



PEER REVIEW
IN SOCIAL PROTECTION
AND SOCIAL INCLUSION
2011

BUILDING A COORDINATED STRATEGY FOR PARENTING SUPPORT

PARIS, 6 - 7 OCTOBER 2011

SYNTHESIS REPORT



On behalf of the
European Commission
Employment, Social Affairs
and Inclusion



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Summary

This Peer Review is part of a growing interest in parenting support in the EU in the last decade or so. Nine Member States attended the Peer Review in Paris on October 6 and 7th — Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Italy, Malta — together with two stakeholders — COFACE and Eurochild. The Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions was also represented.

The domain of parenting support emerged as a vibrant sphere of French policy and provision, with a wide range of stakeholder activity and engagement. The host country showcased a number of projects and initiatives. These included a network of support and assistance to parents with their parental roles (REAAP), family information centres, family mediation and a number of types of mentoring round children's education which are family and parent oriented. In France parenting support is generally conceived in non-interventionist terms and a clear separation exists between preventive and corrective activities. Only the former are seen to be the appropriate terrain of parenting support. Reform is ongoing and a National Parenting Support Committee to further coordination between the many activities has been set up.

The Peer Review made clear that parenting support is an important issue across the participant Member States (and the stakeholder organisations) also. However practice varies quite widely within and across countries and one of the common challenges is to keep abreast of and coordinate developments (not least because many of them are locally based initiatives). The discussions at the Peer Review also made clear the learning potential in the field, not least because of the breadth and depth of the host country approach and the fact that the principles underlying policy are those to which other Member States can subscribe. It is also clear that parenting support is a policy field that can be taken forward under Europe 2020.

The following were the main points of discussion and potential learning among Peer Reviewers: the definition of parenting support and demarcation of it as field for policy; the possibility of service duplication given the variation; the broader context in which parenting support is set and operates; whether

provision should be universal or targeted; whether a particular normative view of good parenting is being promoted; evaluation of the most successful models of parenting support; whether new models are necessary; the cost implications of parenting support; the links to the Europe 2020 Strategy.

The following were the main recommendations:

- Programmes should aim to empower parents;
- Long-term support for programmes is needed;
- Children's and parents' rights should both be leading principles;
- Early support is vital;
- There is a need for evaluation/research.

Lessons from the Peer Review dovetail with the priorities of the social dimension of the Europe 2020 Strategy in a number of ways. In particular Europe 2020 actions in the field of poverty and social exclusion as well as those in education and youth were identified as areas in which integrated activity to support parenting could be fielded.



A. Policy context at European level

This Peer Review is part of a growing interest in parenting support in Europe in the last decade or so. This issue has been gaining in prominence at EU level since 2007, when the German EU Presidency suggested forming a European Federation of Parents. This was followed by the Belgian Presidency's emphasis on fighting child poverty, and the Hungarian Presidency's call to analyse Europe's changing demography.

While the EU has no legal competence in the field, 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, pensions, social care, gender equality and migration.

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

1. 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.'
2. 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 Alliance, with the coordination of the European Commission, serves as an arena of discussion and exchange of opinions and information about family-friendly initiatives between the Member States.
3. The focus on early years' provision which was a strong theme under the Lisbon Strategy. 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.
4. EU activities in the field of family-oriented measures more broadly are also relevant. A Communication on Family Policies was issued in August 1989 and a European Observatory on National Family Policies



was set up in 1989. More recently, a Council Resolution was issued in 2000 on the balanced participation of women and men in family and working life. Also relevant are the many EU activities in the fields of gender equality and the reconciliation of work and family life.

While the EU has not elaborated a position on parenting as such then, it has articulated on child and family policies more generally. As well as the field mentioned above, there are a number of other emphases in the EU discourse that are relevant: demographic renewal and the sustainability of population levels; solidarity among the generations; 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.

Parenting support is also relevant to Europe 2020, the successor to the Lisbon Strategy. An interest in parenting support is implicit in two of the ten integrated guidelines for example: reducing school drop out (Guideline 9) and reducing those living in poverty by 20 million by 2020 and promoting social inclusion (Guideline 10). Of relevance also are the European Commission Communication on Early Years Education and Care and the Recommendation on Child Poverty and Well-being (due next year). The European Platform against Poverty, the hub for initiatives oriented to bringing about social and territorial cohesion, could also play host to parenting support, especially as it is a new area of policy and the Platform emphasises innovation and experimentation in relation to meeting social needs.

