

## **Parenting Support – A New Policy Domain in Northern Ireland and Elsewhere<sup>1</sup>**

Professor Mary Daly, School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast  
m.daly@qub.ac.uk

Parenting support is a policy which is expanding rapidly, especially in Europe but elsewhere also. What this means is that countries are explicitly prioritising the provision of support to parents above and beyond measures for children and childcare. Whereas in the past parenting was taken for granted except in 'problem cases', the notion of parenting as a set of skills in which people need information and education is now widespread in public debate but also in academic circles.

Parenting support policies constitute a very significant development as they indicate a change in perspective about how child well-being is understood and the way in which the role of parents is seen as regards children, family and society more generally. They are a product of a climate of greater concern on the part of the public authorities about how people act in their private lives as well as a greater willingness on the part of the public authorities to intervene in relations which were formerly considered 'private' to parents and families.

This paper is organised as follows. The first section introduces the subject by outlining what is involved in parenting support. The second gives a brief overview of the main factors driving the push to parenting support. The third section describes the nature of provision in a number of countries (including England, Northern Ireland, France and Germany). The fourth section presents a brief overview of some of the evidence about parenting support. The final section sets out some of the factors that have been found to be effective in parenting support.

### 1. Definition and Examples

Given its relative newness and the fact that it relates closely to other aspects of provision, one has to be specific about what is meant by parenting support.

*Parenting support refers to a range of information, support, education, training, counselling and other measures or services that focus on influencing how parents understand and carry out their parenting role.*

A common goal is to achieve better outcomes for children and young people and for parents as well as families as a whole. The programmes or measures involved tend to have the following aims:

- to develop parental strengths and competences and help parents to deal with ordinary as well as difficult situations in family life;
- to teach parents techniques to control their own and their children's behavior and to foster their children's talents;
- to inculcate good habits in the family, especially around education and learning and health;

---

<sup>1</sup> This briefing paper is based on research carried out under the auspices of the ESRC-funding project 'Governing New Social Risks – The Case of Recent Child Policies in European Welfare States' (Research Grant – RES-360-25-0062).

- to reduce risk factors associated with poor outcomes for children;
- to increase so-called 'protective factors' (such as parental self-awareness and control).

While there is great diversity in practice, parenting support tends to take three main forms:

- General information made available to parents (through brochures, manuals/books, advice services, the internet and so forth);
- One-to-one advisory or coaching sessions, especially in relation to health and/or behaviour management (e.g., Family Nurse Partnership);
- Courses or training/education sessions for parents (which can be one-to-one or group based).

The latter courses are quite standardised. They tend to be put together usually by professionals (academic and practitioner). Some of these courses originate in universities or associated research centres but the most standardised ones tend to end up as commercial enterprises which are purchased by end users (typically governments, local providers or NGOs). The classic example – and most widely used programme – is Triple P.<sup>2</sup> This has five levels:

- Level 1 a universal parenting information strategy;
- Level 2 brief (one or two session) primary health care intervention for mild behavioural difficulties or a three session large group seminar series on positive parenting;
- Level 3 a session of interventions for mild to moderate difficulties including parent skills training; or a one-off brief 2 hour discussion group (multiple topics available);
- Level 4 an intensive 8-10 session programme which is individual, group or self directed (with telephone support) for more severe problems;
- Level 5 intensive behavioural family intervention where parenting problems occur in the context of other family difficulties (e.g., conflict, depression).

We do not as yet know how many parents have been engaged through parenting support measures – either in England (where they are at their most developed) or elsewhere as no national authority has counted this yet – perhaps because parenting support is still so new.

Sometimes the providers are highly-trained professions but on other occasions – especially for the lower levels of the standardised programmes - they may be people who have as little as two weeks' training (mainly because many of these programmes are run from manuals).

