Designing and implementing parenting support policies and programs

Tailored brief for service providers and policy makers

July 2021

During the past few years, it has been widely acknowledged that all families, within or outside a "crisis mode", need support. Creating warm, nurturing home environments is not easy, especially when confronted with the many challenges of daily life.

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified families' needs at many different levels. Increasingly, reports echoing parents' voices (Cooney, 2020) highlight that "parents are not ok". Thus, the challenges related to translating evidence into practice on effectively supporting parents to provide nurturing care to their children (Britto et al., 2015) have been also amplified, as new needs have emerged, and new modes of support are needed.

This tailored brief sets out to provide recommendations for policy makers and service providers to consider prior to designing and implementing parenting support policies and programs. This brief also emphasizes the necessary factors that can bring parenting support programs to scale sustainably.

In 1989, the UN General Assembly, under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, acknowledged family as a fundamental group of society that should be afforded the necessary protection, assistance, and an overall nurturing environment (policies, programs, and services) so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community and provide children with nurturing care.

Even though parenting support[1] is gaining acceptance (e.g., World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund & World Bank Group, 2018; UNICEF, 2017; Council of Europe, 2006; OECD, n.d.; World Health Organization, 2020), there are still many conceptual and implementation gaps. The continuation of these gaps means that parenting programs are not adapting sufficiently to meet the changing needs of families.

Existing data on parenting support provision indicate that to be effective and meet the needs of the families it should:

1. Start even before pregnancy and span beyond early childhood	This proposal is based on the rationale that parents' and caregivers' needs are change continuously as their children are growing and have different developmental needs. Programs such as the *Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities* in UK acknowledge that parenting support is essential for supporting developmental processes. The program therefore tailors its scope (aims, focus, knowledge, skills fostered, etc.) based on children's age and development.
2. Provide parents generalized and equitable access to a combination of provision methods (e.g., parenting groups, breastfeeding support group, parent and toddler group).	Provision methods have been proven to influence parents' participation (outreach and retention rates). Given that many families, especially the most vulnerable, either do not have access or may be reluctant to participate in center-based services, it is important to offer a combination of home visiting and center-based approaches. The experience from the *Community Mothers Programme*, a parent-to-parent support for first-time and some second-time parents of children from birth to 24 months who live in mainly disadvantaged areas in Ireland, highlights that combining services is more effective in meeting the diverse needs of the families and subsequently reaching a wider audience.
3. Move away from deficit models that focus on what parents do not know and cannot do to strength-based models that focus on what parents already know and can do.	Experience from effective programs,[2] such as the *Community Mothers Programme*, highlights that parents should be acknowledged as experts of their own child and empowered by enhancing their confidence and self-esteem.

---

1. In the present tailored brief parenting support is defined as "a range of information, support, education, training, counselling and other measures or services that are provided by public and private providers and focus on influencing how parents understand and carry out their parenting role" (Daly, 2007; cited in Janta, 2013, p. 9)

2. The family centers in Nordic countries, the parenting shops in Belgium, the Rastimo Zajendo (Growing Up Together) Programs in Croatia and the Dobry Rodzic Dobry Start (Good Parent Good Start) program in Poland, are some of the effective programs that employ a strength model (World Bank, 2019).

4. Move beyond reinforcing parenting skills to providing a holistic parenting support system.

Experience from the *Community Mothers Programme* and the *Empowering Parents Empowering, Communities* program highlights that effective programs address parental needs holistically by providing them with resources necessary to respond to children's needs, supporting them in their relationship and providing resources for parental well-being, mental health as well as human and social capital. Especially, within the crisis mode of the COVID-19 pandemic, a holistic support to parents is instrumental given the multiple needs they face at the parent, individual, co-parenting and social levels.

5. Be responsive to familial, local and cultural needs.

Effective approaches, such as the *Primokiz* approach and the *Empowering Parents Empowering, Communities* indicate that effective parenting support provision builds on a good understanding of the needs at the local/community level and at the familial context. In order to understand the diverse needs of communities and of individual families, it is important to start the design and implementation processes by mapping existing strengths and weakness at the local/community and family levels. Experience from both approaches highlights that utilizing existing skills and relationships within local communities is key for delivering high-quality programs as well as for increased parental engagement in the wider community.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its mitigation measures have created an extra burden for families, especially the most vulnerable, including but not limited to lack of access to childcare, limited access to health services, loss of income for family earners, limited access to support networks, etc. Parenting support programs have also been negatively affected by such measures. Although more opportunities for responsive caregiving have been created with families now being able to spend more time together, families have also had to take on additional responsibilities, such as being solely responsible for the care and education of their children. As a result, despite the increased time and opportunity for responsive parenting, restrictions related to physical distancing may disrupt them, as the delivery of parenting support programs has been also disrupted.

