



Strasbourg, 20 February 2006

CS-EF (2006) 1

**Committee of Experts on Children and Families
(CS-EF)**

**POSITIVE PARENTING IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE
GUIDELINES FOR GOVERNMENTS/STATES PARTIES**

Working document
Directorate General III – Social Cohesion
Social Policy Department

Governments have a vital role to play in supporting families in general and parenting in particular. While parenting used to be treated as a private matter, in a context where families are buffeted by many changes governments cannot afford to lie idle. The challenge to contemporary parenting lies mainly in the fact that just as the demands on them are growing – whether from the media, the public authorities or family members themselves - parents are experiencing a reduction in the support available to them. In other words, parenting involves a formidable range of tasks and responsibilities which are not just ever expanding but which parents are expected to accomplish more or less on their own. This is not a call for greater intervention in the family. Rather in recognising that all levels of society have a role to play in supporting parents, it seeks especially to redefine the boundary between state action and individual autonomy, such that public policy better resources parents in rearing their children. Support is the keyword from the Council's point of view. The benefits of increased governmental activity in supporting parents are likely to be legion: for states and societies improved provision for parenting represents an investment in a healthier and more prosperous future for society, as well as improving the quality of family life; for those involved in parenting it will provide assistance with the needs that are part and parcel of rearing children and with the problems that occur from time to time as well as with the more enduring needs that affect some parents. In many national settings the recommendations to follow will constitute, rather than a complete innovation, either a concretisation of existing policy concerns or a further development of policies already in place.

1. Policy Commitment to Parenting

- 1.1 Governments should designate parenting as a domain of public policy and should adopt such legislative and other measures that may be necessary, including national guidelines and action plans, to guarantee that the principles and quality standards set out in the appendix to this document are complied with. The ultimate objective is to establish the conditions for positive parenting.

2. Basic Principles

- 2.1 Governments should be guided by the following principles when developing their policy and provision in the domain of support for parenting:
 - Rights-based approach: to be realised by treating children and parents as bearers of rights;
 - Parents as the primary guardians: to be realised by provisions that recognise and respect the parents (which is interpreted to refer to all those in situations of parenting) as the primary guardians and carers of children, subject to the child's best interests;
 - Partnership: to be realised by measures that facilitate the involvement of parents and children in and through public policy, that heed and treat with respect their views and experience and that strive towards inter-agency working;
 - Diversity of provision: to be realised by plurality in approach and a recognition that parents, children and families are heterogeneous and that there are many different varieties or styles of parenting to be encouraged by policy;

- Balance: to be realised by complementing provision to develop responsibility in parents through compulsory measures with that which utilises incentives and a positive approach to parents' potential;
- Adequacy: to be realised by an acceptance of the significance of adequate living conditions, especially those relating to income and access to services, for positive parenthood;
- Equality: to be realised by the promotion of equal chances for children and parents regardless of their family situation or background;
- Local response: to be realised by the establishment of a network of services such that people can access services in their local area;
- Process: to be realised by recognising that parenting, just as providing support for it, involves an ongoing set of activities and relationships that change over time and that must be considered in a holistic fashion;
- Integration/coordination: to be realised by policies that are part of an integrated package of measures, often delivered by a range of agencies or providers, aimed at positive parenting;
- Inter-ministerial co-operation: to be realised by policies that are co-ordinated across ministries and agencies and also, as appropriate, at an international level.

2.2 Such principles will be easier to achieve if they are part of and emerge from some kind of agreement or consensus about what constitutes the basic set of values in society about the parenting of children. The actual values involved will vary from country to country. The Council of Ministers wishes to underline that among such values should be the dignity and proper treatment of children, the human rights of children and the outlawing of physical and verbal violence against children, including humiliation. It is recommended that state parties undertake such measures as will lead to discourse on and elaboration of society's values about parenting and children.

3. Approach to Children

- 3.1 All public policies should have a child angle. This should, as well as recognising the interests and needs of all children, pay due attention to the varying needs of children in different age groups and at stages of development. To effect this commitment, the principles enshrined in the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) should guide the activities of all bodies working in the field, public and private. The explicit rights and general principles enunciated by the UNCRC are:
- Child's right to life, survival and development;
 - Child's right to non discrimination;
 - The best interests of the child;
 - Child's capacity to express views and be heeded.

4. Rights of Parents

- 4.1 The rights of those in a parenting position or situation must also be emphasised (subject to the best interests of the child). Such rights include entitlement to support by the state in fulfilling their parental functions.

