

## EUROCHILD/ CHILDREN IN NORTHERN IRELAND MEMBERS' EXCHANGE SEMINAR 2007

### *Promoting Children's Rights through Positive Parenting Policies*

#### *Key Messages*

Eurochild held its first Members' Exchange Seminar in Belfast, Northern Ireland on 26<sup>th</sup> - 27<sup>th</sup> April 2007. Hosted by Children in Northern Ireland [CiNI], one of Eurochild's newest members, it was attended by over 40 policy-makers, practitioners, researchers and academics from countries across Europe, who came together to share information, experiences and ideas on promoting children's rights through positive parenting policies.

#### **A changing policy context**

There is currently an increasing interest in child and family policies at EU level and a greater willingness to become involved in areas previously regarded as the private domain of individuals. This changing climate has been fuelled by the persistence of unacceptable levels of child poverty in one of the richest continents of the world – on average 20% of children and young people under 16 years old remain at-risk-of-poverty<sup>1</sup> - and concerns to break the transmission of poverty and social exclusion from one generation to the next. A recent report by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre on child well-being in rich countries<sup>2</sup> further evidences the need for policy intervention, showing clearly that all European countries have weaknesses that need to be addressed, regardless of their ranking in the well-being league tables, and that there is no obvious relationship between levels of child well-being and GDP per capita. Consequently, the vast majority of Member States have now prioritised the development of strategies to combat child poverty and social exclusion, adopting a policy mix which has support services for families, promoting parents' labour market participation and reconciliation of work and family life at its heart<sup>3</sup>.

The changing age composition of societies is also driving this agenda. By 2050 the ratio of people of working age to those aged 65 or over is expected to fall to 2:1, stimulating a policy response of 'demographic renewal' to encourage families to have as many children as they want with state support to reconcile the demands of work and family life. The proposed "Alliance for Families" – intended to provide a platform for high level discussion between Member States on family-friendly policies – is a good example of the current climate of interest in supporting families in a changing social context.

At the same time, we are seeing a greater recognition at EU level of children and young people's rights with the introduction last year of the EC Communication "Towards a European Strategy on the Rights of the Child"<sup>4</sup>. All Member States have adopted the UNCRC but the reflection of this in policies concerning children and families has been disappointing. Few Member States, for example, referenced children's rights in their National Action Plans for Inclusion and there was virtually no recognition of children as 'relevant actors' in the planning process<sup>5</sup>. The Communication recognises that a growing number of EU policies

<sup>1</sup> Eurostat *Population and social conditions* <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/int>

<sup>2</sup> Unicef Report Card No. 7, 2007 "An overview of child well-being in rich countries" [www.unicef.org/irc](http://www.unicef.org/irc)

<sup>3</sup> EC Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2007

[http://ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/social\\_inclusion/naps](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/social_inclusion/naps)

<sup>4</sup> EC COM (2006) 367 final, 04 07 06 <http://europa.eu/scadplus/leg>

<sup>5</sup> Eurochild's review of the 2006-08 national reports on strategies for social protection and social inclusion, Jan 2007 *Ending Child Poverty within the EU?* [www.eurochild.org](http://www.eurochild.org)

affect children and young people, directly or indirectly, and amongst its proposals is the 'mainstreaming' of children's rights, to ensure the impact on children of all new EU actions is taken into account. It also proposes the setting up of a European Forum for the Rights of the Child and that children and young people be brought into decision-making processes.

## The concept of positive parenting

Concern about children's rights is not limited to the EU. The Council of Europe has a long track record in this area and frequently operates as a 'think tank' for ideas which the EU subsequently takes up. One initiative of particular relevance to the current debate is the CofE Recommendation on Positive Parenting produced in December 2006<sup>6</sup>. The Recommendation defines positive parenting as "*parental behaviour, based on 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*". The importance to children of growing up in a positive family environment is endorsed and the responsibility of the state to create the right conditions for positive parenting is emphasised. Creating the right conditions means ensuring access to appropriate material, psychological, social and cultural resources; taking steps to remove barriers to positive parenting, such as policies to promote a better reconciliation of family and working life; and importantly, raising awareness of the value of positive parenting, to parents, children and the state. The need to adopt an empowerment approach - based on consultation and dialogue with parents in the spirit of a working partnership – is recommended as a central component of policies to support parents; these should be geared towards engendering support on three levels:

- a) *informal*: creating and strengthening existing social bonds and encouraging new links between parents and their family, neighbours and friends
- b) *semi-formal*: empowering parents' and children's associations and NGOs and activating a range of self-help and other community-based groups and services
- c) *formal*: facilitating access to public services

In keeping with the provisions and spirit of the UNCRC, the Recommendation promotes the development of positive parent-child relationships, founded on the exercise of parental responsibility to optimise the child's potential development, rather than the exercise of parental authority. It recognises both parents and children as holders of rights, validating parents' role as guardians of children's rights with a responsibility on the state to act as final guarantor.

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<sup>6</sup> Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe: Recommendation 19 [2006]  
<http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/youthfamily>

## Key Messages from the Seminar

Seminar participants endorsed the concept and underlying principles of the Council of Europe Positive Parenting Recommendation, which both informed and inspired the debate, providing the context for the key messages which follow:

- ❑ Parents\* are usually best placed to promote the best interests of their child; children's rights and parents' rights need not be in conflict, accepting that the state has this residual responsibility where a conflict of interests prevails
- ❑ There needs to be a much greater recognition of the need to support parents in the parenting task at European level and all levels of national governance; parenting cannot be regarded a "something which comes naturally" and left to chance
- ❑ Creating the right conditions for positive parenting requires that structural problems in society are both recognised and addressed; parenting support cannot substitute efforts to tackle the root causes of poverty and disadvantage
- ❑ We need to shift the focus of parent support away from regulation to resourcing, to more appropriately reflect the spirit and provisions of the UNCRC in relation to the state's responsibility to support parent's in the parenting task
- ❑ Parent support should be an integrated part of policy development; support should be universally available and provided in a non-stigmatising way
- ❑ Parent support programmes should be based on empowerment and partnership, not deficiency and punishment; they should be needs-led and not prescriptive in approach; they should be evidence-based and reflect best practice; Member States should promote more robust research on effective parenting programmes
- ❑ Non-violent parenting should be promoted, incorporating the use of alternatives to physical punishment into parent support programmes
- ❑ Diversity must be recognised and respected in relation to family patterns, cultural differences and gender differences, in keeping with the best interests of the child; there should be positive policy adjustments for particularly vulnerable groups such as immigrant families; there should be greater recognition of fathers' parenting responsibilities, and support for children's involvement with both parents in the event of separation (provided it is safe to do so)
- ❑ Preventive work and early intervention strategies in situations of risk are crucial; the need for support on a multi-dimensional basis to achieve an appropriate work/life balance is essential
- ❑ We must validate parent support work, whether this takes place at an informal, semi-formal or formal level, as outlined in the Council of Europe Recommendation; appropriate standards, training programmes and quality of workers - whether paid or unpaid - is as important as the quality of programme content
- ❑ The state should aspire to a high standard of positive parenting when fulfilling parental responsibilities in place of parents

*\* the term parent(s) is used to mean mothers, fathers, carers and other adults with responsibility for caring for a child(ren)*