Families, parenting and the quality of family life have become more prominent in policy and academic work 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 of children, have played a leading role in developments but in recent times the debate has extended to parents and how they carry out their parenting role (especially



in the context of the increasing likelihood of both parents being employed). 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 (Bronfenbrenner 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 and their transmission across generations. While Europe has always had such families, their numbers seem to be increasing and the costs of dealing with such families appears 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).

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and a number of recommendations on family and parenting by the Council of Europe (especially Recommendation REC(2006)19 on positive parenting) have been influential in setting out the legal and policy basis for efforts to influence and change parenting and family life. The Convention on the Rights of the Child 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. The Convention 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 by the rights of the child. The Council of Europe Recommendation REC(2006)19 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. It encourages an integrated approach, including cooperative action between the public authorities, the social partners and civil society.



The broad field is defined, then, at one end by a concern about the quality of family life and individual well-being 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.



B. The French strategy for parenting support

Parenting support, a relatively recent policy in France emerging in the late 1990s, is a policy focus emphasised strongly by the current government. At its heart is the belief that the parent is the primary actor in the child's education, so the aim is to support them in exercising their skills and competences, and to bring together all the actors who work with families. Parents' involvement is voluntary. There is a strong universalist cast to the actions, which are intended to reach all parents, regardless of status and social background. Parenting support in France therefore tries to avoid stigmatising 'failing parents'; instead its approach is to bolster parents' confidence in how they are bringing up their children and dealing with the associated demands. Diversity is a characteristic feature of provision in that parenting support in France is the subject of a wide variety of schemes and initiatives which have given rise to a large range of services and actions at both national and local levels. This means that no single model of service provision prevails.

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. They are therefore 'bottom-up' in the true sense of the term. Among the most important public actors are the Ministry for Family, the General Directorate of Social Cohesion (DGCS) and its services, local councils, municipalities and the family branch of the social security (CNAF) and its local services. NGOs are also active in the field as well as groups of parents themselves.

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

1. Assistance and Support for Parents: REAAP

This 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. 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. 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.

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

The aim of the CLAS (*Contrat Local d'Accompagnement à la Scolarité*) is to reach both children and their parents by providing 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. The CLAS currently support some 176,000 children and youngsters every year.

5. Solidarity Networks: Child Mentoring

While mentoring has long been offered to children entrusted to the child protection services, third sector mentoring as part of parenting support policy has developed in recent years. The purpose 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.

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 seen to be neglecting their children. There is, then, an inter-ministerial dimension to parenting support with the result that parenting support in France targets a range of situations.

Overall, the French policy/good practices while diverse are governed by a clear set of fundamental principles. In France parenting support is generally conceived in non-interventionist terms and a clear separation exists between preventive and corrective activities. Only the former are seen to be the appropriate terrain of parenting support.

Reform is ongoing, the momentum coming from a number of impulses. One 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, including the national court of auditors (“Cour des comptes”) and the Forum on Endangered Childhood, held in June 2010. Some of the suggested reforms have already been activated. A National Parenting Support Committee to further coordination has been set up for example. 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).

C. Policies and experiences in the peer countries

In **Belgium** parenting support is a developing policy, mainly associated with child welfare and child development, the prevention of education-related difficulties and the fight against child poverty. The strategy to support parents is a multi-level responsibility. In Flanders the Flemish act of 13 July 2007 created 'education shops' (open access information and counselling centres) in all of the major cities as well as in some provincial areas. There is also a type of service similar to the 'solidarity networks' in France — 'Support families' are families of volunteers providing informal support to vulnerable families through occasional child-minding and other activities. In the Walloon region the mission of ONE to support parents was reinforced in the contract 2008–2012. From the perspective of Belgian policy, the need for: (a) a strict institutional separation between parenting support and the judicial system is emphasised as are (b) sufficient attention being given to the social dimension (meeting places for parents, networking, community work and so forth), (c) the support of new types of networks and (d) the retraining of some of the existing professions so that they can progress to and take on board the insights of parenting support.

