

Position Paper: A collaborative all-island approach towards Parenting Support

1. Introduction

The *Parenting Network* is a unique all-island network of agency directors/chief executive officers, practitioners, public officials, academics, trainers and policy influencers who are committed to seeking ways to improve family wellbeing in Ireland through **Parenting Support** as defined below¹. The Network was established in December 2010 with the support of the Centre for Effective Services. (See list of members in Appendix A.)

Parenting Support

“Parenting Support refers to a range of information, support, education, training and counselling. There are also other measures or services that focus on influencing how parents understand and carry out their parenting role.”¹

The important influence of a parent’s love and caring support for their child, particularly during their formative years, cannot be over-emphasised. While most parents want to do their best for their children, parenting is one of the most difficult tasks they will undertake during their lifetime. Parenting can be particularly difficult for families living in challenging circumstances such as: poverty, poor housing, anti-social conditions, lone-parenting, isolation, domestic violence, substance misuse, bereavement, illness, disability, etc. Such circumstances can severely compromise their ability to parent effectively, including their own adverse experience of being parented. This paper advocates for a Parenting Support Strategy incorporating a range of approaches to ameliorate against such adverse circumstances that parents may find themselves living under from time-to-time or in some cases, unfortunately, more enduringly.

2. What do we mean by Parenting Support?

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

- Empower parents by developing parenting confidence and competence;
- Enable parents to foster optimal child wellbeing and development outcomes through knowledge of children’s development and of parenting skills/competencies.
- Increase enjoyment and satisfaction of parenting.

Such practice approaches, services and interventions may be provided in a range of ways, by a spectrum of different practitioners and at varying levels of structure and formality.

3. Why Parenting Support matters

There is considerable evidence, both nationally and internationally, of the importance of effective parenting in generating positive short, medium and longer-term outcomes for children and young people, as well as for their parents and guardians² and society. There are many good examples of parenting supports and services as well as advances in developing more co-ordinated approaches to parenting (for example in Republic of Ireland (ROI) through Tusla’s National Parenting Support Strategy), which aims to respond to parents at different levels of need and across the life course. This paper underlines the importance of supporting effective parenting and sets out the basis on which a strategic plan can be developed that will

enable both the ROI and Northern Ireland (NI) to become world leaders in valuing and supporting parentsⁱ in their parenting role. (See Appendix B for more information on why parenting support matters.) Our vision is outlined below.

Our Vision

That all those who parent in Ireland will be proactively supported and valued in their parenting role to achieve better outcomes for children, parents, families and the wider society.

4. Our mission

The Network has been 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.
- Positively influence **research, policy and practice** in the ROI and NI to contribute to improved outcomes for children and families.
- **Build bridges** between people, groups and agencies, and add value to existing work and networks enabling progressive universalism in delivering parenting and family support programmes.
- Advocate for **appropriate levels of accessible parenting support** to be available to carers, mindful of 'ages and stages' and the different contexts in which parenting takes place.
- **Support the development of strategies** that ensure that the ROI and NI are places where parenting is highly valued and supported.
- Support a **cross-sectoral, cross-Departmental, interdisciplinary and collaborative approach** towards valuing and supporting parents in their parenting role.

5. Our Goals and Priorities

5.1. Effecting strategic change

We are seeking:

- A national policy and well-resourced implementation plan for parenting supports in both the ROI and NI, either integrated into their respective broader policy frameworks (e.g. for children and young people) or as a stand-alone strategy (e.g. National Parenting Strategy, Scotland 2012).
- A strategic and coordinated approach to ensure that parenting services are available to all families who want or need them, through a combination of universal and targeted supports. Additionally, parenting support should be inclusive and recognise the diversity of family forms in today's society, as outlined in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs' (DCYA) high level policy statement,³ as well as the NI Family Matters Strategy and the new Family and Parenting Strategy (draft).

5.2. Enhancing Policy Commitment

We are seeking:

- A higher value to be placed on parenting, with parenting as a recognised issue on the national policy agendas in both NI and ROI.
- A widespread recognition that both the NI and ROI governments have a role in supporting parenting.
- A widespread recognition that parenting supports should be viewed as normal and that although all parents need some kind of support, some parents need more support than others (i.e. Progressive Universalism).

ⁱ For the purposes of this paper, *parents* refer 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)

5.3 Specific Actions

We are seeking to influence the establishment of:

- A range of publicly financed parenting programmes and supports provided through a planned, participatory and integrated approach.
- A requirement that publicly supported parenting programmes are evidence-based and/or evidence-informed.
- The identification of appropriately resourced mainstream services through which parenting supports and practice approaches can be delivered.
- Public information campaigns emphasising the importance of parenting, with practical messages and suggestions for parents that are specifically designed to be non-stigmatising.
- Cross-sectoral and cross Departmental cooperation and collaboration.
- A quality capacity building framework for delivering parenting support, incorporating a multi-agency approach which includes an investment in the education, training and coaching of practitioners.

