how can different forms of support be organised vis-à-vis each other?
As this paper has shown, the term 'parenting support' harbours a diverse range of types of actions. So policy makers will need to think critically about the different options and identify and organise the provisions in a meaningful way so that, for example, they cross the spectrum of service types and need. This brings up the whole matter of definition and approach and whether a legal definition is necessary.

What principles should underlie provision?
This is an especially important question given that many parenting support services function in the domain of private life and have evolved in a relatively ad hoc manner. The work of the Council of Europe has identified a number of positive principles for programmes of support for parents (Daly 2007; Deven 2007). The identified principles include:
- a non-judgmental and non-stigmatising orientation;
- a bottom-up approach;
- integrated, community-based services;
- multi-focused and flexible services;
- inclusivity of the experience of minority and ethnic groups.

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[3] Note that there is no real definition by law of parenting or parenting support in France.

Many of these are reflected in the French approach and so some reflection on the matter of principles seems appropriate and can be informed by the French experience. In particular, the principles of voluntary participation and of respecting and enabling the agency of parents themselves seem to be important messages from the French case.

How can systems or provision transform themselves to be able to best accommodate new 'needs' or concerns?

There is a very real sense in which the development of parenting programmes is a response to emerging need and greater request from parents for support and guidance. The French case makes this very clear. If they are to be responsive to emerging need and demand then, provisions must be flexible and innovative. How can this be achieved, especially given the tendency for some countries to import standardised programmes from other parts of the world?

What kind of service framework needs to exist?

There are a number of issues involved here. One is the matter of multi-disciplinary working, which research in the field favours strongly. Should this be done through inter-agency working or multi-disciplinary teams? A related question here is how parenting support links with other services. A further key question is about the kind of services that are appropriately offered on a universal basis as against those on a particular/targeted basis? Fourthly, there is the matter of the level or location in which service planning should take place. Is this optimally local, regional or national and what limits should be placed on top-down provision so as to ensure local responsiveness and vitality? How can programmes be matched and linked to local need and service frameworks? The question arises here also of whether to go for standardised programmes or indigenously developed ones?

What are the costs and resource implications involved in different types of parenting support?

What costs and efficiencies are involved in staff and training for example? What costs (financial and other) are involved in service organisation and reorganisation? What is the role for new technologies in providing parent support?

What are the gender dimensions?

Parenting has always been a gendered activity. This is much less recognised nowadays, with policy makers increasingly preferring gender neutral language ('worker', 'parent', 'right-holder'). Is this turn to gender neutrality deliberate? What are its consequences of it and how closely does it conform to the reality? To what extent should Member States recognise that in practice parenting is still quite gendered and that efforts to engage fathers are slow and painstaking?

How can parents be accessed and how can 'difficult to reach' parents be engaged?

Available research suggests that participation rates of parents in education and support schemes tend to be low in families considered to be most at risk (Sanders and Ralph 2004: 358). The methods needed to identify families at risk because of parenting difficulties and enable them to participate in parenting support are therefore very important. What needs to be in place to identify and overcome reluctance of parents to access and take up support services? How can parenting programmes be made sensitive to different parenting styles and the programmes matched to the level of need? In Germany, a distinction is made between services with a 'go-structure', whereby the worker goes to the family, and those with a 'come-structure', whereby the parent must come to the service. 'Go-structure' approaches are said to improve access to difficult-to-reach populations. What is the ideal balance between 'go' and 'come' services?

<u>What evidence base needs to be put in place</u>?
The current consensus is that monitoring and evaluation need to be an essential part of the process and infrastructure of parenting support (given the costliness of many of the services and interventions and the fact that they are operating in a very sensitive field). What kind of monitoring exercise needs to be put in place? What kind of methodology is appropriate? What constitutes evidence? There is also the question of whether a data base or bank of programmes is necessary so that: a) what is being offered can be monitored and b) people (whether individuals or policy makers or intending service provider can make the best choice around what is suitable to the particular need? The Commissioning Toolkit (as used in England – see Appendix 1) is an exemplar here.

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Appendix 1: Ancillary information

Some key messages about what has been found to be effective in parenting support

- Programmes with more than one method of delivery.

- Programmes with measureable concrete objectives.

- Programmes with a strong underlying theory and model of how they will improve outcomes for children and parents and can describe the 'mechanisms of change' they are expecting.

- Families under multiple stresses will not be able to benefit fully from parenting support interventions unless their other needs are met as well.

- Effective multi-agency working is required to enable parents to access the range of services usually needed.

- It is unrealistic to expect a single service to meet all needs – hence 'joined up' services are necessary.

- Although parents may draw a wide range of benefits from a parenting intervention, the blanket application of a particular type of programme can be counterproductive.

- Services that allow multiple routes in for families (i.e., have a variety of entry or referral routes).

Source: Moran et al (2004).

Example of good practice − Tool kit for Commissioners of parenting programmes (England)

This is a database of replicable parenting programmes, commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to Parenting UK56, to enable Commissioners of Parenting Support across England to locate support programmes that can be replicated for use in their local areas.

Parenting programmes are defined broadly as any formal interventions designed to support the parent/child relationship. This includes practitioner training. The programmes listed in the Toolkit have been selected where the authors/providers have produced evidence that the programmes have been assessed as being of good quality and have a proven and effective evidence-base.

In reviewing evaluations of parenting programmes the commissioners will want to consider: whether the evaluation is independent and objective; whether it has been undertaken by an organisation or an individual with the appropriate skills and knowledge in undertaking evaluations; details of outcomes and effectiveness. For some of the programmes a peer assessment, written by an experienced practitioner in response to standard questions, is available from Parenting UK.

www.toolkit.parentinguk.org/guidance.php