

Parenting Support on the Island of Ireland: A Systems Perspective

This is the first of three briefing papers produced by The Parenting Network to help inform decision-making and policy development and implementation on the island of Ireland, in relation to supporting parents in their parenting role. The aims of this paper are to: (1) provide an historical overview of parenting support in both Ireland and Northern Ireland (and attendant key legislation and international developments); and (2) to outline the crucial role of the voluntary sector in delivering and promoting parenting support.

What is The Parenting Network?

In 2010, the Centre for Effective Services (CES) established 'The Special Interest Group – Supporting parents in their Parenting Role'. This group was re-branded in 2015 to become The Parenting Network (which will henceforth be referred to as 'The Network'). The Network is an all-island group including agency Directors, CEOs, professional bodies, practitioners, academics and researchers in the relevant sectors.

Since its inception, The Network has played a crucial role in promoting the value of parenting support in its broadest sense, as well as advocating support for parents in their parenting role as a policy specific area. The Network has also produced two key position papers, to date:

2019 – '[A collaborative all-island approach towards Parenting Support](#)': This paper built on the systemic approach to parenting support across the island of Ireland. It called for a range of specific policy actions along with effective strategic change and enhanced policy commitments.

2015 – '[An Action Plan for Parenting](#)': In this paper, The Network set out a systemic approach to the development of parenting support. This recognises the breadth of services and agencies who have, or could have, an enhanced role in parenting support, proposing a 'resource-efficient' approach to maximise the potential within the existing complex service landscape.

Further information about the Parenting Network and the above position papers is available at www.theparentingnetwork.net.

What is 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" (Daly, 2012).

Many services, statutory agencies and infrastructures (e.g. child benefit; tax relief/credits; childcare; maternity and parental leave) provide supports to parents, but these are not considered to be targeted at the task of parenting itself. The Parenting Network believes that parenting support also 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.

A Whole Systems perspective

‘Business and human endeavours are systems... we tend to focus on snapshots of isolated parts of the system. And wonder why our deepest problems never get solved.’ (FSG, 2017)

A whole systems perspective can be utilised to explore complex and intertwined interactions and relationships between multiple structures. It is applied across many sectors from business to public health. In Scotland, for example, whole systems approaches have been applied to health, child welfare and youth offending.

Parenting support services are embedded across a variety of sectors, service delivery mechanisms, actors and legislation/regulation. A whole systems perspective provides an overview of the many moving parts, all of which impact on how parents access and experience parenting supports. It recognises the complexity of influences and promotes higher levels of integration. See Figure 1.

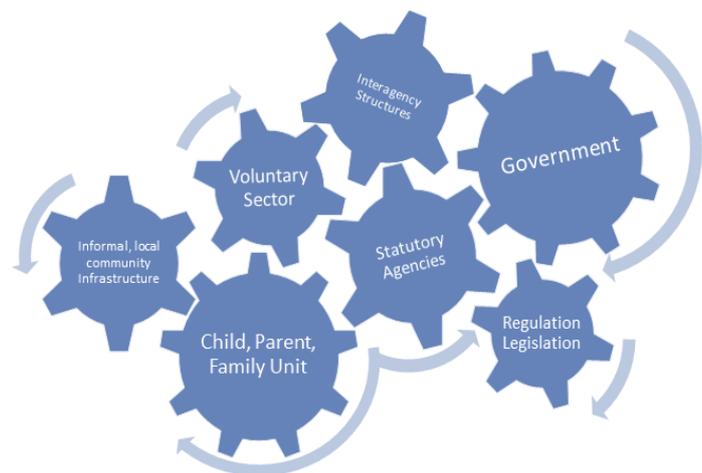


Figure 1 Overview of actors in Parenting Support Systems

Processes and policies beyond traditional parenting strategies, such as national service reform policies, or social contracts, have a considerable impact on parenting support. For example, the NI *Health and Wellbeing 2026 – Delivering Together* (Department of Health NI, 2016) report and in Ireland *Towards 2016: A 10-year Social Partnership Agreement 2006-2015* (Department of the Taoiseach, 2006) have both influenced parenting support.