5. Desired Outcomes

- 5.1 To become a target of government action, parenting and the factors that shape it must be clearly conceptualised. Positive parenting is defined as parental behaviour that is nurturing, empowering and provides a structure or set of boundaries such that the full development of the child is realised.
- 5.2 In terms of concrete outcomes or goals of policy, it is suggested that governments should organise their policies and programmes on positive parenting to bring about the following three types of achievement:
- To create the conditions for positive parenting. This is broad-ranging and mainly oriented to prevention. It includes on the one hand ensuring that all those rearing children have access to an appropriate level and diversity of resources (material, temporal, psychological, social and cultural) and on the other that broad social attitudes and patterns of prevailing life are receptive to the needs of families with children and also those of parents;
 - To remove barriers to positive parenting. Barriers arise from many different sources. They may for example be due to existing inadequacies in income and access to material resources or they may be caused by institutional rigidities such as time schedules, inadequacies in policies to reconcile family and work life;
 - To promote positive parenting by on the one hand developing a vision of what constitutes positive parenting and on the other by taking whatever measures are necessary to see that that vision becomes a reality.

6. Target Group Orientation of Policy and Provision

- 6.1 Programmes and provisions should be designed and conceived of in terms of:
- Universal provision for all involved in parenting of children;
 - Parenting in difficult situations;
 - Parenting in crisis situations.
- 6.2 In the first regard policy and provision should be oriented to meet the needs that all parents encounter from time to time. In the second regard, policy should seek to solve the difficulties experienced on a more regular basis by particular groups of parents. In this regard it must be recognised that parenting in certain situations and at certain periods in the life cycle is by its nature more difficult. This is not to say that those parenting in such situations always encounter difficulties but, rather, that some circumstances place parents in a potentially vulnerable situation and that the needs of some parents are more complex than those of others. Hence, a target group approach is an essential complement to a generic policy. The identity of the target groups will vary from country to country but the needs of the following groups should be especially attended to:

- very young parents;
- lone mothers and/or fathers;
- those parenting in circumstances of illness, disability or addiction;
- those parenting on a low income or in situations where other key resources are below average.

Thirdly, there are crisis situations - such as for example, parenting in times of divorce or family breakdown – where particular support is needed. A third focus of parenting support policy is therefore necessary in order to deal with situations that spell a disruption of family life.

- 6.3 All services should as a matter of course think, talk and act in terms of both mothers and fathers. It should be recognised especially that fathers may need to be guided to take more responsibility for the care and upbringing of their children. In addition, in all provision, the contexts in which mothers and fathers find themselves should be taken into account. For example, fathers often have to work fixed hours, something that they may not have any choice about, while many mothers have to combine parenting and paid work.
- 6.4 The notion of ecology should inform services and interventions in relation to the family in general and parenting in particular. This spells recognition that a wide variety of factors in the family's situation, including the provision designed to offer support and assistance, have an impact on parenting. This together with the principle of public service requires the adoption of forms of provision that correspond to and respect the social routines of the individuals concerned, whilst always taking account of individuals' or groups' specific circumstances and characteristics. Governments must promote diversified intervention procedures depending on the place in order to take account of all environmental parameters.
- 6.5 A local response is underlined. Local co-ordination should be prioritised and should be understood as:
 - Action to optimise the physical and social environment;
 - Action that is based in a local area that takes account of the aspirations and specific features of the various social groups resident there and, equally, the different ecological conditions;
 - Action that secures the best use of already existing resources as well as generating new resources;
 - A permanent commitment to action encompassing users and citizens (including parents and children);
 - Action that is accompanied by an evaluation procedure based on a system of priority objectives.
- 6.6 Measures should be put in place to foster international co-operation and exchanges of good practice in relation to parenting.

7. Parenting in Situations of Social Exclusion

- 7.1 Access to adequate resources for parents and children should be recognised as a fundamental axis of policy oriented to families and parenting. A programme of measures for families at risk of exclusion should be developed. Such a programme will lay emphasis on:
- Access to social rights (including the right to adequate income, health, education, housing and employment) for all parents and especially those experiencing or at risk of social exclusion;
 - A commitment to ensure that families and children suffering exclusion enjoy the same service quality as the best-off families;
 - The avoidance of measures that stigmatise so that children and parents do not feel different because they are from a family that is less well-off than other families;
 - Media campaigns that convey different images of parenting so that no stigma attaches to differences.
- 7.2 Assistance with schooling and assistance with parenting should be combined in certain cases, especially where children lack roots or a permanent home (for example children from Roma or gypsy backgrounds, children of migrants).
- 7.3 Methods for diagnosing the risk factors as regards breakdown in parenting should be devised and disseminated for the use of social services, doctors, youth workers, teachers and childcare staff to train them in identifying families with problems in this respect. In devising methods, particular attention should be paid to children who have not yet learned to communicate their feelings and needs.