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In **Bulgaria** the over-arching framework is one of commitment to the creation of an appropriate family environment for each child and to deinstitutionalisation. There are a number of NGOs or special interest groups that provide support to parents. Bulgaria, however, lacks a legal definition of parenting support and the development of parenting support has been focused on children at risk. The primary philosophy is of child protection. However, in 2010, a working group was set up to help draft legal changes in the area of children and family policy and all new legislation guarantees the personal development of every child irrespective of his/her need of specific supportive measures. The new philosophy acknowledges that the child has particular rights and is not just a subject of protection.

The welfare and protection of children figures quite strongly in **Croatia** which over the last ten years or so has adopted a series of strategies, programmes and protocols on children (influenced especially by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). Parenting support is a relatively recent policy though,



initiated and operated from 2006 on by 19 family centres. There is a wide variety of providers and a strong local dimension to the services, which are voluntary and available for all parents. The services cover general support (through education and information) as well as support in problem situations. One of the most relevant and widespread programmes is 'Growing Up Together' which is a workshop-based community parenting support programme for parents of young children developed by local experts for the UNICEF Office of Croatia. Support services are also offered by the centres for social welfare which have a statutory remit of protecting the rights and interests of children and families. One challenge for Croatia is the provision of services outside the large urban centres. A recently-convened expert group also identified other gaps and needs: measures to offer early help, the need to increase cross-sectoral and interagency coordination and cooperation, and the need to strengthen professional competence.

In the **Czech Republic** parenting support seems to be quite under-developed as a domain of policy in its own right. It is of course provided under other service area within the aegis of family policy. Of relevance are social services, services oriented to the general support of families and services in the sphere of child welfare and child care. There is a wide range of NGOs which provide lectures, meetings, trainings or aid supporting functional parenting and as well as to families at risk or foster family care. Some of them are subsidised by Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. In addition, pedagogical service providers recommend parents to visit a network of pedagogical-psychological counselling centres if they identify a problem with children.

In regard to parenting support the main focus in the child welfare system and the legislative framework in **Denmark** has been on the child. However the inclusion of parents has been suggested as part of the legislative framework since 1976 and the parent focus has been strengthened with the latest Children's Reform. Many programmes exist (including HIPPY and programmes based on the Oregon Model) and they can be designed for all families or targeted at families undergoing difficulties. There is also a parenting support service that is offered through the municipalities to all parents with newborns delivered through a healthcare nurse. A range of actors share responsibility in delivering and developing specific services



of parenting support. Effectiveness and its demonstration is a big issue in Denmark. Other priority issues include securing effective implementation across different service providers, securing careful recruitment and adequate training of the professionals, and delivering and resourcing the programmes in a way that allows them to remain effective over time.

Against a strong legal framework which places the primary responsibility for raising their children on parents, **Germany** has developed a broad range of parenting support mechanisms over the last 20 years. Support for parenting in Germany falls mainly within the aegis of general support for child-raising in the family (within the sphere of child and youth services). There are 6,200 family advisory facilities catering for between 2 and 5 million participants and over the last years across the German Länder the authorities have opened 500 'inter-generational' houses, which include childcare and provide advice services for parents as well as help for elderly people over benefit queries. These services are aimed at all parents and are resource rather than deficit oriented. They are separated from the youth welfare services which have a child protection/monitoring remit. Family support also falls within the domain of adult education in Germany. Of relevance here are the services provided by continuing education institutions on parental and family education. Fragmentation is a possible issue in Germany. The legal framework of the federal level has not been substantiated at the Länder level and so there may be a lack of rigour in the entire field.

Parenting support is a new policy in **Estonia**, mentioned for the first time in the 2012 government programme of action and the children and families action plan 2010–2020. The field is characterised by diversity in provision and there is as yet no state operated and coordinated parenting programme targeted to different groups. However, the Thomas Gordon Parent Effectiveness Training is run on a limited basis and it is planned to introduce Triple P¹ shortly. When this is up and running all parents with a child in first

1 Triple P — Positive Parenting Programme: the programme's main objective is to prevent behavioural, emotional and developmental disorders in children by enhancing the knowledge, skills and confidence of parents. 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).



grade will get counselling which will normalise parenting support as well as helping the authorities to find out which parents need more help. Much of the existing provision is oriented to health and organised through maternity or health-based information and counselling. The school is also an important site for engaging with and offering support to parents. It is also planned to set up regional children and family support centres.