A whole-systems approach considers not just the structures, their functions and their connections, but also how well the system works as a whole and so it includes:

- Capacities, e.g. skills, workforce, funding
- Levels of need, e.g. continuum of care
- Process, e.g. access to services, referrals
- Accountability, e.g. data collection, quality standards, research

Appendix 1 outlines some of the key service delivery actors in terms of parenting support in Ireland whilst Appendices 2 and 3 outline the complicated timeline of many policy, legislative and structural changes or developments which influence the implementation of policy in both Ireland and Northern Ireland

Parenting Support Policy Internationally and on the Island of Ireland

‘...Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children’ (Article 18 - (UNICEF UK, 1989))

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was signed in 1989. It identified a range of children’s rights, including the need to support parents in their child-rearing responsibilities. The UK and Ireland ratified the UNCRC in 1991 and 1992 respectively. Since then, other developments in early intervention and prevention across the world, have shaped a growing interest in parenting support as both a concept and a specific policy area. This has developed in different ways across jurisdictions, with a mix of bottom-up and top-down approaches, as parenting is increasingly seen as a means of addressing many child, family, community, and societal issues. Parenting support policies have emerged in response to these developments, frequently with varying ideological underpinnings.

The Council of Europe has called for specific policies to support positive parenting. Parenting support is one of many child and family supports for which the European Commission provides a framework of support through its European Platform for Investing in Children, along with country-specific recommendations and the recommendation on *‘Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage’* (European Commission, 2013).

‘recognising that parenting, though linked to family intimacy, should be designated as a domain of public policy and all the necessary measures should be adopted for supporting parenting and creating the conditions necessary for positive parenting’. (Council of Europe, 2006)



Figure 2 Timeline of international influences on the development of parenting support policies

1. Development of parenting support in Northern Ireland – a systems perspective

The development of Parenting Support Policy in Northern Ireland has its origins in the late 1990s and early 2000s with the UK Labour government and ‘Every Child Matters’ (Department for Education and Skills (UK), 2004). While this policy did not extend legislatively to Northern Ireland, it did influence the development of parenting. This was primarily through its precursor Sure Start Programme which commenced in NI in 2000. Subsequently, it shaped ‘*Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge: A Ten-Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006 – 2016*’ (Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2006).

As appendix 2 demonstrates, there is a range of complex policy interplays between the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS)¹, Department of Education (DENI) and the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). This has shaped the parenting support landscape over the last 20 years with the following primary policies and strategies:

- ✦ Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge: A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland (Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2006)
- ✦ Families Matter - Supporting Families in Northern Ireland. Regional Family and Parenting Strategy (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 2009)
- ✦ Children and Young People’s Strategy (Department of Education NI, 2019)

Families Matters outlines the strategic approach taken to support parents, in their parenting role over the last 10 years across the lifetime of their children and in many different contexts. Key developments arising out of it were the development of:

- a commitment to universal access along with providing additional supports as needed
- the regional Children and Young People’s Strategic Partnership, providing integrated leadership across statutory and commissioning services
- the emergence of Child and Family Hubs
- enhanced parenting education, supports and a commitment to positive parenting

As noted above, however, these alone cannot provide a framework for the delivery of parenting supports in NI. The context in which such policies are delivered is remarkably complex and has been influenced by many reforms in how health, social care and education services are provided. The role of the Children’s and Young People’s Strategic Partnership is pivotal, along with the delivery mechanisms it oversees, such as Family Support Hubs. Programmes such as Sure Start are still in existence, and along with others in the early years, the sector has been influenced by the Early Intervention Transformation Programme (Department of Health NI, 2020).

¹ Now called the Department of Health in Northern Ireland (NI)

A range of Health and Social Care reforms, most recently Delivering Together (Department of Health- NI, 2016) and other health policies such as Making Life Better NI (DHSSPS-NI, 2014) influence the interplay between health and parenting support through the promotion of different ways of working including:

- Integrated service delivery
- Participation
- Leadership
- Early intervention and prevention
- Partnership working with service users/parents including co-production

*'Healthy Child, Healthy Future: A Framework for the Universal Child Health Promotion Programme in Northern Ireland Pregnancy to 19 Years'*² outlines an interagency framework for child health promotion in NI. It contextualises supports for parents throughout the life stages of the child. It ensures a cross-sectoral responsibility for identifying potential red flags in terms of children's health and overall wellbeing.

Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP)

Established in 2011, this is a high-level national partnership which was established following the merger of four area-based committees in line with the establishment of the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB). From the outset, it had a statutory basis in the Children (1995 Order) (Amendment) (Children's Services Planning) Order 1998. Today, it is also shaped by the Services Cooperation Act (2015). Its membership is drawn from high-level leadership roles across all relevant statutory services (e.g. health, social care, education) as well as representation from the community and voluntary-sector, and the Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME) community.