8. Core Components of Provision

- 8.1 It is suggested that a policy oriented towards positive parenting contain three core components:
- Offering support to parents;
 - Promoting learning;
 - And, as appropriate, facilitating and encouraging behavioural change.
- 8.2 Measures oriented to the first component – offering and improving support - should recognise and seek to activate other forms of support as well as that provided by the state. In fact, policy should be oriented to engendering support for parenting at the following three levels:
- informal support (strengthen parents' existing social bonds and encourage new links with family, friends neighbours and other people based locally);
 - semi-formal support (empower parents' and children's NGOs and activate a range of self-help and other community-based groups and services);
 - formal support (professional services, family policy).
- Programmes of mentoring for parents should be considered as an effective way of providing education and support to parents.

- 8.3 As well as providing support measures, governments should ensure the provision/improvement of education to parents on the nature of the role and how it is changing. Parents should especially be educated on the nature of children's rights as well as those of parents and on the responsibilities that are the complement of these rights. Parents need to be provided with information about the vision of parenting that is enshrined in the UNCRC (e.g., what constitutes a fulfilment or violation of children's human rights in the family). Governments should also take steps to make parents aware of the latest knowledge on child development, the parent-child relationship, the upbringing of children and the prevailing socio-legal expectations. The 'parental information package' also has to include information on the importance of early attachment and sensitivity to the child's needs, as well as what are constructive and effective ways of disciplining and about the qualities of positive parent-child relationships.
- 8.4 The principle of educating children about their rights should also be adopted. Human rights training could, for example, be included in early education. In this context the practice in Sweden whereby one week a year is devoted to educating children about the UNCRC may provide a model from which other countries can learn.
- 8.5 Sometimes information is not enough – this is why there is a need for a third component of policy - training and skills development. It is suggested that national programmes of parenting training should be developed and made available to any adults desiring them (including parents to be as well as those in existing parenting situations). A range of services should be made available for this purpose, including parenting education, parental counselling and other quality services for mothers, fathers, siblings, grandparents and others who from time to time may be responsible for promoting the child's best interests. Parents may in particular need to receive training on how to solve conflicts through anger management and mediation techniques. There is also a need to organise parent training courses for pupils within the school system where these do not already exist.

9. Guidelines and Quality Standards for Service Provision

- 9.1 A diverse set of agencies and means, including the mass media, can be utilised for the purposes of developing and implementing parenting support policy.
- 9.2 To ensure the implementation of the principles and rights set out above, benchmarks and standards must be set and states parties have a key role to play in this respect. It is suggested that government should issue guidelines to professionals and practitioners spelling out how they should orient their provision. Such guidelines should emphasise the following:
- All services should operate to a principle of becoming partners with and empowering parents. The notion of partnership should be understood as implying recognition of the knowledge and expertise held by parents. A key

part of the task of professionals should be to build parents' self confidence. A partnership ethos should also extend to inter-agency working. One way of establishing partnerships is through operational contracts and agreements designed to secure co-operation. Such agreements should specify the particular areas of activity of each department and provide for sharing of facilities. This kind of practice enables those concerned to exchange information and views on needs and increase their effectiveness by agreeing on operational objectives.

- Emphasis should be placed on the language and approach of services. For example, instead of framing services in an ideology of intervention, they should be framed in terms of support and assistance. This means also that professionals should act as support for parents rather than representing overwhelming demands and criticism.
- In terms of service provision and professional praxis the emphasis should be on:
 - rigorous training of the professionals concerned;
 - ongoing evaluation, including internal evaluation (self-evaluation) and external evaluation;
 - continuity of action;
 - response based on functional analysis of every situation.
- As a general principle, any services provided must reflect a non-judgmental and non-stigmatising approach. All support offered must be designed to encourage individuals and family groups to act on their own initiative, and not create excessive dependency. For many families, it is necessary to first support them in their own home before they are able to relate to the social services.
- The principles of equity and accessibility should be to the fore in all services.
- Any action taken must be designed as far as possible to help those concerned to accept their responsibilities and encourage community action as a means of enabling those in parenting positions to express themselves and realise their social role. Self-help groups have a role to play here.
- Provision should be age-related and appropriate to the target group in every way.

10. Guidelines for Those Involved in Parenting

- 10.1 Guidelines on positive child-rearing should be issued to all persons providing care and involved in the upbringing of the child on an ongoing basis (e.g., childminders, kindergardens). These should make clear how the child's person is to be respected and their participation promoted and that parents have rights as well as responsibilities. They should be devised on the basis of consultation with the range of stakeholders involved, especially parents and service providers and where appropriate children, and be monitored to ensure their efficacy and that they are being adhered to.