6. Policy Context

Government Departments across the island of Ireland have a responsibility for improving outcomes and wellbeing for children and families as articulated within the following key documents:

- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (ratified 1990)
- Family Matters 2009 (NI)
- Better Outcomes Brighter Futures 2014 (ROI) *specifically to target child poverty*
- Children's Services Cooperation Act 2015 (NI)
- The Child Poverty Strategy 2016-2019 (NI)
- Programme for Government 2016-2021 (NI)
- Family & Parenting Support Strategy (under consultation 2018) (NI)
- * First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2018⁴ (ROI)

The emphasis on an outcomes-based approach towards planning in relation to children, parenting and families' issues in ROI and NI continues to be an important influence in relation to policy design and implementation, hence the commonalities identified within both jurisdictions for targeting:

Ireland Outcomes:

1. Active and Healthy: physical and mental wellbeing
2. Achieving in all areas of learning and development
3. Safe and protected from harm
4. Economic security and opportunity
5. Connected, respected and contributing to their world

Northern Ireland Outcomes:

1. Healthy
2. Enjoying, learning and achieving
3. Living in safety and with stability
4. Experiencing economic and environmental wellbeing
5. Contributing positively to community and society
6. Living in a society which respects their rights

7. Principles underpinning investment in Parenting Support

7.1 An evidenced-based approach

The quality of parenting and parenting support is of considerable importance and so too is the evidence-base that underpins the programmes/approaches and the rigour with which they are implemented/delivered. This highlights the need to ensure that practitioners, who are implementing and delivering parenting supports, maintain a clear focus on outcomes at both the child and parent level.

Existing evidence, linking effective parenting to improved outcomes for children and young people, indicates that it is very important that parenting support strategies and practice involve an integrated and participatory approach⁵.

7.2. Children's Rights

It is also vital to recognise that parents 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 in line with the UNCRC and other legislative and constitutional frameworks. Parenting support policy, therefore, is seen as a pathway to ensure that children's rights are fulfilled.

7.3 The Quality of Relationships

The nature of the relationships between parenting support providers and individuals/groups who are in contact with them is central to people's perception of what constitutes quality. The qualities that service users and carers are looking for in relations with parenting support services are above all human qualities. While such qualities depend on the individual, of course, they also are a measure of the culture of the organisation/service responsible for providing the service. Parenting support must therefore be offered and delivered through relationships which are based on principles of empowerment, respect, confidentiality, courtesy, honesty and empathy.

8. Outcomes from Investing in Parenting Support

Research across the world has indicated that there are numerous short, medium and longer-term outcomes from investing in appropriate, effective and timely ways in parenting support including:

Positive outcomes for Children:

- Stronger child/parent bonding and attachment

- Improved social, emotional and cognitive outcomes
- Better health outcomes (e.g. reduction in childhood obesity)
- Enhanced self-esteem
- Greater resilience and school readiness
- More positive outcomes in later life across a range of psychosocial dimensions attributable to confident, competent adults.

Positive outcomes for Parents:

- Stronger family relationships
- Better mental and emotional health
- Better socio-economic prospects
- More active community participation
- Greater knowledge about their child's development
- A more supportive home learning environment
- Increased understanding of the importance of play and interaction with their children.

Benefits for Society

- Reduced health and social costs
- More effective use of resources
- Productive, well educated workforce
- Reduction of inequalities
- Promoting Active Citizenship
- Developing human and social capital
- Improved cross-departmental and cross-sectoral co-operation

Whilst acknowledging the significance of the wider context in which parenting takes placeⁱⁱ, the work of The Parenting Network focuses, in particular, on building on what works to *proactively support parents in their parenting role: a range of information, support, education, training and counselling.*

*Notably, the ROI Early Years strategy - *First 5 Strategy: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families*, launched in December 2018, has committed to major initiatives including the improvement of parenting supports, family leave arrangements, children's health services and early learning and care services. Strategic actions associated with these initiatives include:

- *Parental care for children particularly during the first year of a child's life*
- *Information and resources for parents*
- *Tiered model of parenting support*
- *Playful home learning environments*
- *Parental engagement in children's early learning*

ⁱⁱ 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.

Appendix A

Members of the Steering Group of the Parenting Network (March 2019)

1. Charlene Brooks (exec group)	Parenting NI, CEO
2. Dr. Rosemary Crosse	UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUIG
3. Liz Kavanagh (exec group)	Barnardos NI, Ass. Director of Children's Services
4. Karen Kiernan (exec group)	One Family, CEO
5. Liz King	National Forum of Family Resource Centres (FRC), Manager, FRC Sligo
6. Professor Maria Lohan	Queens University Belfast, School of Nursing and Midwifery
7. Maura Mason	Western Area Childcare Partnership NI, Manager
8. Prof. Sinead McGilloway	National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM) Centre for Mental Health and Community Research, Director
9. Dr. Tracey Monson	Daughters of Charity & Family Service, Director of Services
10. Dr. Alison Montgomery	Centre for Effective Services (CES) NI, Project Specialist
11. Margaret Morris	Teen Parents Support Programme, National Coordinator
12. Dr. Colm O'Doherty	Institute of Technology (IT) Tralee & Parenting & Family Studies Alliance, IT Athlone
13. Aileen O'Donoghue (exec group)	Archways, CEO
14. Dr. Stella Owens	Tusla, Empowering Practitioners and Practice Initiative (EPPI) Project Manager
15. Dr. Roddy Quinn (Chair)	Irish College of GPs
16. Dr. John Sharry	Parents Plus, Founder & Director
17. Dr. Noelle Spring (exec group)	Katharine Howard Foundation, Director
18. Orla Tuohy	Lifestart Foundation, National Parenting Advisor