The CYPSP has a coordination role for all actions relevant to the delivery of services to children and their families, including commissioning, planning and encouraging the participation of children, their families, and communities. It has a key role in overseeing the Family Support Hub structure (a multi-agency network of statutory, voluntary and community organisations that either provide early intervention services or work with families who need early intervention services), coordinating parent supports, including training, and specific task groups such as food poverty and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

Relevant legislation

At present, there is no legislative basis in Northern Ireland to remove a parent's right to discipline their child through physical means, unlike its other UK counterparts, Wales and Scotland, which removed the defence of reasonable punishment. While changes in legislation did remove this defence for serious assaults on a child, it remains possible for a parent to physically discipline their child. Recent survey of

² (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 2010)

parents' in Northern Ireland would indicate that public support for a change in the law has grown from 30 to 63% (NICCY, 2017).

One significant feature of the parenting support landscape in Northern Ireland is the Services Co-operation Act (2015) which was introduced to promote enhanced interagency working and better outcomes for children. It builds on previous Northern Ireland legislation the Children (1995 Order) (Amendment) (Children's Services Planning) Order 1998. A similar approach to cooperation was evident in the Children's Act (2004) in England under Every Child Matters, where local authorities and services had a 'duty to cooperate'. While child protection is central to such legislation, these measures address broader engagement and cooperation of services.

Additionally the Health and Social Care Reform Act (2009) places a statutory duty on Health and Care organisations to involve and consult with recipients of their services under Personal and Public Involvement. This places an emphasis on services to include parents and children in the service they receive.

2. The development of parenting support in Ireland – a systems perspective

In Ireland parenting support as a policy area developed very much in response to a wide range of initiatives on the ground. There was a growth of parenting support programmes in the late 1990s, and early 2000s that mirrored developments in the UK. The role of The Atlantic Philanthropies, supported by Government, was substantial from 2004 onwards, both in its direct funding for parenting support programmes and also the innovative Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative, PEII (2004–2013) which involved piloting and evaluation of parenting support initiatives within areas of disadvantage.

The establishment of the Centre for Effective Services (CES) and its role in supporting initiatives such as the PEII and extracting the learning from the 30 organisations funded under the PEIP was also significant, and it played a strategic role in the development of the successor programme, the Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme in 2014.

From 2006 onwards, there was considerable progress in the development of national policy on parenting, which further intensified with the establishment of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2011 and the establishment of Tusla – the Child and Family Agency, 3 years later. Since its development Tusla have subsequently led the development of guidance in terms of parenting support. A suite of documents was developed in conjunction with the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre NUI Galway, along with a range of research-based initiatives to provide a baseline of parenting supports across the country along with best practice guidance and tools on, for example, prevention and early intervention and parental participation.

Key relevant policy documents are listed below with a time line of developments available in Appendix 3.

- ✦ Towards 2016: A 10-year Social Partnership Agreement (2006-2015)
- ✦ Better Outcomes Brighter Futures, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (BOBF) (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014).
- ✦ High-Level Policy Statement on Supporting Parents and Families (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015)
- ✦ First 5: A-Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (First 5) (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2018) & Implementation Plan (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2019)

Relevant legislation

The Child and Family Agency Act (2013) marked a strong commitment to the lives of children and their parents through the establishment of a dedicated statutory service, Tusla- the Child and Family Agency. The Children First Act (2015), which outlined legislative reform of the child protection process including mandated reporting, also included a provision for the removal of the common law defence of reasonable chastisement used by parents or others when disciplining children.