In the countries where it is most developed (especially England, Germany, the Netherlands and the US), parenting support tends to be diversified. Looking within and across countries the following are the main sources of variation

- Universal or targeted;
- Orientated to prevention or intervention and the degree of intensity;
- Who initiates it – parents, NGOs, government or other public authority;
- Whether the focus is on the parent only, the parent and child, the mother and/or father, the extended family;
- Providers and modes of governance;
- Source of funding and amount of funding;
- Conditions of access to the programme/provision (e.g., compulsory or voluntary);
- Whether the provision is home grown or 'imported' from elsewhere;
- The age of the children targeted.

---

<sup>2</sup> Other widely-used programmes in England are *Incredible Years* and *Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities*.

In terms of explaining why there is such variation in the type of parenting support offered within and across countries, this is greatly influenced by factors in the national context such as: the welfare state model and history, the prevailing philosophy and approach to child welfare and family well-being, the traditions of service organisation, the amount of funding available, where the demand comes from (parents, NGOs, government or other public authority), and the degree of importance attributed to interventionist as against preventive policies.

## 2 The Policy Debate and Origins of Interest in Parenting Support

A number of different factors have come together to propel parenting support to attention.

- (1) The health and well-being of children have been a driving concern in this debate. Interest in parenting has been driven also by research on child development, child health and child well-being (especially from medical and psychological sciences on early brain development) which highlights the role of parenting in successful child development and subsequent adult functioning (O'Connor and Scott 2007; Hosking et al 2010).
- (2) Parenting support is also rooted in a concern about problem or dysfunctional families and poor family practices. While we have always had such families, the attention given to them seems to be increasing and the costs of dealing with such families appear also to be higher. Of relevance especially are concerns about social disorder and anti-social behaviour and, indeed, about risk as a feature of contemporary life and whether interventions to affect the risk factors associated with family breakdown are worthwhile (Oates 2010). This area dovetails with concerns raised from a social inclusion perspective on the transmission of dysfunctionality across generations and the fact that families experiencing or at risk of social exclusion face multiple layers or levels of difficulty which they then might pass on to their children.
- (3) Another factor that might also be said to be influencing the debate is the increasing participation of mothers in employment. While this has been widely sought in Europe (at least before the recession) there is a feeling that it has impacted negatively on the quality of family life and child-rearing. As well as creating constraints around the time availability of parents for children and family, this has served to raise questions about whether parenting in a context of two-earner families is sufficiently supported and emphasised. In some quarters parenting support has elements of a backlash against changes occurring in family life; in others it has a more positive orientation to allay parents' worries and improve the quality of child rearing.
- (4) The international organisations (especially the UN and the Council of Europe) are also driving factors. The UN – especially with its Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989 - has transformed the discourses about the respective roles of the child, parents, the family and the state. As well as mandating the rights of children, the CRC underlines the parents' primary responsibility in their children's upbringing and places strict limits on both State intervention and any separation of children from their parents. While the EU has been relatively silent on the issue<sup>3</sup>, the Council of Europe has been adopting recommendations on family matters since the 1970s with an explicit focus on parenting and the quality of family life since the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> While it

---

<sup>3</sup> However, under the auspices of the EU, the French government hosted a Peer Review on parenting support in Paris on October 6/7, 2011. Some nine other countries attended, all expressing a strong interest in 'parenting support'. See: <http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.eu/peer-reviews/2011/building-a-coordinated-strategy-for-parenting-support>. There are also other EU-wide initiatives – see ChildOneEurope (2007) and Boddy et al (2009).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Recommendation (84) 4 on parental responsibilities; Recommendation (85) 4 on violence in the family; Recommendation (87) 6 on foster families; Recommendation 94 (14) on coherent and integrated family policies; Recommendation (97) 4 on securing and promoting the health of single parent families; Recommendation (98) 8 on children's participation in family and social life.

did not invent the notion of positive parenting, Recommendation (2006)<sup>19</sup> provided a definition of 'positive parenting' identifying it as the parental behaviour ensuring the fulfilment of the best interests of the child "that is nurturing, empowering, non-violent and provides recognition and guidance which involves setting of boundaries to enable the full development of the child". This Recommendation underlines the importance to children of growing up in a positive family environment and the State's responsibility to create the right conditions for positive parenting (Daly 2007).

