Supporting parents in their parenting role

A Position Paper prepared by the Special Interest Group on Parenting

Introduction

There is growing evidence of the importance of effective parenting in generating positive outcomes for children and young people. In Ireland we have no agreed approach to supporting parents and our efforts in this area are predominantly based on intervening to remedy deficits rather than building on strengths in a timely way. This paper outlines why effective parenting is so important and sets out the basis on which a strategic plan could be developed that will enable Ireland and Northern Ireland to become leaders in valuing and supporting parents in their parenting role.

“Parenting Support is a policy which is expanding rapidly, especially in Europe but elsewhere also”

Vision

The island of Ireland will actively value and support parents in their parenting role to achieve better outcomes for children, parents and families.

Why parenting matters

While debates continue around the type and quality of programmes that should be in place, and the balance between universal and targeted support, the research makes it clear that the quality of parenting influences outcomes for children and young people and that there is a need to plan services which will empower parents to maximise their parenting knowledge and skills. The following are key messages from the literature on parenting:

- The quality of the parent-child relationship is associated with a number of outcomes including self-regulation and behaviour, engagement and participation, mental health, academic achievement and the ability to develop and sustain other relationships over a life time. A negative parenting style is strongly associated with aggressive behaviour, delinquency, depression, anxiety and high risk behaviours e.g. smoking, drug/alcohol misuse
- Parenting is an important mediator in redressing the effects of poverty and disadvantage
- A supportive home learning environment is positively associated with children’s early achievements and well-being and influences social mobility
- Warm, attentive, stimulating parenting is strongly associated with children’s positive social, emotional, cognitive and physical development
- Children who have benefited from good parenting have a greater chance of succeeding in school, of getting jobs and reducing the chance of criminal behaviour
- Parents are key mediators in developing and supporting desirable health related behaviours among children and addressing undesirable behaviours. With the worrying rise in childhood obesity across the island, there is a need to mobilise parents to address this problem now.
- Changes in the family only occur if we empower parents, and making decisions on their behalf will not have long term benefits. As it is evident from research that parents need to be motivated and actively involved, parental support needs to embrace the principle that positive parenting must be mutually beneficial both to parents and to children.
An evidenced based approach
As significant as the nature of parenting and parenting support and how it is delivered, is the evidence-base that underpins the approaches and the rigour with which they are implemented. This suggests the need to ensure that parenting support maintains a clear outcomes focus at both child and parent level.

Evidence from scientific research, which connects effective parenting to improved outcomes for children and young people, indicates that it is very important that family support (including parenting support) strategies, policy and practice have an integrated and participatory approach. It is also vital to recognise that parents, through their responsibilities, are central to realising children’s rights within the context of family life. It is also recognised that governments have a responsibility to support parents in their parenting role further underpinned since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and other legislative and constitutional frameworks. Parenting support policy, therefore, is seen as a pathway to ensure that children’s rights are fulfilled.

What do we mean by parenting support?
Ensuring that all parents are appropriately supported and resourced to care for their children, is central to realising rights for all children and young people and preventing child maltreatment. In this regard we mean children and young people of all ages, regardless of their needs.

Whilst acknowledging the huge significance of the wider context in which parenting takes place\textsuperscript{14} the work of this special interest group focuses particularly on interventions that support parents in their parenting role. As is outlined in this document, we are concerned with raising awareness about and promoting support for parenting, rather than a broader-based, more general, support for parents and families.

The concept of parenting support has evolved considerably in recent years and is understood in various ways. For the purposes of this group, we interpret parenting support to be practice approaches, services and interventions that:

- Empower parents by developing parenting confidence and competence;
- Enable parents to foster optimal child well-being and development outcomes;
- Increase enjoyment and satisfaction of parenting.

Such practice approaches, services and interventions may be provided in a broad range of ways, by a spectrum of different practitioners and at varying levels of structure and formality. The definition of the field by Professor Mary Daly encompasses the breadth of what we are promoting.

"Parenting Support refers to a range of information, support, education, training and counselling and other measures or services that focus on influencing how parents understand and carry out their parenting role"\textsuperscript{15}
The outcomes we are seeking:

1. A Strategic Approach:
   - A resourced national policy framework for parenting supports in Ireland and Northern Ireland either integrated into the policy framework (e.g. for children and young people) or as a stand-alone strategy/framework (e.g. National Parenting Strategy, Scotland 2012).
   - A coordinated approach to ensure that parenting support services are available to all families who want or need them, through a combination of universal and targeted supports.

2. Policy Commitment:
   - A higher value placed on parenting, with parenting a recognised issue on the National Policy agenda.
   - A widespread recognition that the State has a role in supporting parenting.
   - A widespread recognition that parenting supports should be seen as normal.

3. Specific Actions:
   - A range of publicly financed parenting programmes and supports provided through a planned and strategic approach.
   - A requirement that publicly supported parenting programmes are evidence-based or evidence-informed.
   - Identification of mainstream services through which parenting supports and practice approaches can be delivered.
   - A quality framework for delivering parent support should be developed
   - Cross-sectoral and cross departmental (Justice, Education, Health and Children) cooperation and collaboration between parenting programmes/supports and health services, early years, community development, youth services and family and educational supports.
   - Public information campaigns emphasising the importance of parenting, with practical messages and suggestions for parents that are specifically designed to be non-stigmatising.

