

Building a coordinated strategy to help parents

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Country highlights

In France, the fertility rate is above the OECD average and close to the replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman (2.01 in 2010). The employment rate of women aged 25 to 54 is above the OECD average, and 80% of them work full-time; despite a recent slight increase, child poverty concerns 8% of children aged from 0 to 17 and is well below the OECD average (12.75%).

However, despite good material outcomes, average educational performance is below the average of the OECD. France has the fifth highest gap between low and high achievers.

In 2005, 63% of children under 18 were living with married-couple parents. 18% are living with a consensual-union couple and 16% in a single-parent family. 37% of children live with at least one parent who is a higher-education graduate, and 44% with at least one parent in a management-level job or engaged in an intermediate occupation. Young children in single-parent families are less likely to have mothers with degrees or in employment than young children living with both parents. These differences are narrower for teenagers. They are also less pronounced on the fathers' side.

Children enjoy better dwelling conditions when their parents live together. 11% of French children live in overcrowded dwellings. The proportion rises to one-quarter in the Paris region (Île-de-France).

Parenting support is a relatively recent policy that emerged in the late 1990's.

In the French context, parenting support means the various actions in place to help support parents in their parental roles. These actions are intended to reach all parents, regardless of status and social background, through underlining the importance of their parenting skills.

Parenting support is one of the priorities in the French government's family policy. It 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. Parenting support actions are implemented and run by a large variety of actors.

The current reforms are intended to clarify and improve steering of the parenting support policy led by the State and Family Branch of the Social Security (*Caisse nationale des allocations familiales*, CNAF). This includes improving the coordination of various actions providing assistance to families and planning a local (*département*) organisation in coherence with the steering reform at a national level.

1. The development of parenting support policy in France

1.1 Originally, parenting support tools and schemes were developed locally, on the basis of private initiatives. They have been integrated into a public policy subsequently

In recent decades, the traditional family model has been confronted with great sociological transformations with an increasing number of single-parent families or step-families, the increasing demands placed by the society on parents, the isolation felt by some parents and the effect of the social and economic crisis on already struggling families. As a result, disorientated parents sought specific support to help them with their educational role.

These needs were initially met by local associations. 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, etc.).

In the late 1990's, public actors (i.e.: central State and its services, local councils, municipalities, the Family Branch of the Social Security and its local services) started to take an interest in these private initiatives.

As to the central State it started giving financial support to these actions and asked its local services to get involved (for instance, by launching calls for proposal or participating in local steering groups). Parenting support actions became progressively included in the field of public policy.

1.2 There is now a great 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 for Families. But other stakeholders such as local authorities or other ministries can also cofinance some of these actions.

The best-known schemes are:

1.2.1 Information for families: family information centres (*Point Info Famille, PIF*)

Giving families access to their rights and information is a prerequisite for all types of assistance. Centres offering information and guidance for families receive the "*Point Info Famille*" label, granted by the local service of the General Directorate for Social Cohesion.

The aim of these centres is to help families accessing information and to simplify their day-to-day lives. They are also in charge of promoting the parenting support tools and as such, they are part of the REAAP network (*réseaux d'écoute, d'appui et d'accompagnement des parents*). They can be identified by a common logo.

A map of all 490 family information centres (PIF) in France will be accessible from the Ministry for Families' website. It is currently reengineered into a general website dedicated to parents, elaborated by the Ministry.

1.2.2 *Resolving family conflicts: family mediation*

Given the increasing number of divorces and separations¹ and also the escalation in the number of family conflicts,² the Government decided to make it easier for parents to access alternative means of conflict management, i.e. family mediation.

The aim is to help this service to develop, not only to assist families, but also to assist the children of separated couples to move forward without losing touch with either side of family. Parents are also given the choice to use this service or not (it won't be imposed by a judge). The State (Ministry for Families and Ministry of Justice) and the Family Branch of the Social Security (CNAF) worked together with the professional organisations in the field to strengthen the offer: family mediation had been included in the Civil Code, a state diploma in family mediation had been created in 2003 and in 2006, a dedicated grant has been created (issued by CNAF) to help family mediation services to develop their offer.

Nevertheless, family mediation is not free for families even if, in practice, the Family Branch of the Social Security pays part of its cost.

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% helped to soothe the relationship between former partners.

1.2.3 *Academic support for children: Academic Support Local Contract (Contrat Local d'Accompagnement à la Scolarité, CLAS)*

"We are trying to prevent problems linked to special needs by studying the influence of family education on academic success."³

The specific 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 a mentoring outside its school, most of the time 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, which they do not always get from their family or social circle. It also provides assistance for parents, by helping them to monitor their children's schooling. It is 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 academic success.

The CLAS are currently supporting 176,000 children and youngsters every year.

¹ Currently, two million children have parents who are separated and almost one million of those children hardly ever see one of their parents.

