

Proposal for an Action Plan on Parenting

Introduction

The Special Interest Group on Parenting¹ warmly welcomes the commitment made by the Government in *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures*, the Children and Young People's Policy Framework, to develop a "high-level policy statement on Parenting and Family Support to guide the provision of universal evidence-informed parenting supports". This is a theme that the Special Interest Group has been working on collectively for a number of years and therefore we see this as an important development.

In this document we set out proposals for the objectives and content of the policy statement. We invite the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to meet with the Special Interest Group to discuss these proposals in more detail.

We believe the Government's commitment to develop a standalone statement on parenting is the right way forward because:

- The policy statement will be a visible demonstration of the value placed by the Government on parents and parenting.
- The statement will be an effective way to make clear that parenting supports should be seen as normal – and can help all families.
- Parenting matters for all children of all ages, and it impacts on all five of the national outcomes for children and on all aspects of children's lives. The Children and Young People's Policy Framework rightly presents supporting parents as the first 'Transformational Goal' to achieve positive outcomes for children. Each of the other children's strategies being prepared by Government can address some aspects of parenting support but will not be able to address the full breadth of parenting supports. For this reason, a dedicated policy statement on parenting is needed.

The policy statement is an opportunity for the Government to make clear its commitment to parents, who are at the centre of children's lives, and to set out the ways in which the State and other actors can support parents in their parenting role. The statement should be broad in scope, encompassing supports for all parents through a combination of universal and targeted measures, and drawing in the wide range of Government departments and agencies that are relevant. The statement has the potential to bring about better use of resources, in particular through ensuring a coordinated approach to parenting supports.

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)

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Evidence

The evidence shows that parenting plays a key role in influencing child development and behaviour. There is now a suite of fully evidence based and evidence informed prevention and early intervention programmes and practice approaches which support positive parenting. There is also a clear and ever growing evidence base which indicates that appropriate interventions and supports, when implemented early in childhood, can improve child wellbeing, health (including childhood obesity) and family functioning, and reduce the risks of poor long-term outcomes. Such interventions have also been shown to significantly reduce the potential for early childhood problems to remain into late childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

Principles

The Special Interest Group proposes that the following key principles should shape the policy statement and any actions that follow it:

- Focus on prevention and early intervention.
- Address parenting of children across the life course – ante-natally through to young adulthood.
- Support parenting of children who live in different contexts, circumstances and family types, including looked-after children, children with disabilities, and children living in diverse families.
- Adopt an outcomes-focused approach, addressing the five national outcomes (Active and Healthy; Achieving in all areas of Learning and Development; Safe and Protected from Harm; Economic Security and Opportunity; Connected, Respected and Contributing).
- Be strongly rooted in evidence.
- Promote progressive universalism, providing high quality universal services for all with targeting of resources for those requiring additional supports along a continuum of services.
- Aim to normalise / de-stigmatise parenting supports.
- Take account of the benefits and return on investments through prevention and early intervention and through supporting parents.
- Build on existing resources and services, reforming mainstream services, and achieving cost-efficiency.
- Ensure that outcomes and impacts are measurable and measured.
- Promote quality assurance in the provision of parenting supports, and lead the development of quality standards in parenting supports.
- Demand a high degree of accountability at all levels.
- Foster integrated and co-ordinated service delivery.
- Ensure that engagement with parents is meaningful and appropriate.
- Institute mechanisms to hear the voice of parents as active participants in policy development and service delivery.

Implementation

A national steering committee should be established to drive and monitor the implementation of the Parenting Policy Statement and any actions arising from it. The steering committee should have responsibility for: developing an implementation plan, identifying indicators of progress, regularly monitoring implementation, and publishing an annual progress statement. The steering committee should include representation from all relevant Government departments, agencies and community and voluntary sector organisations, as well as parents.

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Areas for Action

The Special Interest Group has developed a number of key themes that the Parenting Policy Statement should address and outlines below proposals for consideration.

1. Integrated planning
2. Reconfiguration of resources
3. Building on 'what works'
4. Inter-agency workforce development, training & support
5. Data and knowledge collection and dissemination

1. Integrated Planning

This Parenting Policy Statement offers Government the opportunity to ensure the integrated planning of policies that impact on parenting, drawing together different policy areas and different Government Departments and agencies in a single document. The Parenting Policy Statement provides the opportunity to set out an agreed vision, objectives, priorities, and plans, with associated arrangements for monitoring and evaluation, on a cross-Government basis, and create mechanisms to ensure that different policies and actions work together effectively:

- As parenting impacts on children of all ages, the Parenting Policy Statement should cut across all the age-specific and context-specific strategies being developed by DCYA and other Departments, including the Early Years Strategy, the Youth Strategy, etc. While parenting will appear in each of the strategies, parenting supports at different ages are interconnected, and the Plan is needed to draw together parenting-related policies from within each strategy.
- The Parenting Policy Statement should include a plan to draw together the range of services provided to support parents, e.g. by Public Health Nurses and wider Primary Care Teams, Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, Maternity Hospitals, Schools (e.g. Home School Community Liaison), Early Years Services, Early Intervention Teams, Family Resource Centres and Community and Voluntary sector organisations, as well as the delivery of specific evidence based and evidence informed parenting programmes and practices.
- It should encompass both universal and targeted programmes and approaches. Universal approaches have been shown to be effective and are important in normalising and de-stigmatising parenting supports, which is essential if there is to be a high take-up.