In summary if we support parents we achieve:\(^6\)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits for Parents</th>
<th>Benefits for Children</th>
<th>Benefits for Society</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Better family relationships</td>
<td>Better child/parent bonding and attachment</td>
<td>Reduced social costs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Better mental and emotional health</td>
<td>Better social, emotional and cognitive outcomes</td>
<td>Effective use of resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Better socio-economic prospects</td>
<td>Better health outcomes i.e. reduction in childhood obesity</td>
<td>Productive, well educated workforce</td>
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<tr>
<td>More active community participation.</td>
<td>Better self-identity and self-esteem</td>
<td>Reduction of inequalities</td>
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<td>More knowledgeable about their child’s development.</td>
<td>Better resiliency and school readiness</td>
<td>Promoting Active Citizenship</td>
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<td>Better home learning environment.</td>
<td>Better outcomes in later life across a range of psycho-social dimensions</td>
<td>Developing Human and Social Capital</td>
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<td>Increased understanding of the importance of play and interaction with their children.</td>
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<td>Improved cross-departmental and cross-sectoral co-operation</td>
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Background

In December 2010 the Centre for Effective Services established The Special Interest Group – Supporting parents in their parenting role. The group was established to:

- Create a unique space for developing thinking about issues relevant to parents in their parenting role and children and young people’s wellbeing.
- Build bridges between people, groups and agencies, and add value to existing work and networks.
- Develop a strategy that ensures Ireland is a place where parenting is highly valued and supported.

This all-island group currently includes agency Directors or CEOs, funders and public officials, professional bodies and practitioners engaged in direct work and academics and professional researchers in the relevant sectors.

Member List

1. Archways, Aileen O’Donoghue, CEO
2. Barnardos, Suzanne Connolly (Marijka Walsh), Director of Children’s Services
3. Barnardos NI, Lynda Wilson, Director of Children’s Services
4. Centre for Effective Services, Dr Stella Owens & Michelle Harris
5. Child and Family Research Centre, NUI, Galway, Liam Coen
6. Daughters of Charity Child and Family Service, Liam Ó’Dálaigh, Director of Services
7. Family Support Agency (DCYA), Bill O’Dea, Chief Executive
8. Gingerbread, NI, Marie Cavanagh, Director
9. Health Services Executive, Child Health and Screening, Mary Roche, Project Manager
10. Health & Social Care Board NI, Gerry Conway, Commissioning Lead for Family Support, Early Years
11. Home-Start NI, Heather Knox, Director
12. Irish College of General Practitioners, Dr Roddy Quinn
13. Katharine Howard Foundation, Dr Noelle Spring, Development Director
14. Lifestart Foundation, Orla Tuohy, National Training & Promotional Officer Parenting Support
15. Marte Meo Training Centre, Colette O’Donovan, Co-ordinator
16. MenCap NI, Una Brown (Colette Slevin), Development Manager
17. Midlands Area Parenting Partnerships, Conor Owens, Programme Director
18. National Directorate Children & Families Services, Dr Aisling Gillen, National Specialist Family Support
19. Northside Partnership, Noel Kelly, Programme Manager, Preparing for Life
20. NUI, Maynooth, Dr Sinead McGilloway, Principal Investigator, Incredible Years Evaluation
21. One Family, Karen Kiernan, Director
22. OPEN, Frances Byrne, CEO
23. Parenting NI, Pip Jaffa, Chief Executive,
24. Parents Plus Dr John Sharry, Founder and Director
25. Start Strong, Toby Wolfe, Acting Director
26. Teen Parent Support Programme, Margaret Morris, National Co-ordinator
27. Youngballymun, Hazel O’Byrne, Projects Officer
National Outcomes for Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ireland Outcomes</th>
<th>Northern Ireland Outcomes</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Healthy, both physically and mentally</td>
<td>1. Healthy</td>
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<td>2. Supported in active learning</td>
<td>2. Enjoying, learning and achieving</td>
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<td>3. Safe from accidental and intentional harm and secure in the immediate and wider physical environment</td>
<td>3. Living in safety and with stability</td>
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<td>4. Economically secure</td>
<td>4. Experiencing economic and environmental wellbeing</td>
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<td>5. Part of positive networks of family, friends, neighbours and the community and Included and participating in society</td>
<td>5. Contributing positively to community and society</td>
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<td>6. Living in a society which respects their rights</td>
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Endnotes

1 For the purposes of this paper, parents refers to persons with parental authority or responsibility. Parenting refers to all roles undertaken by parents or carers in order to bring up children. Parenting is centred on parent child interactions and entails rights and duties for the child’s development and fulfilment. (Council of Europe Recommendation 19, 2006)
3 Ibid
7 Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) 2012 Parenting style influences child development and social mobility, Evidence briefing
8 Ibid
12 Ibid
14 Almost all aspects of public policy impact on some dimension of parenting, from healthcare and housing provision to employment law, social welfare allowances to delivery of education. In this respect, the administration of many state services and transfers could be argued to be supportive of parents or otherwise.