² Successive activity reports on child protection emphasise that "some couples have real difficulty in finding a peaceful solution to their conflicts in the interests of the child." In 2007, 37% of referrals to family mediation were related to situations where the child is "taken hostage" in the conflict between its parents. This proportion has not changed for many years.

³ Institut français de l'éducation - Dossier d'actualité Veille et analyses, No. 63, June 2011.

1.2.4 Assistance and support for parents: parental support and guidance networks (réseaux d'écoute, d'appui et d'accompagnement des parents, REAAP)

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

A "REAAP" action is not a pre-definite action. It is an action which respects several characteristics: the actions initiated by REAAP are aimed at all parents, regardless of status and social conditions, are free of charge and work on a voluntary basis. They take into account the diversity of family structures and the different forms of parenting. They use a preventative and supportive approach and are based on the assumption that parents are the primary educators of their children. These actions are aimed at parents who have questions or are vulnerable, or even in difficulty, and use dialogue and exchange to help them in their parenting duties.

In 2009, 539,000 parents benefitted from 8,000 actions.

1.2.5 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 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. Nowadays, mentoring is helping to develop solidarity networks around the child and between families.

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 of June 2010.

1.3 Other actions with a corrective dimension are also used in prevention programmes

In the wake of general actions implemented by the Ministry for Families and the Family Branch of the Social Security, other ministries have developed parenting support as a form of action for a wide variety of objectives as both a primary and secondary prevention measure.

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 of parenting support: the prevention of drug abuse, child protection, the prevention of illiteracy, the integration of migrants, the fight against academic

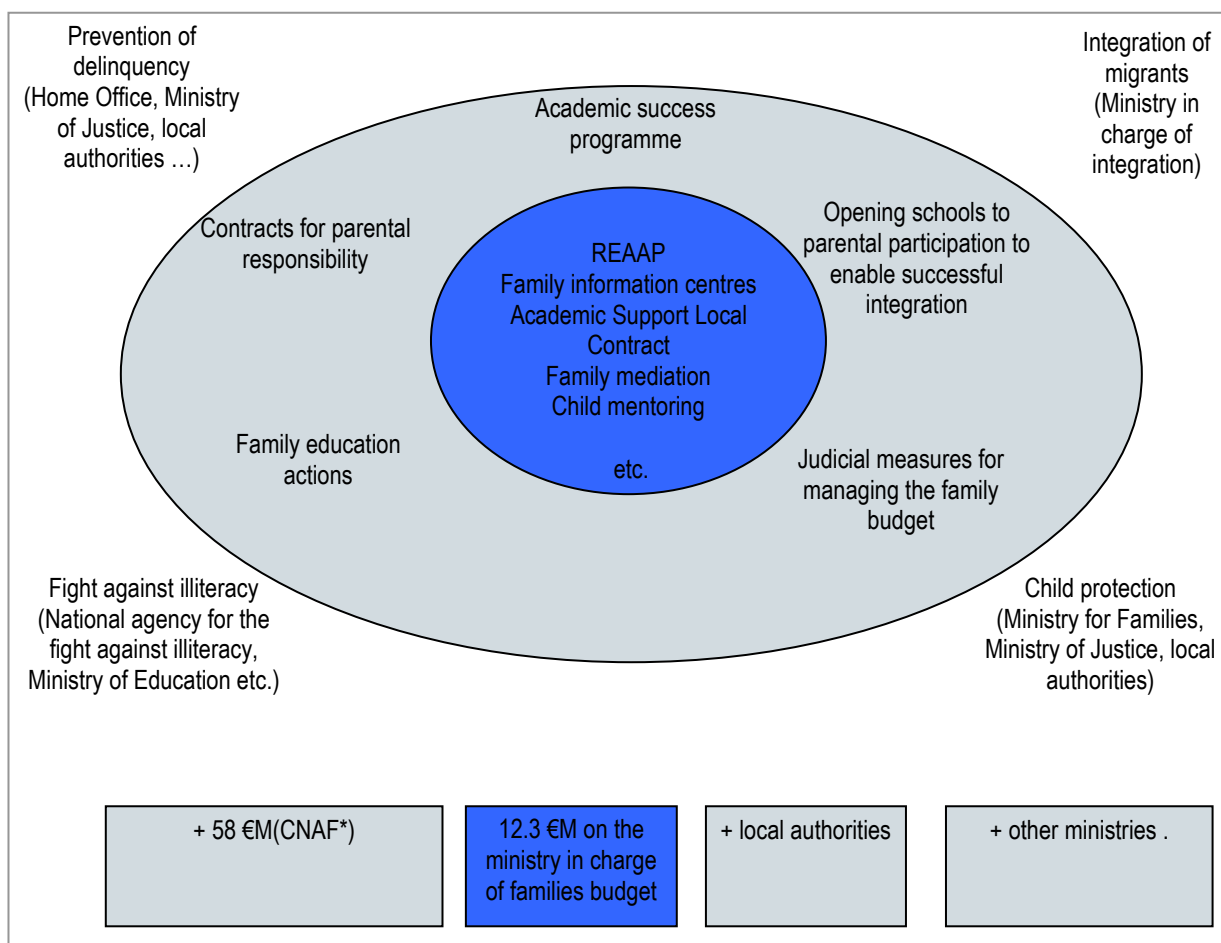
failure or truancy and the fight against crime are all sections of public policy that use parenting support measures.

