



## **Strategy for Strengthening Families**

Submission of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and  
Education

21st September 2004



## 1. Introduction

In 2001, the Minister for Education and Science appointed the Dublin Institute of Technology and St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra to jointly establish the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE). This was in pursuance of the objectives of the White Paper *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999) and to advise the Department of Education and Science on policy issues in this area. The remit of the CECDE is comprehensive, focusing on all care and education settings for children aged birth to six years of age, bridging many of the traditional divides between education and care and between early years settings and the formal education system.

Within this broad framework, the **objectives** of the CECDE include:

- Developing a National Framework for Quality (NFQ) for early childhood education;
- Developing targeted interventions on a pilot basis for children who are educationally disadvantaged and children with special needs and;
- Preparing the groundwork for the establishment of an Early Childhood Education Agency as envisaged by the White Paper, *Ready to Learn* (CECDE, 2001).

The strengthening of families forms an inherent part of this brief, the family forming the primary unit within which the majority of children develop and learn. As part of the development of the NFQ, parental involvement is cited within our Programme of Work (CECDE, 2001) as one of the core areas for the development of guidelines and standards. The NFQ will provide a set of quality standards applicable to all settings where children aged birth to six are present and therefore enable parents to ensure that their children are receiving quality care and education regardless of the setting attended.

Specifically in relation to coordinating and enhancing provision for children affected by disadvantage or those with special needs, the CECDE Programme of Work asserts that, "*The active involvement of parents in early childhood education settings will be a priority.*" (CECDE, 2001:5) Consultation is a core and central value of the CECDE, and we have made progress in the development of consultation processes to

involve parents and the wider community in our work. Within this context, the CECDE welcomes the opportunity to be involved in the development of the Strategy of Strengthening Families.

## **2. Role of Early Childhood Care and Education**

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) plays an important role in supporting and strengthening family life. In the early years, the care and education of the child are indivisible and in no other context is this more apparent than in that of the family. Owing to dramatic changes in economic, social and demographic terms in recent years, great strains have been placed on the adequate supply of quality affordable childcare places outside the home. As has been elucidated by research, high quality ECCE services can be an important stimulus for the early learning and development of the young child (DES, 1999; Shonkoff and Philips, 2000). In addition, quality, affordable services support parents and reduce the stresses that can be inherent in trying to combine their duties of work and family life (DSCFA, 1998; DJELR, 1999).

Currently, while half of all four year olds and nearly all five year olds are enrolled in the infant classes of the primary school, there is no universal provision for younger children. The application of the cut-off age of four years is arbitrary. Life-long learning begins at birth, but making provision for all three year olds will be a step in the right direction. Providing this age group with the opportunity to avail of quality ECCE services will enhance parents' ability to provide for the optimal development of their child.

### **Recommendation:**

**The CECDE recommends universal provision of early childhood care and education in a quality setting for all three year olds in Ireland for at least one year. The relationship between parents and providers should be on the basis of partnership and collaboration in the best interests of the child.**

## **3. Research**

It is imperative that the provision and development of services is evidence-based on indigenous Irish research. While there is a wealth of international research available, there is need for enhanced research capacity in the Irish context, including research on the role of ECCE services in strengthening families and the impact of parental involvement in settings on the early learning and development of children. Such research needs to be coordinated and sustained and methods of dissemination be put in place to ensure the results are widely available and used.

The work of the CECDE is instrumental in this regard. Our Research Strategy (CECDE, 2003a) outlines a number of research initiatives the CECDE is undertaking in relation to partnership with parents and families. The Audit of Research (CECDE, 2003b), which details all research conducted in Ireland since 1990 in ECCE, contains a chapter on Parents and Families. This contains sections on Family Supports and Partnership and Participation and while much research has been conducted, gaps are highlighted that need to be researched in the Irish context. In addition, the CECDE is building an archive of resource materials and is making preparations to become a clearinghouse for research in ECCE in Ireland.

**Recommendation:**

**The CECDE recommends that the Strategy for Strengthening Families contain a research element to ensure that decisions taken now and in the future are evidence-based, drawing on indigenous Irish research. Moreover, the Strategy must contain a dissemination element, ensuring accessibility to, and use of, such research.**

**4. Economic considerations**

Quality ECCE services must be adequately resourced and financed. Research is emphatic on the positive returns to the individual and society from investment in ECCE services, in both short-term and long-term aspects (Weikart *et al.*, 1978; DES, 1999; Cleveland and Krashinsky, 2003). Such an investment is also an asset to the parents and family of the child in the provision of quality services to support the child's learning and development.

When making decisions about the use and application of resources, policy makers need to ensure the best return possible on that investment. Cost benefit analyses of investment at various stages of a child's life have shown that the earlier the investment is made in a child's development, the more effective it is and the better the returns (Council of Economic Advisers, 1997; Karoly *et al.*, 1998; Barnett, 2000; Reynolds *et al.*, 2002). While the economics of early intervention can be helpful to policy makers in making decisions about the distribution of scarce resources, we must remain aware that they tell us nothing of whether such distribution is fair or equitable. Therefore, observations on the cost benefits or otherwise of a particular activity must be tempered by other considerations to do with equity and less tangible benefits to children and their families. Barnett (2000) has pointed out that while structural elements such as a reduced need for special education provision can be costed, increases in the child's self-esteem cannot. This is a relevant consideration as the programmes associated with strong evidence of effectiveness were the most expensive. Variables that have been considered in cost/benefit analyses include duration of service provision, intensity of provision, the number of services provided and the cost to parents. Studies from the United States have shown that under-investing in the elements which impact on the quality of the service and the length of time it is available to the child and family results in the loss of important benefits, and therefore reduces the returns on the investment (Barnett, 2000).