### 3. Some Examples of Different Countries' Approaches

England is the country with the most sophisticated and extensive range of supports for parenting. This is relatively new – it was mainly New Labour that instituted it a strong move to parenting support in England. It started with the *Sure Start* first introduced in 1998, and subsequently developed into Children's Centres. At the end of their tenure of office practically any parent who needed support could turn up and ask for it. Provision ranged across the continuum including:

- ▶ A national network of Children's Centres (which provide a range of services but include some oriented towards parents and the way they parent);
- ▶ A national roll-out of education programmes for parents (some of which take place within the auspices of the Children's Centres but many of which are run by a variety of NGOs and some statutory service providers);
- ▶ Parenting Commissioners in each Local Authority and evidence-based guidance for Local Authorities and their staff with regard to commissioning programmes and services around parenting;
- ▶ A national programme focusing on the education/support of young mothers (the Family/Nurse Partnership which is a health-led home visitation programme);
- ▶ Parent support advisors in schools;
- ▶ Telephone helpline and web-based information services around parenting;
- ▶ A focus on the training of the parenting workforce through the setting up of a national academy for parenting practitioners and a Council for the Development of the Childcare Workforce and a Parenting and Family Institute;
- ▶ A series of intensive intervention projects around parenting (Family Intervention Projects (for families involved in anti-social behaviour) and Parenting Early Intervention Programmes (for families of children at risk or likely to become so)).

While the current UK government has yet to reveal the full detail of its family-oriented policy in England, it has started to reorganise public support for parenting. In regard to parenting classes for instance, in May this year it instituted a £100 voucher scheme available to all parents and carers of children under 5 years but on a two-year pilot basis in only three areas.<sup>5</sup> The intention is to roll out the scheme to all of England and Wales in the next years and to extend it to cover parenting of children of all ages. The vouchers can be used to 'purchase' free attendance at a range of parenting classes and services run by a range of 'independent' providers. A second prong of current UK government policy is the strong support for intensive and interventionist measures with so-called 'troubled families' – to all intents and purposes an intensification of the Family Intervention Projects initiated by New Labour. Such families, whose lives are represented as 'chaotic', have been estimated to number some 120,000 (Department for Communities and Local Government 2012; HM Government 2012).<sup>6</sup> Some £448 million are to be spent on a cross-departmental programme to 'turn around their lives' (in three years). As part of this

---

<sup>5</sup> Piloted in Camden, Middlesbrough and High Peak (Derbyshire), the scheme is projected to be availed of by some 50,000 parents at a cost of £5 million. See [www.canparent.org](http://www.canparent.org).

<sup>6</sup> See Levitas (2012) for a critique of both the categorization of 'troubled' families and the methodology whereby the figure of 120,000 was derived.

every local authority has been asked to identify their 'most troubled families' and appoint a co-ordinator to oversee local action ('Troubled Families Trouble Shooters'). The government will offer up to 40% of the cost of dealing with these families to local authorities - but on a payment-by-results basis available only when they achieve 'success' with families. Intensive work – along the lines of the Family Intervention Project model – is favoured, whereby each family will be assigned a 'single key worker' who will work intensively with the family. Another significant parenting-related measure on the part of the current government is the decision to double the capacity of the Family Nurse Partnership, which is an intensive structured home visiting programme for new mothers aged under 20 years.