Coordination is needed at local level – drawing together statutory, community and voluntary provision – and the Parenting Policy Statement should specify the local structures responsible. A key existing structure for local planning and coordination of parenting actions and approaches is the Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSCs). Each CYPSC should have a sub-group focused on parenting either as a stand-alone group or as part of the Prevention, Partnership and Family Support sub group of the CYPSC. The work of the sub group should inform the development of the Children and Young People's Plans for each CYPSC.

Key actions:

- The establishment of a committee to drive implementation of the Policy at national level
- The Parenting Policy Statement and any actions arising from it should include the provision of normalising and de-stigmatising universal and targeted parenting programmes and practice approaches, and should encompass all agencies that provide parenting supports
- Each CYPSC should have responsibility for co-ordination of parenting supports at local county level

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2. Reconfiguration of Resources

A cost and resource efficient system to support parents requires a reconfiguration and shifting of resources in an equitable way that includes universal and targeted provision, at national and local level. A resource-efficient approach to the Parenting Policy Statement requires supports for parenting to be integrated and implemented through existing services and systems. The very nature of parenting is such that a variety of organisations and sectors have a role to play. There is potential for a broad spectrum of resources to be activated and coordinated to deliver more informed and focused parenting support including health services, child and family services, the community and voluntary sector, local authorities and educational agencies.

Whilst various practitioners are involved in supporting parenting (e.g. through the Public Health Nursing Service, Family Support Workers, Home School Community Liaison Teachers and the community and voluntary sectors), this practice has historically tended to be fragmented, varying significantly across communities. There is little coherence in terms of what is available, development of practice, the quality of provision and monitoring of outcomes. Central to the successful implementation of a Parenting Policy Statement will be reconfiguring what is already in place to work more effectively through coordinated commissioning, planning and work force development. Integrated planning of how services are commissioned and delivered is complex and requires inter-organisational cooperation at various levels in the system along with strong local collaboration. This can be supported by guidance and a clear mandate, and the role of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency will be critical in this respect.

Working with and through existing service structures also affords significant advantages in terms of embedding and sustainability of change. By leveraging existing resources to change 'business-as-usual', reformed work practices have the potential to deliver improved outcomes for children and families at minimal additional cost. However, we also know that investment is only cost effective if it delivers positive outcomes. For this reason, the integration of evidence-based and evidence-informed approaches to supporting parenting must be at the heart of the Parenting Policy Statement.

Key actions:

- Undertake a review of all investment in parenting supports, stratified according to parenting stage and context (pregnancy and infancy; early childhood; middle childhood; adolescence and early adulthood; family type; children with additional needs etc), across the spectrum of agencies and organisations working in this field to ascertain current level of resources and gaps
- Identification of mainstream services through which parenting supports and practice approaches can be delivered
- Develop evidence-based and evidence-informed practice partnership models to maximise return on existing investments (e.g. Speech and Language Therapists developing capacity of early year's practitioners; Public Health Nurses working with Family Resource Centres; HSCLs and Education & Training Boards)
- Look at potential for models which have been shown to be effective to be supported and replicated in other contexts

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3. Building on 'What Works'

Since 2004 a number of services and programmes have been funded and introduced in Ireland in an effort to assess the effectiveness of prevention and early intervention approaches, including supports for parenting. A large number of these programmes and initiatives have been the subject of rigorous evaluation and have demonstrated positive improvements in:

- Child behaviour;
- Parental self efficacy – confidence in parenting;
- Parenting skills;
- Levels of parental stress;
- Parental mental well-being;
- Social support for parents; and
- The home learning environment.

These positive improvements were achieved through the use of a range of different approaches including home visiting, group sessions and individual one to one work.

That the majority of these proven programmes have been delivered within community based settings and by community based agencies and personnel, sometimes in partnership with statutory services, is important and highlights the existing skill sets and interagency collaborative practice and energy available to us.

In Ireland, we have also seen evidence-based and evidence-informed provision offered on both a universal and targeted basis i.e. either to all families, to particularly vulnerable families or to families with a child experiencing a specific difficulty. Many of these initiatives have had a parenting component. The evaluation outcomes produced to date have confirmed the powerful influence of proven programmes in terms of achieving and sustaining positive child and parental outcomes.

In addition there is also a growing body of research to show that evidence-based and evidence-informed parenting programmes are highly cost effective. One cost benefit analysis carried out in Ireland on the impact of an evidence based parenting programme showed that it delivered savings of 4 euro for every euro spent. These potential savings cannot be underestimated given our current economic climate.