Parenting support is a relatively new topic and domain of policy in **Italy** as well, dating from the late 1990s, but it is at the vanguard of an important new line of development, shifting the focus from pathology to support as normal and prevention as a goal of policy. Parenting support policies and provisions are not, however, regulated uniformly across the national territory and vary in form and frequency from region to region. The variety of provision is therefore striking as is the wide range of providers (including regional and municipal authorities, consortia, co-operatives and third-sector organisations). It is possible to group provision on the basis of whether the services are oriented to all parents and aim at empowerment and skill and resource building or whether they are targeted at parents and families facing difficulties. Among the issues in the French case identified as significant for Italy are: the networking of services and their management in a global rather than a local or regional governance perspective; the accessibility of services on a nationwide basis; and a specification of a minimum essential level of services together with a delineation of responsibilities and a division of labour across different sectors.

At the EU level, **COFACE** stresses that parenting support should be mainstreamed into a wide variety of policy making. In its view successful parenting depends on an array of policy dimensions — family policy, media policy, housing policy, educational policy, social security and healthcare all contribute to creating a favourable environment for parenting. COFACE also maintains that the promotion of socio-economic measures and policies is an important aspect in supporting parents and their parenting experience. Poverty can be an obstacle to positive parenting and tackling poverty is part of an appropriate response.

Eurochild, too, advocates the normalisation of parenting support and suggests that Member States should adopt a comprehensive and cross-



governmental approach to promoting the well-being of children and their families. It also advocates early intervention and investment in children and families. Among the first principles for parenting support identified by Eurochild are a low threshold of participation, (so services should be free of charge or very affordable and accessible by all without compulsion or stigma), good territorial coverage and prioritising of the most vulnerable. Another very important principle emphasised by Eurochild is listening to parents and involving children (and also fathers) as is a non-judgemental and non-stigmatising orientation.

The **European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions** has recently funded a research project on parenting support. It, too, emphasises the diversity of the field. In general very few countries (with the exception of Sweden) have specific legislation on parenthood, and in most cases parenting support is part of a wider strategy.



D. Discussions at the Peer Review meeting

There were a number of over-arching questions or themes in the discussion.

The importance of defining ‘parenting support’ and demarcating the field.

During the discussion the matter of what constitutes parenting support as a field of policy came up repeatedly. Given that it is an emerging rather than an established field of policy, it was felt that a clear definition of parenting support is needed and a set of decisions around whether it should be created as a distinct field of policy in its own right. This may require either a legal definition as exists in some countries or an operational definition but it is important that the field is clearly defined and demarcated in order to know what type of response is appropriate, assess what the goals and desired outcomes should be and locate the policy field relative to other policies. Another set of questions also arose about the type of ‘good’ parenting programmes should impart: information or knowledge, advice, a set of contacts or network, a change of attitude, an improvement in confidence, skill and capacity, or a change of behaviour?

Possible duplication of services. Given that many parenting support measures have grown out of local initiatives to meet local needs, there are in some countries — and in all the possibility that — services overlap and several services carrying out the same functions. The question then arises of how to address possible fragmentation and rationalise or better integrate services. This is a major issue that extends beyond the field of parenting policy. There is also the related question of which departments or ministries should take the lead. Currently, parenting policy (where it exists) in most countries is divided among several departments, typically education, welfare, health and family. This too leads to another issue which is the level at which responsibility should lie and in particular the division between national/federal, regional and local level. The need to mobilise all actors, build partnerships and involve local communities was also discussed.

Putting parenting support in a broader context. The need to take a broad view of why parenting support is emerging was emphasised which means putting parenting-related needs and responses in a broader political and service context. Why is parenting support emerging now and what ‘problem’



is being expressed by it? How does the emergence of parenting support link to the situation of other policy responses? Are there occasions when parenting support is a substitute for state services for families and children which are being cut as a result of the financial crisis? How is parenting support affected by the particular government in power? What are the other services that parenting support should link to, for example, those to reduce poverty in times when support measures are being cut?