Unlike Northern Ireland, there is no legislative basis for interagency working. However, some parallel protocols and frameworks have been put in place across specific services. Examples include:

- Joint Protocol for Interagency Collaboration between the Health Services Executive (HSE) and Tusla – Child and Family Agency to promote the best interests of Children and Families (Tusla and the HSE, 2017)
- Framework for Collaborative Working between Education and Health Professionals (Progressing Disability Services Education and Health Subgroup, 2013)
- Joint Working Protocol Primary Care, Disability and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (HSE, 2017)
- Hidden Harm: Seeing through Hidden Harm to Brighter Futures – A Strategic Statement (HSE / Tusla, 2019)

Children and Young People’s Service Committees (CYPSCs)

Originally a pilot project of four sites, the role of the CYPSCs was to promote greater integration of local service delivery. Since 2014, it became a national programme with centralised governance structures to coordinate its work and contribute to the implementation of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures. Considerable progress has been made in terms of strengthening CYPSCs nationally, and their role is well recognised across the service delivery landscape. They have led the way for many developments and changes in terms of the local provision of parenting supports. As a structure, however, they operate with minimal administrative and data supports. One example of the systemic challenges facing CYPSCs, is the absence of crucial sector representation. For instance, Ireland does not have a statutory agency supporting

primary and secondary education – similar to the Education Authority in Northern Ireland – and this impacts on how education is represented within CYPSCs.

Future developments in data gathering, research and outcomes

The national longitudinal study [Growing Up in Ireland](#), has captured the life experiences of over 18,000 children incrementally over the last 14 years. Its contribution to the policy and service delivery landscape for parents and children, has been significant. More recent developments within DYCA, expand on the need for high quality data gathering to inform all in the sector about the lives of children and parents. The establishment of the [‘What Works’ initiative](#)³ (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2019) is significant and leads the way towards informed evidence based outcomes focused practice nationally. Another development is the [‘Outcomes 4 Children Data Hub’](#) supported by Tusla (Tusla, 2019) which maps outcomes and indicators for children nationally, similar to that developed in Northern Ireland. A considerable number of additional commitments to advancing research in the lives of children, their parents/families and communities have also been made within the First 5 Strategy and Implementation Plan.

Role of the community and voluntary sector in Parenting Support in Ireland and Northern Ireland

The voluntary sector plays a considerable role in the delivery of parenting supports. This final section of the paper outlines the key ways in which this sector has helped to champion, develop and deliver parenting supports.

Innovation and piloting new supports – leading change

The community and voluntary sector has been at the forefront of innovation in developing responses to the needs of children, parents and families on the island of Ireland and it has pioneered many of the recent developments in parenting support. Northern Ireland has a more centralised approach given the wider UK influences. There have also been state initiated parenting supports such as the Sure Start Programme in Northern Ireland which is delivered in partnership with the voluntary sector.

A primary example of innovation and cross-sectoral working, are those initiatives which provide support to parents and families experiencing incarceration, an area where there has, traditionally, been no statutory provision. The Northern Ireland Association for the Care Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO) has been supporting families affected by a prison experience through a variety of means, such as Caps – Child and Parent Support, along with Barnardos NI.

³ Formerly Quality and Capacity Building Initiative

More recently in Ireland, the Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) developed 'Family Links', a project within the Irish Prison Service, and a subsequent initiative, Prisoners and Family Reintegration Programme, which targeted parenting support to those in prison and their families.

The sector responds to the needs it encounters on the ground, quickly identifying gaps in service provision and has the flexibility to innovate and trial new approaches and services. The nature of community settings enables the establishment and maintenance of relationships building social capital.

Partnership working with statutory services

There are also many examples of partnership working between statutory and the voluntary-sector. For instance, in Ireland programmes such as the Drugs Task Force or the Healthy Foods Made Easy Programme are HSE programmes, delivered and governed locally by the voluntary-sector. Similarly, structures like Sure Start and the Family Support Hub models in Northern Ireland are government-initiated programmes provided and governed by the voluntary-sector.

One key example of relevance to Ireland's recent First 5 Implementation Plan is the development of 'Weaning Workshops'. One of the first of these workshops was developed in Clondalkin in 2010 through the joint working of a Healthy Foods Made Easy Co-ordinator, the local HSE Dietetic Department and the Health House⁴. As part of the broader range of supports on offer, the idea to adapt the traditional Healthy Foods Made Easy Programme to address the needs of new parents was explored, and the provision of pots, spoons and blenders was added. The final programme was developed by the HSE, delivered by the Healthy Foods Made Easy Co-ordinator and offered to parents availing of supports in the community-based Health House. Since then, it has been adopted by Area Based Childhood Programmes and developed independently in conjunction with either Community Dietitians or Public Health Nurses and a community partner.

The above example illustrates the flexibility of working in nuanced ways in partnership with statutory agencies and how community-led initiatives have the capacity to upscale and become mainstreamed. The voluntary-sector in both Ireland and Northern Ireland has developed considerable on-the-ground expertise as to 'What Works' in relation to the design and delivery of a range of community-based parenting supports.