Research in Ireland and internationally has now consistently demonstrated that evidence-based and evidence-informed approaches to supporting parents can be effectively and efficiently delivered by local organisations, with significant benefits accruing to children, families and indeed communities more generally.

Key actions:

- A range of evidence-based and evidence-informed programmes and approaches should be made available to all parents through local community agencies and settings e.g. Primary Care Teams, Public Health Nurses, Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, Maternity Hospitals, Schools, Early Years Services, Family Resource Centres and Community and Voluntary sector organisations.
- Public information campaigns emphasising the importance of parenting, with practical messages and suggestions for parents that are specifically designed to be non-stigmatising.

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4. Inter-agency Workforce Development, Training and Support

To facilitate the delivery of evidence-based and evidence-informed programmes and services within local communities, a national interagency workforce development plan for parenting supports needs to be developed, building on the work of the HSE and Tusla Workforce Development Teams. The implementation of the workforce development plan should be monitored by a committee that includes representatives from the HSE, Tusla, the Child and Family Agency and community and voluntary sector organisations.

The workforce development plan needs to be adequately resourced to ensure that the appropriate level of training and support is available to all professionals who work with parents. The workforce development plan needs to be mindful of the relevant principles, and facilitate the integration of the relevant quality standards in relation to working with and supporting all those who are in a parenting role. A set of standards needs to be developed that highlights best practice for all professionals working with parents.

The workforce development plan should have the following features:

- Provide local and regional inter-disciplinary and inter-professional training opportunities that include practitioners from a range of different agencies and organisations working with children, parents and families.
- Enable 'Learning Communities' of practitioners to communicate on a regular basis to facilitate dissemination of information and shared understanding.
- Be linked to Continuous Professional Development (CPD) initiatives and existing national accreditation frameworks.
- Be connected to relevant Universities and Institutes of Technology.
- Be linked to web-based training and CPD resources.
- Be integrated into organisational supervision and CPD frameworks.
- Have an appropriate evaluation mechanism.

The workforce development plan should include the following training initiatives:

- An introduction to the Family Support National Service Delivery Framework including Prevention Partnership & Family Support, Meitheal, the Parenting Support Strategy and 50 Key Messages, for all practitioners working in parenting support.
- Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2011, basic training and refresher courses.
- Effective engagement and strategies for working with parents particularly where other factors are impacting on parenting capacity – mental illness, substance abuse, learning disability etc.
- A range of evidence-based and evidence-informed parenting support programmes and approaches across the lifecourse.
- A range of evidence-based and evidence-informed parenting support programmes that are designed for carers parenting in different contexts, for example, teen parents, lone parents and parents with mental health difficulties.

Key actions:

- Development and roll out of national quality standards for all professionals working with parents.
- Training in interagency working for all professionals working with parents to promote information sharing and communication between professionals and the sharing of good practice.
- Workforce development plan to equip practitioners with the skills and capacities to implement evidence-based and evidence-informed practices and programmes.

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5. Data and Knowledge Collection and Dissemination

Knowledge, evidence and data collection, collation and dissemination are critical to understanding and developing a national picture of children's lives and those of their parents and families. This information and data helps to inform policy, research and practice and ensures that decision making is informed by evidence. A number of large and small scale policy and practice initiatives currently being delivered and implemented in Ireland are contributing to a burgeoning evidence base about effective interventions, approaches and programmes to support parents. Examples of these are:

Planning and Service Delivery

- Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative (PEII) – an evidence base of evaluation findings that include parenting programmes and approaches that work directly or indirectly with parents.
- Area Based Childhood Programme – informed by the PEII, selected sites of socio-economic disadvantage will be delivering evidence-based and evidence-informed parenting programmes and approaches.
- Parenting Support Initiative – funded by the Katharine Howard Foundation, a small grants programme for organisations and services delivering parenting support to parents of children aged 0 to 3 years.

Research

- National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives (2011 – 2016).
- Growing Up in Ireland Longitudinal Study – producing evidence about key parental and child indicators to inform policy and practice decisions.
- State of the Nation's Children Reports – producing key bi-annual information about the national child well-being indicators.

This submission to inform the Parenting Policy Statement and any actions that follow it, recommends that knowledge, data and findings emerging from all of the above and other initiatives should be shared nationally and locally to inform policy and service development. Platforms like learning communities/communities of practice/conferences/seminars focused specifically on parenting should be developed as a mechanism to disseminate evidence and knowledge and to share learning and good practice.

Key actions:

- Research unit of DCYA should have responsibility for co-ordinating data and information emanating from the above sources, collating and disseminating this to inform service delivery and policy development.
- Agencies and structures operating at local level, for example CYPSCs, should be encouraged to evaluate and review parenting initiatives and should feed findings from local initiatives to national overarching evaluations and advisory committees where appropriate.
- DCYA in conjunction with the Special Interest Group should host an annual parenting support conference where learning from initiatives can be shared.