



# Parenting support and education

## info sheet

*'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.'*

Mary Daly (2011), *Building a co-ordinated strategy for parenting support*



## Background

Parenting support and education encompass different types of interventions (e.g. information, training, counselling, etc.) directly linked to rearing children. The ultimate goals of parenting support and education are helping parents raise their children and having a positive impact on the physical, emotional and cognitive development of children.

Several programmes have as their objective the promotion of health of children. This can include postnatal assistance, the prevention of obesity or the early detection of mental health problems such as ADHD. For example, *Kraamzorg* is a universal postnatal service in the Netherlands whose aim is to aid the recovery of the mother as well as providing her with advice and assistance to care for her new-born, for example showing how to breastfeed properly and how to bathe the baby.

The respect of human rights of children is also a fundamental aspect of teaching positive parenting. Many programmes focus on the prevention of smacking and other forms of corporal punishment. In Germany, the programme *Starke Eltern - Starke Kinder* (Strong parents - strong children) provides information and practical exercises so that parents have more confidence in themselves and can raise and educate their children without recurring to smacking or any other harmful measures. The Council of Europe has also put a lot of emphasis on this issue as part of its rights-based strategy

'Building a child friendly Europe'. Its *Recommendation on positive parenting* (2006) defines it as 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'.

Overall, the improvement of communication between parents and children is at the core of many programmes. Portugal's *Associação Nacional para a Acção Familiar*, a non-profit association whose aim is to encourage solidarity between young people, their families and the community, has been running a parental training project since 2007. The main aim is to increase the knowledge and skills of parents (or anyone with a parental role) and to raise awareness of the importance of parental figures in the development of children and young people.

## The policy context

Parenting support is usually implemented as part of a wider framework of child welfare or family policies. A few European countries have specific legislation regarding parenting support and education: in Belgium, the Flemish region has a decree since 2007 that sets out how parenting support is organised, with local authorities being in charge of coordinating all the relevant stakeholders. The Swedish National Strategy for Parental Support (2009) includes measures for improving cooperation between parents and



institutions, as well as increasing health promotion activities, meeting places and staff training.

Some governments have also established specialised research Institutes or advisory groups for supporting governmental decisions. The United Kingdom has a National Advisory Group to strengthen parenting education in schools, the National Family and Parenting Institute and, from 2007 to 2010, the National Academy for Parenting Practitioners providing training to professionals. Also in the UK there is currently a proposal to develop a series of Life Chance Indicators that would be used towards measuring the impact of parenting policies. Different aspects of parenting are currently being monitored through longitudinal studies such as the UK National Child Development Study or the Millennium Cohort Study.

## How to reach parents

Some parents may be reluctant to use these services because they may feel that doing so means acknowledging their incompetence as parents. There may also be some degree of suspicion towards what has been established as 'good parenting'. Furthermore, it is often the case that those families who are most in need of these services (e.g. vulnerable groups such as migrants, disabled or single parent households) are usually harder to reach because of their cost or distance or because they are unaware of the existence of these services.

Some governments have promoted campaigns to better reach parents and raise their awareness (Austria, Czech Republic, Greece on corporal punishment, Poland on positive parenting during crisis and family violence, Romania, Spain) or by providing information material (posters, leaflets and audio-visual materials) in public places. Also telephone help-lines are available in most European countries. In the case of hard to reach groups, programmes with a 'go structure' (social workers visit the family) are more successful than those with a 'come structure'. Programmes should also strive to involve fathers in the development of their children: it is often the

case that most participants in parenting programmes are mothers.

In relation to the debate concerning the balance between universal and targeted policies, there is evidence that the former are less stigmatising and that they can prevent problems before they become critical. Vulnerable groups may therefore be better off with more universal services rather than with targeted policies. Nevertheless, it is useful to have programmes tailored at the specific needs of a particular family group. For example in France there are group meetings for parents of children with mental health problems. The aim of these meetings is to help parents recognise and develop ways of coping with stress and to identify and access other sources of support or assistance.

Another format that has proven to be useful is the organisation of peer groups where parents can exchange views and ask for advice in a more informal manner than when consulting specialised staff. In Brussels the *Baboes* programme was established because research had shown that many parents look for informal support rather than professional advice. Parents can use the meeting space to exchange experiences whilst their children play. Another possibility is to have volunteers involved in the implementation of the programme. In Ireland, the Community Mothers Programme trains mothers to visit families in their local community and provide child rearing support, particularly in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Families participating in this programme scored better in terms of the self-esteem of parents and the cognitive development of children.

Aside from peer groups, the availability of qualified staff is crucial for the effective delivery of services. Whilst there is an increase in the demand for these services, there is a mismatch between this demand and the availability of suitably qualified workers in this area. This is therefore a sector where there is an opportunity for the creation of employment if workers with the right skills can be attracted and training opportunities are created.

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