Should parenting support be universal or focused? The range and span of services that fall under the ‘umbrella’ of parenting support is very large and in fact services span a continuum from offering ‘light’ support with a voluntary take-up (the ‘pull mechanism’) to targeted measures to parents who are seen to need it/are considered as ‘failing’ (the ‘push’ mechanism). The question arises of what a country or service provider’s overall service profile should look like. Where does the balance lie and should policy offer a range of services or focus on ‘needy’ parents? Sometimes in universal approaches the needs of the most vulnerable go unheard and yet it is often the most troubled families which require support with their parenting activities. The point was continually made that while universal services are the ideal there must be special efforts made to target the most vulnerable families who will not necessarily present themselves or make their way to universal services. The mode of access and the access threshold (what criteria have to be passed for entry or access) are therefore very important. The question of whether the system should be based on a ‘bottom-up’ approach of responding to parents’ and children’s needs or whether the central state and public authorities can and should more generally define what is needed was also discussed.

Is a normative view of good parenting being promoted? The meaning of “support’ in the context of parenting is not by any means self evident — the scientific literature on it does not come down strongly in favour of one particular method. Given this, is there a danger of offering a service based on a normative view of ‘good parenting’, i.e. a set of values and provisions that seeks to turn parents into the middle class view of a good parent? To what extent is good parenting culturally specific and how are different cultures of parenting to be validated and supported? This raises the matter



of the degree of intervention implied by parenting support measures and whether parenting support interferes in people's private lives, in other words the boundaries around intervention. The discussion considered this public/private faultline and generally agreed that this needed careful managing. There are other issues involved in the view of good parenting as well — gender issues for example. Does the move to good parenting imply that women are at fault for not being good enough parents by going to work and what is the father's role? In addition, is there a role for public debate and education in identifying what good parenting is?

Defining, identifying and evaluating successful models of parenting support.

There is a consensus now that programmes in this and other fields need to be evidence based. In some countries this is a very strong push, for financial reasons but also because programmes deal with very sensitive and life-changing issues. How does one identify the models that have worked best? What type of evidence is needed to evaluate success — should it be qualitative (in terms of people's experiences) or quantitative (i.e. numbers of people helped and the outcomes effected)? Another issue discussed was the need to be conscious of evaluation when programme goals are set. These must be capable of being evaluated and measured if the commitment to evaluation is to be meaningful. The question of how to evaluate social experimentation is relevant here as well given the innovative nature of many of the interventions involved in parenting support. It needs to be recognised that not all forms of support in responding to parents' needs have directly quantifiable effects. Other key questions that need an evidence base include: at what age should parenting support begin? How important is peer support?

Can current provision be transformed to meet changing needs, or is it necessary to create new models?

The relationship among service providers, both operationally and also in terms of legal remit, was another important theme in the discussions. What is the relationship between parenting support and child welfare institutions for example? It was generally agreed that parenting support is less regulatory and more voluntaristic on the part of parents and so should be kept separate from social protection, in which parents are mandated to participate and where they fear if they do not shape up, their children will be legally removed. Obviously, there needs to be some



kind of bridge between the two services but if parents fear that there could be punitive consequences from participating in parenting support activities then they may not get involved.

The cost implications of parenting support. During the period of high growth there was political will for positive support measures and in fact many of the parenting support measures emerged in this kind of economic climate. Now we are in a different economic climate and Peer Reviewers wondered whether we can afford to provide these services in times of austerity? At the minimum a strong case needs to be made for them (again underlining the need for clear thinking around the constituents of parent support policies and the needs that they address and the benefits they yield) and also how value for money can be attained.

Is this type of parental support relevant to the Europe 2020 Strategy?

What are the opportunities for incorporating this type of parental and early learning support into the measures set out in Europe 2020, the Alliance for Families, and the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion? How does this service help achieve the poverty and social exclusion related and other goals of Europe 2020?



E. Conclusions and key learning elements

The wide-ranging and very active discussion led to a number of conclusions.

Emergence of a 'parenting-support' policy domain. Most European countries now accept the importance of offering parenting support. Hence Europe is starting a process of 'normalising' parenting support although in many countries the policy is still in its infancy. This field needs to be clearly defined, though, and one of the benefits of the Peer Review was for this very purpose in demonstrating the range of provisions that fall under the term 'parenting support'.

Coordination of services and responsibilities for programmes is one of the needed steps. Peer country representatives described moves to integrate services and the necessity for this given that parenting support is implicit in a number of existing services and yet is also emerging as an independent or *sui generis* domain of policy. It is common for a number of ministries to be involved and countries differ in their views on who is the appropriate provider of parenting-support services.