Appendix B

More on why Parenting Support Matters

*“Parenting Support is a policy area which is expanding rapidly, especially in Europe but elsewhere also”
Professor Mary Daly (2013)¹*

Dolan and Pinkerton (2000), provide further clarification on why parenting matters:

“The primary focus of these services is on early intervention, aiming to promote and protect the health, wellbeing and rights of all children, young people and their families. At the same time, particular attention is given to those who are vulnerable or at risk”⁶.

While debates continue around the type and quality of services and support that should be in place to support parents, as well as the appropriate balance between universal and targeted support, the available international evidence indicates that the quality of parenting influences outcomes for children and young people and that there is a need to plan and provide services which will empower parents to maximise their parenting knowledge, competencies and skills so that their children can be given the best possible start in life.

The following are key messages from research on parenting:

- The quality of the parent-child relationship is associated with a range of outcomes including: self-regulation and behaviour, engagement and participation, mental health, academic achievement and the ability to develop and sustain relationships over a life time. For example, a negative parenting style is strongly associated with aggressive behaviour, delinquency, depression, anxiety and high-risk behaviours (e.g. smoking, drug/alcohol misuse)^{7 8 9}.
- Parenting is an important mediator in redressing the effects of poverty and disadvantage¹⁰.
- A supportive home learning environment is positively associated with children’s early achievements and wellbeing and influences social mobility.
- Warm, attentive, stimulating parenting is strongly associated with children’s positive social, emotional, cognitive and physical development^{11 12 13}.
- Children who have benefited from good parenting have a greater chance of succeeding in school, of getting jobs and reducing the chance of criminal behaviour¹⁴.
- 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; 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, parenting and family support needs to embrace the principle that positive parenting must be mutually beneficial both to parents and to children¹⁵.
- Actively involving parents in the design, delivery and evaluation of parenting supports and services through parental participation initiatives may result in better outcomes for families. It is also more likely that parents themselves will use participatory practices at home¹⁶.
- Research on mothers and fathers who have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) indicate that there may be 18% increase in the suspected risk of their children developing a developmental delay, particularly in the areas of problem solving and communication¹⁷. The wide-ranging health and social consequences of ACEs underscores the importance of prevention. Research also suggests that the benefits of effective prevention likely outweigh the costs of longer-term remedial interventions and deliver benefits for children, parents and wider society.

Endnotes

- ¹Daly, M. (2012) *Parenting Support – A New Policy Domain in Northern Ireland and Elsewhere* Briefing paper for Knowledge Exchange Seminars Stormont, NI Assembly
- ² Ibid
- ³ Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (2015): High-Level Policy Statement on Supporting Parents and Families.
- ⁴ DCYA (2018) *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (2019-2028)*. Government of Ireland
- ⁵ Tusla (2013) *Toolkit for Parental Participation*.
- ⁶ Dolan and Pinkerton (2000): *Family Support Direction from Diversity Canavan*, page 16
- ⁷ O'Connor, T.G. and Scott, S.B.C. (2007) *Parenting and outcomes for children*. York, UK: Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- ⁸ Patterson, G.P. (1996) 'Some characteristics of a developmental theory for early onset delinquency', in M.F. Lenzenweger and J.J. Hugaard (eds) *Frontiers of Developmental Psychopathology*. New York: Oxford University Press
- ⁹ Kilgore, K., Snyder, J. and Lentz, C. (2000) 'The contribution of parental discipline, parental monitoring, and school risk to early-onset conduct problems in African American boys' and girls', *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 36, pp. 835–45
- ¹⁰ Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) 2012 *Parenting style influences child development and social mobility*, Evidence briefing
- ¹¹ Allen, G. (2011) *Early Intervention: The Next Steps*. London: HM Government
- ¹² Davies, C. and Ward, H. (2012) *Safeguarding Children across Services: Message from Research*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- ¹³ Heckman, James J. (2011) *The Economics of Inequality, The value of Early Childhood Education* *American Educator*
- ¹⁴ Ibid
- ¹⁵ Daly, M. (2012) *Parenting Support – A New Policy Domain in Northern Ireland and Elsewhere* Briefing paper for Knowledge Exchange Seminars Stormont, NI Assembly
- ¹⁶ Tusla (2013) *Toolkit for Parental Participation*.
- ¹⁷ Folger et al. ([10.1542/peds.2017-2826](https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2017-2826)) <https://www.aappublications.org/news/2018/03/26/when-parents-have-experienced-adverse-childhood-experiences-what-is-the-effect-on-their-children-pediatrics-3-26-18>