



## Families: Children's first educators

Children's first educators are their families. Children's own homes are, in very many ways, the most important setting for their early care and education.

All families want to give their children a good start in life. Government can help families to help young children through the impact of Government policies on jobs, incomes, services and supports – including support and advice on parenting.

**"The Home Learning Environment in the pre-school period has association with all aspects of children's cognitive and social development and for much of a child's life is one of the most powerful influences upon development."**

Prof. Edward Melhuish, University of London<sup>1</sup>

### A powerful influence on child development

#### Learning at home

The way adults talk with children when very young, how much they read to them, and the learning opportunities they create in everyday home life, all shape children's development and later learning. The first 3 years are an especially important period.<sup>2</sup>

- The latest PISA study of educational attainment in OECD countries finds that 15 year olds whose parents often read books with them in early childhood have markedly higher PISA scores than those whose parents read little with them. This finding holds true regardless of the family's socio-economic background.<sup>3</sup>

#### Investing in children

The material resources available to families shape the investment they can make in their children. Families' incomes, the services they can access, the opportunities open to them and the neighbourhoods they grow up in – all impact on children's development and life-chances and all affect their

expectations of success in life. Children who grow up in poverty have the odds stacked against them right from the start.

- Research in the UK has found that by the age of 5, children from the poorest fifth of homes are already nearly a year behind children from middle-income households in developmental outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

#### Parenting

The ways in which parents, guardians and other carers in the family bring up children – the way they interact day-to-day, the warmth of their relationships, the boundaries they set on their children's behaviour, and the way they model behaviour themselves – these different aspects of 'parenting' have a significant impact on children's self-esteem, behaviour, emotional self-regulation and long-term development.

- Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland study and from other research indicates children do best with a parenting style that is warm and responsive but that also demands appropriate behaviour from children.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E. Melhuish (2010) 'Why children, parents and home learning are important', in K. Sylva et al., *Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-School and Primary Education Project*, Abingdon: Routledge, p.67.

<sup>2</sup> Start Strong (2012) *Policy Brief: Early Learning – Policies for Children's First 3 Years*.

<sup>3</sup> OECD (2011) *PISA in Focus 10: What Can Parents Do to Help their Children Succeed in School?* Paris: OECD.

<sup>4</sup> Economic and Social Research Council (2012) *Evidence Briefing: Child Poverty Casts a Long Shadow Over Social Mobility*.

<sup>5</sup> E. Nixon (2012) *Growing Up in Ireland: How Families Matter for Social and Emotional Outcomes of 9 Year-Old Children*.

## Support for the early years

### Supports for families

A family's resources and the services and opportunities available to them have a big impact on the parenting investment a family can make.

#### Linked services and supports

- A wide range of services and supports can help families and children in the early years: early care and education services, Public Health Nurses, specialist health services, parenting supports, primary schools. To be effective, they need to work together so that families can access the right supports at the right time.

#### Helping families out of poverty

- A range of services and income supports are needed to help families and young children get out of poverty. Early care and education services – when they are of high quality and affordable – can directly benefit children and at the same time enable families to access employment, education and training.

#### Balancing work and family life

- Young children benefit when families can combine financial security with the time and energy to provide a happy, stimulating home environment. That's why work-life balance policies and parents' leave entitlements can be so valuable for young children, provided they do not impact negatively on family incomes. In particular, research indicates children benefit when families can take paid parental leave right through a child's first year.<sup>6</sup>

### Parenting supports

Parenting supports are especially valuable in children's early years – a critical time in a child's development and a time when families often look for and are open to support. Supports in the early years include information and advice on children's learning, health and development, as well as advice on how to

promote positive behaviour. Supports may include, for example, tips on how to play with young children interactively, and advice on the value of talking with and reading to even the youngest children. There is a growing body of research evidence on what types of support work.<sup>7</sup>

#### Diverse supports for diverse families

- Parenting supports include public information campaigns, group-based parenting courses, and programmes of home visits to families.
- They are not just for parents and guardians – they can be for grandparents, other family members or carers. Supports should be flexible to fit with families' lives, and should be relevant to all families in all their diversity – social, ethnic, cultural and family structure.

#### Universal and targeted supports

- There should be a continuum of parenting supports, from universal to targeted, to meet different levels of need. A public health approach benefits all children – as all families can benefit from clear and reliable information and advice on parenting – and it reduces the need for more intensive support. In addition, some families go through times when they need further support, which should be available promptly.
- Parenting supports are most effective when trusted, non-stigmatising and accessible. Basing supports in mainstream services can help achieve this and be cost-effective.

<sup>6</sup> Marmot Review (2010) *Fair Society, Healthy Lives: The Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England Post-2010*, p.98.

<sup>7</sup> Two recent reviews are: I. Siraj-Blatchford and J. Siraj-Blatchford (2009) *Improving Children's Attainment through a Better Quality of Family-based Support for Early Learning*, London: C4EO; and M. Furlong et al. (2012) 'Behavioural and cognitive-behavioural group-based parenting programmes for early-onset conduct problems in children aged 3 to 12 years (Review)', *The Cochrane Library* (2012/2).