Policy and provision should span the continuum of parenting support needs. Examples from peer countries demonstrate that parenting support needs to be both universal and targeted. In Germany the parenting-support services are open to all, based on a relationship of trust. Italy is beginning to develop such a network of services, Croatia too. In Malta, stakeholders run childcare centres and parents who use them get a tax rebate, using a 'carrot' rather than a 'stick' approach to contact parents. Parent-led initiatives in France demonstrate how one can offer a free system with a low threshold of involvement and no social stigma. This policy approach has the merit of attracting a wide range of parents and offering a 'gentle' support system. For all types of services, it is vital that benchmarks or criteria of quality are set out.

Parenting support alone is insufficient. Parenting is not an isolated activity and so the set of needs involved in parenting support is potentially broad and can be met only within a comprehensive system of assistance for parents, children and families. For these and other reasons, a single-focus policy is

inappropriate. Family and parental support also requires programmes for child protection, health and education services as well as policies aiming to cut poverty and social exclusion. In Estonia the Education Ministry runs services in local schools to identify parents who need support. In Bulgaria there is support for families in the form of housing support and social assistance. However, most countries still have a long way to go in putting in place the wide range of services that constitute an ideal parenting support strategy.

The relationship between parent support and child protection systems needs to be carefully managed. Child protection systems are well-developed in all EU countries at this stage. The issue of how to get the two services to work in tandem but yet to maintain a degree of independence is a concern. Poor families may be wary about using parenting-support services, as they fear that if they are identified as 'in need', the authorities may remove their children. There was a general consensus about the need to keep parenting support separate from child protection in order to win parental trust and also because the two types of services have different objectives, different legal bases and different histories.

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Reaching low-income or vulnerable families is vital. One major challenge facing programmes in many countries is to reach families who are outside the mainstream. This may be because they are high-need or because they are from a minority group or indeed because they live in a rural area (where services are typically less developed). There may need to be specific programmes or actions for such groups. Countries have started to develop responses. Germany has trained 'local mums' from migrant families to contact families, but has found that trained professionals were more successful in carrying out programmes. In Denmark the municipalities offer a wide range of services especially for new parents. In the Czech Republic, a wide range of NGOs, some funded by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, provide lectures, meetings, trainings or aid supporting functional parenting and as well as to families at risk or foster family care. It is vital that programmes for vulnerable groups exist and that special efforts are made to reach the most vulnerable families. There may need to be tailored



programmes for different sectors of the population and these must work to actively destigmatise participation in parenting support initiatives.

Balance needs to be achieved between local and national action. This partly depends on the country's political structure and the history of social service provision. Italy is moving towards federalism, so regions have competence on programming social services, with municipalities taking responsibility for management. In regard to Croatia the opinion was expressed that decentralising the current system would enable services to connect better with each other. All countries face these kinds of issues because underlying them is the question of where the responsibility lies between local and national authorities and also indeed between parents and providers of services.

The following recommendations came out of the Peer Review:

Programmes should aim for empowerment. Parents' confidence in their abilities needs to be bolstered, and they should not be made to feel at fault if they require support. Rather, support in the parenting role should be 'normalised' or mainstreamed. This suggests a strengths-based approach. It also suggests a participatory approach whereby parents are consulted, children also, and allowed a say in the programmes' design and operation in the spirit of dialogue and working partnership. French examples show this could be done in a creative way by incorporating stakeholders in policy design and implementation. However, it is vital that professionals know how to work with parents and they may need training or education to adopt a supportive and respectful way of dealing with parents and children.

Long-term support for programmes is needed. Programmes need to work on a long-term basis, which allows for more flexibility and experimentation and avoids making policies dependent on short-term decision-making. The 2000 Lisbon Agenda provided a long-term perspective as did the UK 'Sure Start' programme which, when it was first set up, had ring-fenced funding for five years. Given the deleterious effects of the financial crisis on families, long-term support is vital for some families as is a certain degree of security and stability in funding for providers. Long-term support implies especially a co-ordinated strategy. The French model of instituting a national parenting



support coordinating committee to provide strategic direction and greater coordination is a good practice in this context.

Children's and parents' rights should be leading principles. A major shift has occurred toward a rights-based approach since the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children are now seen as actors with individual rights and parents' responsibility in their upbringing is underlined. The importance of a rights-based approach and of hearing the voices of both children and their parents must be incorporated into all policies especially those on parenting support which relate to core issues about individual and collective well-being and take policy makers and providers into terrain that is not only new but highly sensitive.