Despite the new challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for parenting support programs to adapt their approach to address them, existing data highlight that the above-mentioned principles are fundamental even within the crisis mode. For example, according to the results presented in the brief on **supporting the ECD workforce delivering parenting programs**, recently released by the *Early Childhood Workforce Initiative*, a multi-stakeholder global initiative co-led by the **International Step by Step Association (ISSA)** and **Results for Development (R4D)**, across parenting support programs, common approaches in response to COVID-19 include:

► Being responsive to the needs of the users, by conducting outreach and simple needs assessments to determine the needs and capacities of families;

► Providing a holistic parenting support system by increasing content on psychosocial support;

► Providing access to a combination of provision methods, by using virtual platforms, messaging services or telephone to deliver visits and other supports.

Service providers play a vital role in ensuring that parenting support is effective and responsive. Learnings from the case studies on effective parenting support programs highlight that before designing and implementing programs, service providers should consider the following:

Use a variety of methods and approaches to deliver the content: It is more effective to use more than one method to deliver the content so as to model and offer opportunities for participants to practice the target behavior. Parenting programs which are more effective use active rather than passive learning techniques such as role-playing situations or actual interactions with children. Some effective approaches include: multiple adult learning principles; intergenerational approaches; psychosocial stimulation; individual counselling and peer to peer exchange.

1. Involve key stakeholders in design and implementation

Effective parenting support programs build on bottom-up and participatory approaches. Such approaches guarantees that children's and families' needs are met and also improves networking among program stakeholders.

In the **Community Mothers Programme**, parents and community mothers co-decide the child-rearing and developmental goals to be achieved before the next visit.

The **Primokiz approach** is also highly participatory, as a broad range of participants from the local administration, public and private services and organizations across sectors, including families, have to be involved at different stages in the process.

2. Support peer-to-peer exchanges among parents

Peer-led parenting support programs, such as the *Empowering Parents Empowering, Communities* program, have higher retention rates than conventional parenting group formats (Royal Children's Hospital, n.d.). Families that participate become more engaged when they feel that they share common experiences with the people who deliver the program. In addition, peer-led parenting support yields positive effects for the parent who delivers the program.

Results from evaluation studies on the **Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities program** highlight that parents value programs that combine the following modes and modalities of delivery:

1) integration of behaviour change with adult learning;

2) interactive modes of delivery (e.g. small and large group discussion, role play, demonstrations, information sharing and reflection); and

3) opportunities for parents to practice and use the new skills learnt.

For example, the experience of the *Community Mothers Programme* indicates that the effects on 'community mothers' include: increased feelings of self-worth, increased status in their own community and increased motivation to participate in lifelong learning. Thus, both 'community' mothers' and the parents who are visited by them, feel empowered and believe in their capabilities without becoming dependent on professionals.

3.   Encourage the workforce development

Programs such as the *Empowering Parents Empowering, Communities* and the *Community Mothers Programme* highlight the need for providers to offer opportunities for continuous training, supervision and support, so as to ensure that frontline workers deliver high-quality and effective parenting support. Local Hubs, parenting specialists and peer-to-peer support can contribute into enhancing the capacities and skills.

4.   Provide multi-professional training opportunities

To ensure that coherent and consistent messages are conveyed to parents by multiple professionals and services, it is important to offer opportunities for training across professions and sectors. The experience from the Italian *Nati per Leggere (Born to Read)* program highlights that multi-professional training not only empowers the professionals but also can support the development of new (intersectoral) networks which supports implementation and the scaling of programs.

5.   Monitor whether delivery of the program adheres to the protocol or program model originally developed (program fidelity)

Implementation fidelity is the degree to which an intervention is delivered as intended and is critical to successful translation of evidence-based interventions into practice (Breitenstein, et al., 2010).

6.   Reward continued program participation

Experience from the *Empowering Parents Empowering, Communities* and the *Nati per Leggere* programs highlight that some effective ways for ensuring program fidelity include but are not limited to evaluation and monitoring, development and use of prescribed materials and curricula, mechanisms for empowering and building the capacity of the workforce, links to the community and cooperation with different sectors.

Parenting support provision is inherent to a wide range of policies, such as health, education, and social welfare. Coordination of sectors is key to ensure that an action plan underpinned by common vision and values is pursued, and that parenting support programs are brought into scale sustainably.

Below we present some key considerations for policy makers, that can contribute into scaling success and making it sustainable:

1. **Scalability and sustainability are more likely to happen when the program has political and administrative support.**

The *Primokiz* approach and the *Nati per Leggere* program indicate that political buy-in is critical for starting the program in new communities. For example, under the *Primokiz* approach, the political will is guaranteed by obtaining the political commitment to work with the *Primokiz* approach and to improving the early years services in a written form before starting the intervention, and by ensuring that policy makers are members of the working/ advisory group. Such mechanisms endure the legitimization of the process.