## All families

### Families in Ireland – more supports needed

#### Disconnected services and supports

- All too often, services and supports for children and families operate in silos. Steps are being taken to strengthen cooperation, e.g. through the roll-out of Children's Services Committees at county level, but developments remain at an early stage.
- The Government has yet to implement its commitment to develop 'a new area-based approach to child poverty'.<sup>8</sup>

#### Early care and education services: unaffordable to many

- Care and education services for under-3s in Ireland are among the most expensive in Europe, and school-age care is unregulated and often unavailable. The lack of affordable, high quality care limits the opportunities for children – and also for families seeking employment. It's a particular barrier for families trying to get out of poverty. 100,000 children are living in consistent poverty in Ireland today.<sup>9</sup>

#### Parents' leave: well short of international standards

- Maternity leave is only paid for 6 months, and parental leave is unpaid, so Ireland falls well short of the one year of paid leave recommended by UNICEF.<sup>10</sup> There is no statutory paternity leave, and no flexibility for parents to transfer unused maternity leave.
- The gap from the end of parents' leave entitlement to a subsidised place in an early care and education service is between 2 and 3.5 years, depending on the age at which a child starts the Free Pre-School Year. In 10 European countries, there is no gap at all.<sup>11</sup>

### Parenting supports in Ireland – not yet mainstream

#### Many local initiatives, but no national framework

- There are many parenting courses and supports in Ireland today, offered by a wide range of organisations, but they operate on a pilot basis or as local initiatives rather than as a mainstream public service. There is no national policy framework.
- Availability varies around the country. In some areas, parenting supports are available on a universal basis, e.g. linked to Public Health Nurses (PHNs). In some areas, supports are targeted at disadvantaged communities. In general, there is no coordination to ensure availability to all families who want or need parenting supports.

#### An evidence base that is growing, but not always clear to parents

- While some parenting programmes have a strong evidence base, some do not.
- A series of initiatives are under way in Ireland evaluating different parenting programmes and models of delivery. When the learning from all these is brought together, we will know a lot about what works for families in Ireland. But we will still need political decisions to translate the learning from these initiatives into mainstream supports.

#### Barriers to mainstreaming

- PHNs and early care and education services are both widely available and trusted – both could provide infrastructure for the mainstream provision of parenting supports. But both services face barriers. The role of PHNs is wide-ranging,<sup>12</sup> and their numbers are limited. In early care and education services the level of professional development is varied, as are parents' views of the role of early care and education services.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Government of Ireland (2011) *Towards Recovery: Programme for a National Government 2011-2016*.

<sup>9</sup> End Child Poverty Coalition (2011) *Child Poverty: Ireland in Recession*.

<sup>10</sup> UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre (2008) *The Child Care Transition: Report Card 8*, pp.14-15.

<sup>11</sup> P. Moss (ed.) (2012) *International Review of Leave Policies and Related Research: 2011*, pp.32-33.

<sup>12</sup> C. A. Nic Philibin et al. (2010) 'The role of the public health nurse in a changing society', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 66(4).

<sup>13</sup> M. Share, L. Kerrins & S. Greene (2011) *Developing Early Years Professionalism*, NCI Early Learning Initiative and TCD.

## A strong start

### Policies to help families give their children a good start

To help families give their children a good start in life, we recommend the Government use the National Early Years Strategy to develop a national policy framework for parenting supports and to strengthen services and supports for families:

#### 1. Make services work for families

We need to ensure clear links between Public Health Nurses (PHNs), early care and education services, and specialist services such as Speech and Language Therapists.

- Implement the Programme for Government commitment to area-based responses to child poverty, drawing on the experience of Family Resource Centres and the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme<sup>14</sup> as well as international learning, e.g. Sure Start in the UK.<sup>15</sup> Responses should involve 'early childhood hubs' that link together services outside the home and supports for young children and their families inside the home.<sup>16</sup>
- Review the structure of the PHN service to ensure PHNs have a dedicated role in supporting families with young children.

#### 2. Make high quality early care and education services more affordable

Affordability and quality must go hand in hand. When early care and education services are affordable, they facilitate employment, which in turn reduces child poverty. But they only benefit children when they are of high quality.

- Require any extension of affordable services – whether pre-school or school-age – to be of high quality. This commitment should involve the regulation of school-age services, and avoid the use of Community Employment as the basis of any scheme.

- Promote parental engagement in early care and education services through quality-raising measures, e.g. through the national roll-out of the Siolta national quality framework and the Aistear curriculum framework.

#### 3. Make parenting supports available to all families in children's early years

Parenting and the home learning environment are crucial for all children, and the need for information, advice and support in children's early years is common to all families.

- Make high quality parenting supports available locally and free of charge for all families with young children, using the existing infrastructure of Public Health Nurses, early care and education services, and Family Resource Centres.
- Ensure that publicly supported parenting programmes are evidence-based.
- Support public information campaigns on the importance of early learning and on practical ways in which families can support young children's development.

#### 4. Enhance parents' leave options in children's first year

The Government should use the opportunity created by the requirement to turn the new EU Directive on parental leave into law by March 2013 to:<sup>17</sup>

- Make it possible for parents to transfer unused maternity leave entitlements, so children do not lose if out if their mother returns to work before using all her leave entitlements.
- Introduce a statutory entitlement to 2 weeks' paid paternity leave.
- Extend the right to request changes in working hours/patterns to *all* families with young children.

The long-term aim should be to move towards the international standard of one year's paid leave in a child's first year.

<sup>14</sup> This programme, co-funded with philanthropic funding, supports pilot interventions in Dublin 17 (Preparing for Life), Ballymun (youngballymun) and Tallaght West (CDI).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, House of Commons: Children's, Schools and Families Committee (2010) *Sure Start Children's Centres*.

<sup>16</sup> Start Strong (2010) *Children 2020: Planning Now, For the Future*, pp.64-66.

<sup>17</sup> Council Directive 2010/18/EU will, among other things, increase (unpaid) parental leave from 14 to 18 weeks for each parent, and introduce a right for workers returning from parental leave to request changes to their working hours and/or patterns.



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Start Strong is a coalition of organisations and individuals committed to advancing high quality care and education for all young children in Ireland.

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