In Northern Ireland provision is far less widespread. In fact most provision of parenting support is organised by the voluntary/NGO sector. ParentingNI, which was initiated in 1979 as a parents' advice centre on a one-year pilot basis but has since become an enduring organisation catering a whole range of parents' needs and services - is the largest single provider.<sup>7</sup> They offer a variety of parenting-related services directly to parents but more widely to community and statutory providers on demand. Parenting NI services include, as well as a parent helpline and a parenting forum, a diversified set of education programmes for parents. These include positive parenting, parenting for teens, parent anger management, preparation for parenthood, fathers' programmes and parenting apart. Another programme available in Northern Ireland is the Lifestart programme which is run by the Lifestart Foundation (a charity covering the island of Ireland).<sup>8</sup> This is a structured month-by-month curriculum of information, knowledge and practical learning activity for parents consisting of age-specific information on child development supported by art, story, music and movement resources tailored to suit each individual child and family. The programme is delivered by trained family visitors in the parent's own home and is open to any family who wants to participate in the seven project areas where the programme is operating in Northern Ireland.<sup>9</sup>

In France parenting support is very different. Organised parenting programmes hardly exist and unlike England much of what exists has come from the ground up (mainly from parents themselves). One of the biggest initiatives there is a national infrastructure of networks of parents. These are the 'REAAPs' (Parental Consultation, Care and Social Support Networks'). They are not highly interventionist, working on a more 'softly-softly' basis, oriented to peer support by parents for parents, and drawing upon principles of voluntarism and parent-centredness. The goal is to offer support and assistance to enable all parents to assume their parental role, especially in an educational context. The parents meet in different places (social centers, schools, crèches, municipal rooms) and engage in different activities (discussion groups, lectures or debates, parent-child interactions), with or without the support of professionals. In 2009 at least half a million French parents took part in REAAP activities.<sup>10</sup>

In Germany, the approach is different again. Here, the focus is on education for family life (with the emphasis on family life and parenting as a part of that) run through a nationwide network of family education and guidance centres. These are open-access information and counselling centres, based within local communities and mainly run by church-based organisations providing various kinds of guidance and counselling services (individual and group). Another form of provision that is of some relevance is the parent child groups which, aimed at parents of young children (aged 0-3 years), seek to enable the acquisition of parenting skills through group discussions, sharing experiences and strengthening social networks. These often focus on low-income or ethnic minority families.

---

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.parentingni.org>.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.lifestartfoundation.org>.

<sup>9</sup> These are Ballmagroarty, Enniskillen, Limavady, Belfast, Derry, Strabane, Mid Ards.

<sup>10</sup> See *Bilan REAAP 2009* available at <http://www.solidarite.gouv.fr/espaces.770/famille.774/informations-pratiques.981/partenaires-institutionnels-et.859/reseaux-d-ecoute-d-appui-et-d.6826.html>. See also Hamel et al (2012).

#### 4. The Impact and Challenges of Parenting Support

A lot of claims are made for parenting support. The most reliable evidence (Moran et al 2004; Hosking et al 2010; Barlow et al 2011) suggests that when it works parenting support:

- Can make parenting a less stressful and more enjoyable role;
- Can reduce the risks of emotional and physical harm to children;
- Can improve children's well-being and development.

The evidence base is strongest for established approaches to working with parents. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) – working with the relationship between thoughts, feelings and behaviour – shows good outcomes for children and families, particularly those with anxiety-based difficulties (Fonagy *et al.*, 2002, cited in Oakes 2010). Parent skills training, which combines observation of the child and family by the therapist, therapeutic and educational clinic sessions and problem-solving and goal-setting work, provides well-evaluated support for families with children with behavioural problems (as discussed by Webster-Stratton and Spitzer (1996), for example (cited in Oates 2010).

A recent evaluation of a programme run by ParentingNI – Parenting Ur Teen – reported positive outcomes such as improved parental mental health, a reduction in overall family distress with less conflict over school and decreased conflict around meals and eating (Higgins et al 2012). The evidence also indicated that parents perceived their teenagers to be less moody and less likely to engage in delinquent behaviour after participation in the programme and that teens themselves perceived less stress also.