2. **Political support is also linked to financial support and can encourage or hinder further scale up.**

The implementation of the *Nati per Leggere* program is funded by 40% from public entities at the national and regional levels. In the case of the *Primokiz* approach, when successfully embedded in the local governance structures and mechanisms, the *Primokiz* approach operates with public funding. In Romania, during the 'transfer of know-how' from the Primokiz expert team to the local team, as well as throughout the facilitated seven phases process, the private funding covered solely the technical assistance provided to the local teams, while public funding covered the costs incurred by the local teams. Lower-budget municipalities had fewer financial resources, therefore uneven situations were created across the municipalities which led to a slower process and lower motivation at times.

3. **Having in place a central funding body can contribute into scale.**

The complexity in funding mechanisms for the *Community Mothers Programme* and the funding from different sources is considered as being threatening for the sustainability of the program, since with the establishment of *Tusla*[3] in 2014, different sites are funded by different organizations. On the other hand, in the case of the *Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities* program where a central funding body (NESTA) is in place, scaling up and sustainability are pursued by that body per se. For example, NESTA provided £249,889 in 2017 to scale the program to 16 new hubs across the country.

---

3. Tusla is the Irish Child and Family Agency, an independent egal entity, comprising HSE Children and Family Services, the Family Support Agency and the National Educational Welfare Board as well as incorporating some psychological services and a range of services responding to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

4. Partnerships with stakeholders across different departments, sectors and organizations support scale up.

For instance, the *Primokiz* approach lays its foundations on connecting public and private actors in the early childhood systems with the administrative and political sphere (horizontal and vertical cooperation) with the aim to provide services to all children in a universal and progressive approach. This networking ensures that both municipalities and local coordinators across the country learn from each other, share experiences, challenges and successes and create a Primokiz community. The *Nati per Leggere* program has also being successful in scaling because it promotes cross-sectoral collaboration at national and regional levels across Italy. In addition, the strong involvement of diverse stakeholders has established a whole-society approach and their buy-in has helped considerably to get more professionals engaged in the program.

5. Continuous monitoring and evaluation are key for ensuring that the program achieves its goals and that families' and children's needs are met.

As the *Primokiz* approach highlights, an evaluation and monitoring plan can ensure scale up, as monitoring and evaluation processes can support identifying key enablers and barriers in each phase as well as enabling and risk factors for successful and sustainable further city uptake.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Data from program implementation suggest that the following principles are key for scale and sustainability of parenting support provision.

1. **Constantly access the needs of the families and communities and reconsider your theory of change.** A solid theory of change helps organizational management better understand the intervention and its contribution to creating impact, whereas at the same time supports better and more timely strategic decisions when adapting to emerging issues.

2. **Provide access to a variety of approaches and methods for engaging parents and for delivering the content of the program** to ensure that the diverse needs of the families and the communities are met.

3. **Involve in the process of design and implementation all stakeholders** with an interest in family support and child development.

4. **Build a strong team**, across sectors and professions, by offering capacity building opportunities.

5. **Pursue networking** at the local and national levels to advocate for the program and the importance of family support and to gain allies across stakeholder groups.

6. **Getting the political buy-in** contributes to formalizing the processes and ensure the further uptake at the local and national levels.

Breitenstein, S.M, Gross, D., Garvey, C., Hill, C., Fogg, L., & Resnick, B. (2010). Implementation fidelity in community-based interventions. *Research in nursing & health, 33*(2), 164–173.

Britto, P., Ponguta, L.A, Reyes, C., & Karnati, R. (2015). A systematic review of parenting programmes for young children in low and middle income countries. UNICEF. Retrieved June 14, 2020.

Cooney, C. (2020). *The parents are not all right.* Retrieved June 14, 2020.

Council of Europe (2006). *Recommendation Rec (2006)19 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Policy to Support Positive Parenting with Appendix and Explanatory Report.* Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe.

Hatipoglu, K. (with support from Michelle Neuman and Denise Bonsu, R4D) and Konstantina Rentzou and Zorica Trikic, ISSA) (2021). *Supporting the workforce: Parenting programs adapt to COVID-19.* Retrieved February 22, 2021.

Janta, B. (2013). *Parental support policy brief.* European Union: RAND Europe.

OECD (n.d.). *Research brief. Parental and community engagement matters.* Retrieved November 2020.

Royal Children's Hospital (n.d). *Empowering Parents Empowering Communities.* Retrieved November 26, 2020.

UNICEF (2017). *Standards for ECD parenting programmes in low and middle income countries.* UNICEF

World Bank. (2019). Parenting support: Key transformational instrument of child and human development policies – Trends in EU countries and discussion on parenting policies in Bulgaria. World Bank, Washington, DC.

World Health Organization (2020). Innovating for early childhood development: what have we learned to strengthen programming for nurturing care? Meeting report, Geneva, Switzerland, June 13–14, 2019. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2020. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO. Retrieved May 13, 2020.

World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund & World Bank Group (2018). *Nurturing care for early childhood development: A framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential.* Geneva: World Health Organization.

INTERNATIONAL
STEP by STEP
ASSOCIATION

www.issa.nl

Facebook: @ISSAECD
Twitter: @ISSA_ECD