**Recommendation:**

**The CECDE recommends that the Strategy for Strengthening Families prioritise services for families with babies and young children as a crucial period of investment.**

**The CECDE recommends a sustainable funding strategy for the early childhood period at national level. Such an investment enhances the learning and development of the child by ensuring quality services and also strengthens the family as a direct support in the child-rearing process.**

## **5. Resources**

Families are not homogenous. Individual families live in different circumstances and their needs change over time. Supporting families with young children will require

different approaches than, for example, families whose children are older. Likewise, the very many different models of the family in Ireland today and the changing roles of mothers and fathers have also had an impact. For many parents, support from the State and employers to establish work/life balance will be a priority. For parents of children with special needs arising from a disability, the supports required may be specific to the nature of the child's disability and the impact on the family. For families experiencing disadvantaged circumstances, access to training and education for parents may well enter the equation. The system of supports put in place must be flexible in order to be able to respond to the holistic needs of the family, rather than the family having to package its needs in order to fit the structure of the system.

There are many models of support for families with young children already in operation in Ireland. Many of these relate only to families at risk, or to families of children with special needs. The Community Mothers' Programme (Molloy, 2002) has been shown to have benefits to subsequent children even though mothers were visited only on the birth of the first child. The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (NDP/CSF Evaluation Unit, 2003) represents a very large investment in allowing parents to access training and employment in order to move out of poverty. Several voluntary agencies are involved in early intervention services for babies and young children with disabilities, and there are other examples. But two important issues must be kept in mind. There is no single coherent system of family support available to all parents and families to meet the particular needs of our society. A family must be identified as not functioning properly, or being somehow in deficit in order to avail of certain supports. Secondly, supports for the family must ensure quality provision and positive outcomes for the children. Supporting families through services involving children must primarily be concerned with how the service benefits the children.

**Recommendation:**

**Family Support Services must be designed and implemented as a universal support for all families so that it will not lead to marginalisation or labelling of those availing of services.**

**The public image of family support services needs to be revised and reviewed to ensure that families perceive them in a more positive light.**

**Only then will those accessing services do so without negativity or stigma.**

## **6. Benefits of positive parenting**

Hart and Risely (1995) noted that a child is uniquely dependent during the earliest years of life, and her/his experience is mediated almost entirely by parents.

Common sense would then indicate that the way in which parents mediate the world for the child will have an enormous impact on the child's development. Common sense would be correct, as there is ample evidence from the research literature to support this conclusion. Across all the domains of physical, socio-emotional, cognitive, moral and spiritual development, the evidence for the positive effects of supportive parenting are overwhelming (Gribble *et al.*, 1993; Van Ijzendoorn *et al.*, 1995; Wilson and Gottman, 1995; Belsky, *et al.*, 1996; Kirsh and Cassidy, 1997; Meins *et al.*, 1998; Steinhauer, 1998; Belsky and Fearon, 2002). As the National Children's Strategy (DHC, 2000:5) points out "*The family generally affords the best environment for raising children and external intervention should be to support and empower families within the community.*"

While the emphasis here is on the benefits to the child, and future adult, of growing up in a supportive family environment, it is important to note, albeit briefly, the impact on children of less positive family situations. Stressed family settings will not provide young children with the type of experiences which will be of optimum benefit. In fact there is "... *abundant evidence for a strong causal relationship between stressed family environments in early childhood and poor mental and physical health of the offspring later in life.*"(Leseman, 2002:13)

### **Recommendation:**

**The CECDE recommends the development of locally based, integrated family support services linked to existing structures (for instance the County Childcare Committees). These support services should be diverse and responsive to local requirements and build on the acknowledgment of the important contribution parents make to their children and society as a whole.**

## 7. Coordination of Policy

At present, there is a multiplicity of government departments with a remit for families and children(CECDE, 2004). Oftentimes, the policies and practices of various departments can adopt different emphases; for example, the DES is concerned primarily with the education of children from the age of four or so, whereas the DHC prioritises child welfare. The coordination of these policies and practices is often lacking. This lack of coordination seriously impacts on the supports offered to children and their families.

There is also a need to disseminate explicit information on services available to families in a variety of formats and methods. There are such a diversity of services and service providers that it is difficult for a person seeking a service to know where to start. Services that support families need to be more accessible and increased information is necessary to ensure public recognition of such services.

### **Recommendation:**

**The CECDE recommends the development of a cohesive government policy in relation to the support of parents and families in Ireland. Such a policy would be devised in consultation with all government departments and stakeholders who have an interest in or remit for family supports, including families and children.**

**The availability of information is a prerequisite of making support services accessible and useful for families. The CECDE propose a “one stop shop” for all family support services, whereby those seeking such services can access a central agency which can mobilise the appropriate supports to address the family’s needs.**

**The Strategy for Strengthening Families should be cognisant of the work of the Review of Family Support Services currently underway at the Department of Health and Children to ensure that there is harmony and accord between the two processes.**

## 8. Conclusion

The CECDE welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the development of the Strategy for Strengthening Families. While this submission addresses some major issues regarding the situation as it affects families with young children, there are many other matters that have not been included. The CECDE would be delighted to further engage with the process to discuss the subject in more detail. We look forward to the completion of the Strategy for Strengthening Families as we believe it will positively impact on the lives of parents and young children in Ireland.

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