However, there are risks involved also. For example, parents may be overloaded with information or knowledge that can confuse and disempower them. Also, as a general phenomenon, the move to parenting support may actually make parents more anxious and less secure. There is also the risk that parenting programmes provide platforms for people and organisations who are not specifically trained in both child development and evidence-based child and family therapeutic approaches.

#### 5. Some Key Messages about What Has Been Found to be Effective in Parenting Support

While different types of provision tend to have different outcomes, the following are the main points from an analysis of the findings of a range of international research on what has been found to be effective (Moran et al 2004; Utting 2009). Those programmes which have most chance of success include:

- Programmes with more than one method of delivery
- Programmes with measurable concrete objectives
- Programmes with a strong underlying theory and model of how they will improve outcomes for children and parents and can describe the 'mechanisms of change' they are expecting
- Families under multiple stresses will not be able to benefit fully from parenting support interventions unless their other needs are met as well
- Effective multi-agency working is required to enable parents to access the range of services usually needed
- It is unrealistic to expect a single service to meet all needs – hence 'joined up' services are necessary.
- Although parents may draw a wide range of benefits from a parenting intervention, the blanket application of a particular type of programme can be counterproductive.
- Services that allow multiple routes in for families (i.e., have a variety of entry or referral routes).

## Useful Sources/References

Barlow, J., Smailagic, N., Bennett, C., Huband, N., Jones, H. and Coren, E. (2011) *Individual and Group Based Parenting Programmes for Improving Psychosocial Outcomes for Teenage Parents and Their Children*, Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2011, Issue 3. Art. No.: CD002964. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD002964.pub2.

Boddy, J. et al (2009) *International Perspectives on parenting Support Non-English Language Sources*, London: Institute of Education, University of London. Available at:  
<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DCSF-RR114.pdf>

ChildONEurope Secretariat (2007) *Survey on the Role of Parents and the Support from the Governments in the EU*, Florence: ChildONEurope Secretariat.

Daly, M. (ed) (2007) *Parenting in Contemporary Europe: A Positive Approach*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.

Department for Communities and Local Government (2012) *Listening to Troubled Families A Report by Louise Casey, CB, Department for Communities and Local Government*, London: Department for Communities and Local Government.

Higgins, K., Macdonald, G., McLaughlin, K., O'Hara, L., McCann, M. and Moriarty, J. (2012) *Parenting Ur Teen End of Study Report*, Belfast: Institute of Child Care Research, available at:  
<http://www.parentingni.org/downloads/Appendix%201%20Report.pdf>

HM Government (2012) *Social Justice: Transforming People's Lives*, London: Department for Work and Pensions.

Hosking, G., Walsh, I. and Pillai, B. (2010) *International Experiences of Early Intervention for Children, Young People and their Families*, Croyden, Surrey: Wave Trust commissioned by C4EO. Available at:  
[http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/earlyintervention/files/early\\_intervention\\_wave\\_trust\\_international\\_desk\\_study.pdf](http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/earlyintervention/files/early_intervention_wave_trust_international_desk_study.pdf)

Levitas, R. 2012 *There May be Trouble Ahead: What We Know about those 120,000 'Troubled' Families*, PSE Policy Series, Working Paper No 3, Bristol: University of Bristol.

Moran, P., Ghate, D. and van der Merwe, A. (2004) *What Works in Parenting Support? A Review of the International Evidence*, London: Department for Education and Skills, Research Report RR574. Available at:  
<http://www.prb.org.uk/wwiparenting/RR574.pdf>

Oates, J. (ed) (2010) *Supporting Parenting*, Milton Keynes, UK: Open University. Available at:  
<http://oro.open.ac.uk/21201/2/ECiF5-final-corrected.pdf>

O'Connor, T.G. and Scott, S.B.C. (2007) *Parenting and Outcomes for Children*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Utting, D. (2009) *Assessing and Meeting the Needs for Parenting Support Services*, London: Family and Parenting Institute. Available at:  
<http://www.familyandparenting.org/NR/exeres/662AE8A8-32A0-4920-83B8-F2251046FFD2>