



# Parenting support in Europe

## Executive summary

### Introduction

Much of the debate about work–life balance and the well-being of children has focused on issues such as childcare services, flexible work arrangements and child allowances. While the influence of parenting on the well-being and future opportunities of children is widely acknowledged, it is only recently that parenting support and education have come to be viewed as a social investment that contributes towards reducing parental stress and helping parents to manage work and family commitments successfully. Good parenting skills have a highly positive impact on the physical, emotional and intellectual development of children. Parenting support can promote the health and well-being of children by showing parents how to identify mental health problems or giving them advice about nutrition. It can also give guidance to parents on how to improve the behaviour and achievements of their children at school. Corporal punishment can be considered as an extreme form of poor parenting: parenting courses teach parents how to solve conflicts at home in a constructive and affirmative manner. Parenting support and education helps to achieve all these goals by empowering parents and improving their skills through counselling, training courses, awareness campaigns and learning materials.

As part of its ongoing research on families and working life, Eurofound recently carried out work in the areas of parenting support and education. The resulting report provides comparable information about parenting support and education services for families with children, in particular services for families with children of pre-school age. The report draws on information gathered in a literature review and on seven country reports that examine service provision in Austria, Belgium, Estonia, Hungary, Ireland, Portugal and Sweden. Each country report includes case studies of services that have been used as a guideline to determine what works well.

### Policy context

International developments in the field of parenting support have steered policy initiatives at national level. The ratification of the 1990 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in Sweden led to parenting initiatives that have impacted positively on the health and well-being of children in that country. During the International Year of the Family (1994), a working group on parent education was formed at federal level in Austria, leading to the development of a legal basis for the financial support of parent education. Council of Europe Recommendation 19 (2006) to member states on policies to support positive parenting has influenced the establishment of new laws and programmes in Belgium and Estonia.

The European Union is also paying increasing attention to parenting support, mainly through research projects and mutual learning activities. However, parenting support has played little or no part in the debate on early childhood education and care, child poverty or social dialogue on the reconciliation of professional, private and family life.

### Key findings

Tackling existing preconceptions about the aims of parenting support and the intended users of the services is a first step towards boosting the take-up of services. It appears that many parents are reluctant to use the services either because they are afraid of being labelled as ‘bad parents’ or because they believe that this type of support is only for families at risk of social exclusion. One way in which the providers of these services try to increase take-up is by adopting a ‘skills improvement’ approach rather than a ‘deficit view’ that tends to invalidate parents’ current skills.

In terms of the roll-out of services, experts and organisations working with families and children advocate 'progressive universalism' (i.e. support available for all, with more support for those who need it most) as the most effective and less stigmatising form of delivery. When it comes to reaching specific groups, services that adopt a strategy whereby the service providers go directly to the family home ('go structure') have proven particularly useful.

Research has shown that there is still a lot of work to be done to encourage the involvement of fathers in parenting support programmes. If current low participation levels are not improved, parenting support risks reinforcing a family model in which the mother is recognised as the 'certified' child-rearing expert in the home.

The personnel delivering these services is very varied, including not only social educators, psychologists, social workers, lawyers and family mediators, but also health professionals such as maternity and public health nurses and doctors. Many courses are delivered by volunteers or staff hired on a project basis. In many cases, this means that there is a high staff turnover, which can have an adverse impact on the relational skills of staff – a crucial factor in parenting support.

Some countries have successfully developed training in parenting support. The National Occupational Standards for Work with Parents in the UK, for example, are used to identify training gaps, establish performance indicators, and provide the platform for appraisals and job descriptions. In Austria, parent support practitioners are required to undergo a 500-hour training programme that is focused on parenting education.

Evaluation is an issue for many service providers, as they often lack incentives or the staff and financial resources necessary to measure outcomes in a comprehensive manner. Quality control tends to be done through guidelines for funding or peer pressure (e.g. the Open Method of Coordination among Swedish local authorities). Standardised programmes, which are popular in many European countries, have often been subject to formal types of evaluation such as randomised control trials. Some experts have criticised the emphasis on formal evaluation as there is a risk of discarding promising practices.

## Policy pointers

- Defining clearly what constitutes parenting support, its boundaries and goals is crucial for the successful delivery of services. As parenting support touches on a number of areas such as health, education and social welfare, it is necessary to establish clear delimitations about the role of services in order to avoid gaps and overlaps in provision.
- In order to improve the take-up of services and meet the needs of service users, it is important to make available a wide range of forms of support.
- Lowering the cost of services and offering childcare facilities at the service location has also encouraged more parents to participate in parenting courses. Peer groups are a form of support that is often demanded by parents: this has proven successful in empowering them while at the same time contributing to social cohesion. In some municipalities in Sweden, the take-up of programmes by men and migrants has increased through the hiring of staff from these groups.
- Improving the qualifications of the workforce involves reducing the staff turnover and securing funding for projects. This includes not only formal qualifications but also learning how to establish a smooth working relationship with parents.
- Parenting support is often provided in the form of standardised international programmes. These programmes are evidence-based and have usually been subject to comprehensive evaluations such as randomised controlled trials. However, in order to be effective these programmes need to be adapted to the specific needs of their target group. In some cases, international programmes have been adapted with the help of research institutes and through carrying out surveys and needs assessment studies.

### Further information

The report *Parenting support in Europe* will be available from January 2013 at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef1270.htm>

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