Mapping parenting supports – the community and voluntary sector

There are many examples of both innovation and partnership working from the voluntary-sector across both jurisdictions as the community and voluntary sector provides local and accessible infrastructures on which parents rely for support. Appendix 1 provides a brief overview of a range of voluntary-sector services who have a role in offering parenting supports in Ireland. While not exhaustive, it provides a useful insight into the breadth of services on offer from the community and voluntary sector on the island of Ireland.

⁴A community health initiative providing a range of supports to the local community and new parents, established by Clondalkin Partnership.

Connolly, Devaney, & Crosse (2017) reviewed the range of parenting support services being delivered in Ireland. They identify the primary delivery mechanisms of such supports to be: Tusla; HSE; Community and voluntary sector; Early Childhood Education and Care Sector; and private provision. Looking across four geographic areas, they mapped in more detail the range of universal services on offer to local parents. The voluntary sector delivered the majority of these services.

Summary

The parenting support system on the island of Ireland continues to develop and evolve and it has been clearly a long and complex journey from policy to implementation. In Northern Ireland, 'Families Matters' has strongly influenced the development of supports for parents in their parenting role. Along with reforms in health and social care and the foundational legislative basis, a progressive parenting support system has emerged. A new strategy is now required to build on this legacy and shape the future development of parenting support in Northern Ireland. The recent launch of the Children and Young People's Strategy (Department of Education NI, 2019), is a welcome development, whilst a new Family and Parenting Support Strategy is also anticipated.

The recent 'First 5' strategy marked a pivotal moment for parenting support in Ireland as it represents a 'whole-systems' approach to the myriad of factors involved in the life of young children and their families and addresses the complex system within which they work. It builds on the strong commitment to parenting support in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures and the high-level policy statement. It demonstrates a strong governmental commitment to parenting through the establishment of the Parenting Support Policy Unit. Further to this the Department of Children (recently renamed the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to reflect its additional functions in the new Government in Ireland, DCEDIY) is developing a national model of parenting support services which it sees as a key building block of the First 5 Strategy.

The development of a national model will help to ensure that all parents can access the support services they need when they need them. In acknowledging the strong leadership The Parenting Network has shown in this area in helping to raise awareness of best practice and share learning from approaches and experiences in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, The Network will be contributing to the national model development through the DCEDIY led Working Group established to progress this initiative.