Early support is vital. If the view is adopted that all parents need parenting support then this will go a considerable distance towards justifying and putting in place a set of services and initiatives that begin early in the experience of parenting. This is recognised already in the provision of support around childbirth and the early weeks and months of the child's life which is among the most developed area of parenting support in the Member States. Early support should not lead to a neglect of services for older children however.

There is need for evaluation/research. Many of the Peer Reviewers are concerned to introduce programmes that can be evaluated to assess their worth. It is particularly important in times of financial straits to be able to demonstrate that these policies bring added value, obviating the need for more expensive and intrusive interventions in families. However, given that in the current constrained times there is little money for research, providers are encouraged to be innovative and pluralistic in the methods they adopt for evaluation. Part of this openness to research and evaluation should include reflexivity about the values being promoted as part of parenting support and whether these values are sufficiently plural and open to different understandings about what constitutes 'good parenting'. Regular monitoring may also be helpful.



F. Peer Review contribution to the goals of Europe 2020

Lessons from this Peer Review dovetail with the priorities of the social dimension of the Europe 2020 Strategy in a number of ways. Europe 2020 has two guidelines that directly or indirectly call to mind the role of support for parenting: guideline 9 on preventing school drop-out and guideline 10 on reducing the numbers of people in poverty and social exclusion. Moreover, parenting support is also relevant to two of the seven flagship initiatives of Europe 2020. These are the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion and Youth on the Move. In more general terms, Europe 2020 aims for an integrated cross-sectoral or policy approach, the kind of approach that is implied by parenting support. It also places considerable focus on social innovation as a means of addressing social issues.

In terms of concrete lessons, the Peer Review is notable in the context of Europe 2020 in the following respects. First, it provides examples of parenting support to give children a good start in life — one of the priorities of the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion is to break the cycle of disadvantage. Second, it demonstrates the importance of a range of family-oriented services and the need to offer a combination of universal services (the ‘pull’ approach) and targeted services (‘push’ approach). Thirdly, it gives examples of how to introduce close cooperation between all levels of government, social partners and civil society and to mobilise parents themselves. Finally as a field of policy that is inherently innovative — in that it is responding to a new set of needs (or perhaps a set of needs that is being voiced more strongly) — parenting support picks up on the strong theme of Europe 2020 around innovation and social experimentation as a way of meeting needs. In these and other ways, and especially as a new domain of policy, parenting support has the potential to contribute to the aims of Europe 2020.

This Peer Review has the potential to make a major contribution to the social Open Method of Coordination and the OMC strands by demonstrating the important role of stakeholders (local parents) in initiating policy. The examples of parenting-support policies underline the need to ensure that all

citizens have access to resources and services so that they can participate in society, and as such provide useful lessons in bolstering social inclusion. These examples demonstrate the positive results of acknowledging the primary role that parents have in the education and rising of their children and how they can be assisted in this by the state and other providers. Overall, they demonstrate how Peer Reviews contribute to Europe 2020 goals by responding to key challenges.



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Building a coordinated strategy for parenting support

Host country: **France**

Peer countries: **Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Italy, Malta**

Stakeholders: **Coface, Eurochild**

France has established a variety of services to support parents on a voluntary, free-of-charge basis. In part these support measures respond to evolving family structures (such as the rise in single-parent families, “blended families”, teenage parenthood etc) which create different needs and demand new support systems. It is also a way of supporting the well-being of children more generally and an important part of the overall effort to combat child poverty and promote social inclusion in line with the Europe 2020 Strategy.

Support measures range from counselling to active intervention; one innovative programme empowers parents to build their own support networks. Programmes are funded or co-funded by various actors (the central government, local authorities, a centralised finance body in charge of family benefits) and various NGOs are involved in implementation.

France’s Audit Commission (“Cour des Comptes”) reported that the coordination of services could be more efficient. A committee has since been set up to benchmark best practice in other countries. The Peer Review supports these endeavours, providing the opportunity for participants to share expertise and innovative practices and obtain feedback. In addition, the Peer Review will enable France to collect ideas for improving policy coordination and increasing the cost effectiveness of the measure, an important objective in a context of tightening constraints on public spending.