

The Parenting Network

**A Position Paper prepared by The Parenting¹ Network
May 2016**

Introduction

There is growing evidence of the importance of effective parenting in generating positive outcomes for children and young people.² 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”³

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^{4 5 6}
- Parenting is an important mediator in redressing the effects of poverty and disadvantage⁷
- A supportive home learning environment is positively associated with children’s early achievements and well-being and influences social mobility.⁸
- Warm, attentive, stimulating parenting is strongly associated with children’s positive social, emotional, cognitive and physical development^{9 10 11}
- 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.¹²
- 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.¹³

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 place¹⁴ the work of this Parenting Network 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"*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 evidenceinformed.
- 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:¹⁶

<p>Benefits for Parents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better family relationships • Better mental and emotional health • Better socio-economic prospects • More active community participation. • More knowledgeable about their child’s development • Better home learning environment • Increased understanding of the importance of play and interaction with their children. 	<p>Benefits for Children</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better child/parent bonding and attachment • Better social, emotional and cognitive outcomes • Better health outcomes i.e. reduction in childhood obesity • Better self-identity and self-esteem • Better resiliency and school readiness • Better outcomes in later life across a range of psycho-social dimensions 	<p>Benefits for Society</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced social costs • 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
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Background

In December 2010 the Centre for Effective Services established The Parenting Network – *Influencing Policy, Practice and Learning*. 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.

Members of the Parenting Network (May 2016)

1. Archways, Aileen O’Donoghue, CEO
2. Barnardos, Marijka Walsh, Best Practice Manager
3. Barnardos NI, Liz Kavanagh, Director of Children’s Services
4. Centre for Effective Services, Dr Stella Owens & Dr Alison Montgomery
5. Child and Family Research Centre, NUI, Galway, Nuala Connolly
6. Daughters of Charity Child and Family Service, Liam Ó’Dálaigh, Director of Services
7. Department of Children and Youth Affairs/ Department of Health, Dr Sean Denyer, Child Health Specialist
8. Department of Health, Maurice Leeson, Programme Manager EITP
9. Department of Health, Elaine Colgan, Family Policy Unit
10. National Resource Centre National Forum, Karin Jonsson, Chairperson and Manager Quarryvale FRC
11. Health Service Executive, Sheila Geoghegan, Director of Public Health Nursing
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. Midlands Area Parenting Partnerships, Conor Owens, Programme Director
16. Northside Partnership, Noel Kelly, Programme Manager, Preparing for Life
17. NUI, Maynooth, Dr Sinead McGilloway, Principal Investigator, Incredible Years Evaluation
18. One Family, Karen Kiernan, CEO
19. Parenting NI, Pip Jaffa, Chief Executive,
20. Parents Plus Dr John Sharry, Founder and Director
21. Queen’s University Belfast, Improving Children’s Lives, Dr Liam O’Hare
22. Teen Parent Support Programme, Margaret Morris, National Co-ordinator
23. Tusla, Fionnuala MacAonghusa, Senior Manager, Integrated Services, Education Welfare.
24. Tusla, Dr Aisling Gillen, National Programme Manager Development & Mainstreaming Programme and National Policy Development Manager Family Support
25. Western Area Childcare Partnership, Maura Mason, Manager

National Outcomes for Children

Ireland Outcomes

1. Active & healthy, physical & mental wellbeing
2. Achieving in all areas of learning & development
3. Safe & protected from harm
4. Economic security & opportunity
5. Connected, respected & contributing to their world¹

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

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)
- 2 Daly, M. (2012) *Parenting Support – A New Policy Domain in Northern Ireland and Elsewhere* Briefing paper for Knowledge Exchange Seminars Stormont, NI Assembly
- 3 Ibid
- 4 O'Connor, T.G. and Scott, S.B.C. (2007) *Parenting and outcomes for children*. York, UK: Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- 5 Patterson, G.P. (1996) 'Some characteristics of a developmental theory for early onset delinquency', in M.F. Lenzenweger and J.J. Haugaard (eds) *Frontiers of Developmental Psychopathology*. New York: Oxford University Press
- 6 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
- 7 Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) 2012 Parenting style influences child development and social mobility, Evidence briefing
- 8 Ibid
- 9 Allen, G. (2011) *Early Intervention: The Next Steps*. London: HM Government
- 10 Davies, C. and Ward, H. (2012) *Safeguarding Children across Services: Message from Research*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- 11 Heckman, James J. (2011) The Economics of Inequality, The value of Early Childhood Education *American Educator*
- 12 Ibid
- 13 Daly, M. (2012) *Parenting Support – A New Policy Domain in Northern Ireland and Elsewhere* Briefing paper for Knowledge Exchange Seminars Stormont, NI Assembly
- 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.

- 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 Gbate, D. (2009) *Messages from research about quality in parenting services* Parents Advice Centre NI 30th Anniversary conference Belfast