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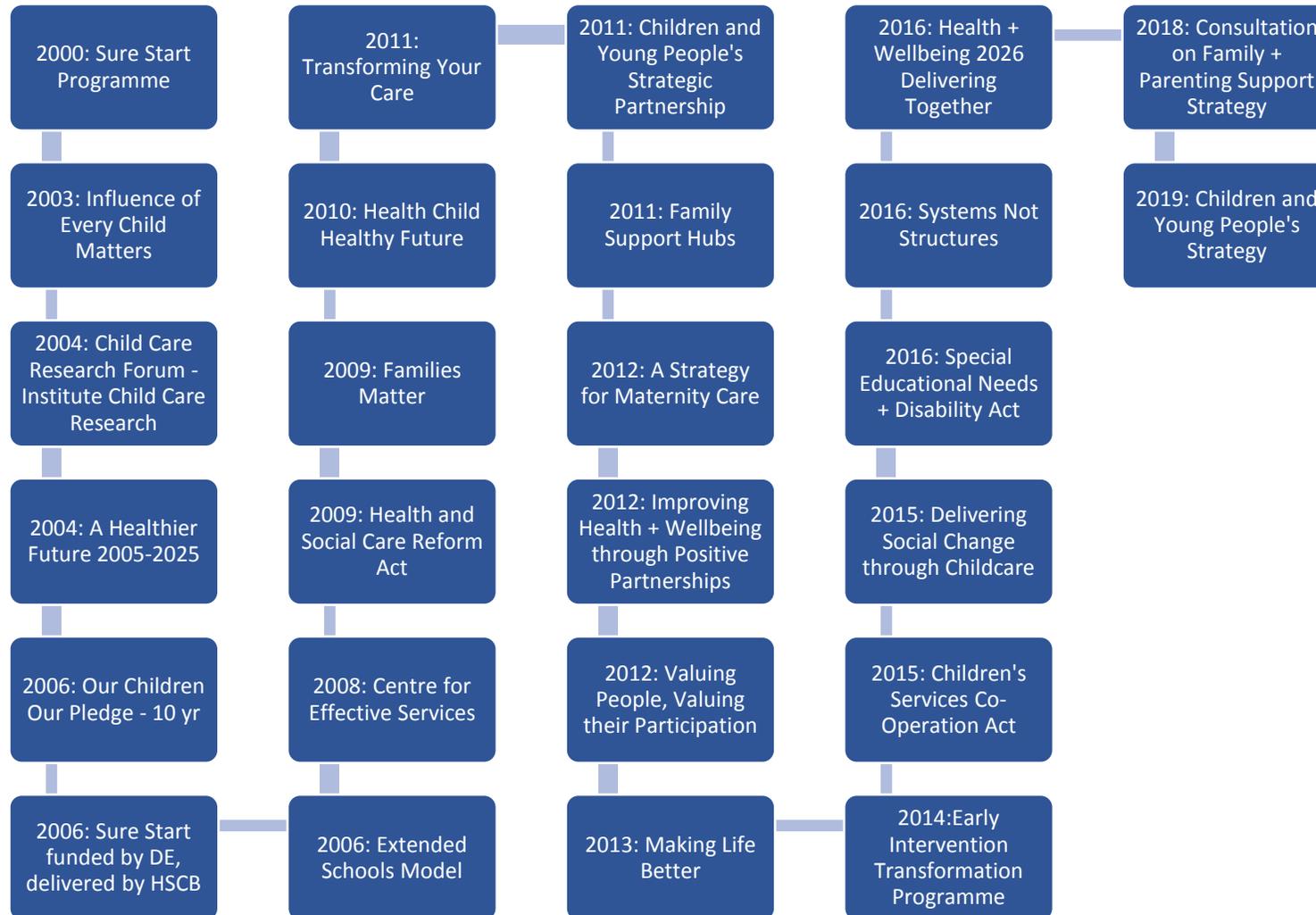
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Appendix 1: Overview of agencies/organisations delivering parenting supports or with a role in supporting parents in Ireland

<p>HSE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary Care Psychology + Therapy Services • Public Health Nurses • Assessment of Need • Early Intervention + School Aged Teams (disability) • CAMHS • Paediatric Hospital/Outpatient Services • Maternity and Infant Health Services incl. Neonatal care • Counselling Supports • Websites – mychild.ie 	<p>Tusla</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education Welfare • Child Safeguarding Services • Prevention Partnership + Family Support (PPFS); Child + Family Support Networks (CFSN) + Meitheal • Family Support • Parenting Support Services • Parenting 24/7 • Parenting Support Champions • Children + Young Peoples Services Committees (CYPSCs) • Commissioning of Parent Support Organisations 	<p>C+V Sector</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National /Local Child and Family Support Services e.g Barnardos/DoCh. • Disability Services • Area Based Childhood Programmes (ABCs) • Family Resource Centres (FRCs) • National Parenting Specific Services • Youth Services • ISPCC • Housing Associations • Housing + Homelessness Services • Drugs Task Force • Parent + Toddler/Baby Groups • Early Learning + Care (ELC) settings • Phone line supports e.g. Parentline • Lone parent organisations • Breastfeeding: Cuidu /La Leche League • Counselling – range of provision • Domestic violence supports services • Services for ethnic minority families incl. Traveller Community • Teen Parent Support Programme • Supports to families experiencing prison / criminal justice system • National Parents Council • County Childcare Committees • Local Dev. Companies /Partnerships
<p>Local Authorities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Library Parent and Toddler Groups • Library Information • Play Supports • Sports Partnership 	<p>Sample range of service delivery infrastructure providing parenting supports</p>	
<p>Commercial</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ELC settings • Online websites • Parenting coaching/ programmes • Private child health/therapy supports • Counselling 	<p>Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary • Secondary • DEIS Programme • Early Start • Schools NEPS • National Council for Special Education 	<p>Parent-led</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breastfeeding supports • Voluntary supports children with additional needs • Voluntary support groups • Voluntary Parent and Toddler Groups
		<p>Other state agencies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy Ireland

Appendix 2: Timeline of the policy, Legislation and Structures which shaped the development of parenting support policy in Northern Ireland



Appendix 3: Timeline of the policy, legislation and structures which shaped the development of parenting support policy in Ireland