In relation with the fight against crime in particular, various parenting support schemes have been developed for several years now. These schemes are more akin to secondary prevention measures since they are often implemented after the first criminal acts have been committed.

In regard of the policy run by the Ministry for 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 behaviour assumptions.

1.4 Financial resources

Financial resources for parenting support actions come from a variety of sources that are difficult to consolidate. A large majority of the financing is decentralised. The sketch below can give a simplified overview of fields, stakeholders and financing.



* CNAF = Family Branch of the Social Security

As already explained, the actions belonging to this public policy are very diverse and the boundaries between prevention and correction are not always very clear.

Moreover, there is no real definition by law of parenting or parenting support.

But even if there is no clear definition, there are some characteristics common to all the schemes and actions which are currently considered to be part of the parenting support policy:

Parenting support actions are aimed at all parents, and provided on a voluntary basis. Their objective is to support parents in their parental role and help them to build their particular skills and aptitudes through empowerment. They are free of charge or very affordable. The main objective of these actions is to strengthen social cohesion.

2. On-going reforms and action plans

2.1 Despite strong positive points, there is a need for reform

In 2009, the national court of auditors (*"Cour des comptes"*) pointed out the multiplication and sometimes the overlap of programmes and actions and the lack of coordination of the whole 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.

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

Nevertheless the strong positive points of this policy are also underlined by all stakeholders and auditors. In a recent memorandum on the structure of family policy and the possible developments over the next 15 years, the Higher Council for the Family⁴ outlined the place of parenting support policies. "Traditional" parenting support actions should keep on receiving public support and financing. The actions proposed should be diverse, in order to meet family needs and should be meant to reach all parents, regardless of status and social background. However, the Higher Council also said that special attention should be paid to families facing social difficulties.

2.2 On-going reform and priorities for improvement

2.2.1 Creation of the National Parenting Support Committee

In 2010, the Secretary of State in charge of the family decided to create a National Parenting Support Committee in order to help redefine and improve the organisation of existing parenting support schemes.⁵

⁴ The Higher Council for the Family was created in June 2009 and operates under the authority of the Prime Minister. It is an advisory body on family policy.

⁵ Created by the Decree n°1308 of 2nd November 2010.

According to the law,⁶ this Committee is responsible for furthering the coordination of participants and the link between the various schemes implemented by the State and the Family Branch of the Social Security. It will also ensure that parenting support schemes are relevant to all parents.

The work programme of this Committee will focus on the evaluation and legibility of implemented actions.

The Committee provides coordination at a national level for bodies which steer, organise and finance the various parenting support schemes.

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 chaired by the Minister for Families in person and its vice-chairperson is the President of the Family Branch of the Social Security (CNAF).

This Committee has been very active since its creation: it meets in a select committee to monitor the work programme and in technical groups to steer the schemes. In 2011 the technical groups studied the reform of the Family information centres (PIF), the overhaul of the REAAP questionnaire, the qualitative evaluation of family mediation and the direction of the monitoring programme for vulnerable children.

The General Directorate of Social Cohesion (DGCS) and the CNAF will organise a symposium in November 2011 on the theme of parenting and public policy to support the action of the National Committee. The DGCS is also helping the Centre for Strategic Analysis⁷ to organise a symposium on the experience of foreigners in parenting support.

2.2.2 Further priorities for improvement

- *Improving the definition and promotion of parenting support actions whilst also maintaining their broad applicability*
One of the first tasks of the new National Parenting Support Committee in 2011, was to develop a framework for an accepted definition of parenting and parenting support. The November 2011 symposium will be a good opportunity to synthesise these debates.

The Ministry for Families is also planning to develop an internet portal in order to guide parents in need of support. A particular priority is to reach more vulnerable groups who would not normally be inclined to made use of available resources (for example through fear of interference of social services in their private lives).

- *Selecting good practice*
New solutions are still being developed at a local level by associations. It is therefore important to monitor innovative actions.
- *Ensuring better territorial coverage of parenting support actions so they can become accessible to all parents.*

⁶ Article D141-9 of the Code of Social Action and Families.

⁷ A public think-tank.

- *Developing actions targeted for the most vulnerable families*
The most vulnerable families should be given special attention. These target groups can be defined at a national level (for instance, single parents) and also locally, using local diagnostics.
- *Improving the evaluation of schemes*
These evaluations should be transversal in order to make sure that different stakeholders are not financing overlapping actions (for instance, out of school actions). It is especially difficult to assess preventive actions.