

Can We Help?

**A Guide to Supporting Children and
Families in Early Years Services**

By Fiona Lane

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ISBN: 978-1-906004-22-4

Published by: Barnardos Training and Resource Service, Barnardos,
Christchurch Square, Dublin 8

Acknowledgements

Can We Help? would not have been possible without the assistance and contributions of the following people from Barnardos Training and Resource Service: Anne Conroy, National Manager; Sinead Lawton, Publications Co-ordinator; Colm Carroll, Information Officer.

Particular thanks to the following people who so kindly gave of their time and ideas: Sharon Byrne, Olive Carter, Monica Cassidy, Mary Corrigan, Sharon Dunne, Fionnuala Foley, Geraldine French, Aileen Kelleher, Mary Gibblin, Roslyn Gibbons, Antoinette Gibbs, Imelda Graham, Patrica Murray, Joanne Waters.

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Introduction

Children grow and develop as part of an interconnected system of family and community relationships. If the family or community environment becomes a source of stress for children, it can impact on their development and overall well-being. Young children are particularly vulnerable to family-related stresses as they are highly dependent on their parents to provide a stable, nurturing environment in which their physical, emotional and other needs can be met. Supporting families is the most effective way to support children.

The role of early childhood care and education (ECCE) or early years services in supporting families centres on the early learning and development needs of children. It takes place within a framework that recognises parents as the most important people in children's lives, and their most influential educators. To be effective, early years services need to work in partnership with parents, using an approach that supports parent-child relationships and strengthens the capacity of parents to respond effectively to their child's learning and development needs.

Where families need additional support, early years services are in a unique position to empower parents through information and social support, and also to act as a bridge between families and other services in the community.

Research also tells us that early years services can play a key role in supporting the well-being of children and families experiencing poverty and social exclusion, through the provision of quality learning environments for children in conjunction with a range of needs-led parenting and family support services.

The aim of this publication

The aim of this publication is to assist staff and managers working in early years service to increase their knowledge and understanding of:

- ◆ The range of challenges and stresses facing children and families today.
- ◆ Why it is important to support families.
- ◆ Where the work of early years services fits into the wider system of family supports.
- ◆ How practice in this area is informed by Siolta - The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006); Aistear - The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009); legislation; regulations and other relevant policy documents.
- ◆ The role of early years services in engaging and supporting families, including the boundaries and limitations.
- ◆ What early years services can do to support families effectively and, if further support is needed outside the role of the service, how and where this can be accessed.
- ◆ Why it is important to develop linkages with other services for children and families in the local area.

In seeking to support quality practice in work with families, *Can We Help?* aims to build on the knowledge and experience of early years services. To this end, a consultation process was undertaken to inform the content, involving early years staff and managers (representing private and community services), development workers and national representative organisations.

This consultation process was invaluable in highlighting the range of perspectives on the role of early years services in supporting families and different opinions on the extent to which early years services should be involved in family support. It also showed the diversity of practice among settings, the dilemmas and challenges presented by this work, and the resource, training and support needs arising for early years staff and managers. The richness of their contributions is reflected in direct quotations from the consultation process, which are interspersed throughout this publication.

Reflecting what may be an emerging debate on this area of practice, it is also hoped that this publication will:

- ◆ Stimulate discussion on this issue among early years staff and managers.
- ◆ Contribute to a deeper understanding of the holistic needs of children and the central role of family and community in a child's learning, development and overall well-being.
- ◆ Highlight the unique role and the skills of early years practitioners in making informed observations about children, and how this practice contributes to promoting the development, welfare and protection of young children.
- ◆ Capture and frame much of the hidden work that many early years services currently do in supporting families.
- ◆ Contribute to improved understanding and confidence in this area.
- ◆ Highlight the often stressful and demanding nature of this work.

Target audience

This publication is primarily aimed at managers and staff working in centre-based early years services and school age services. It will also be a useful resource for development staff who work in a support or training capacity with these services, childminders and students of early years or family support.

We use both of the terms 'practitioner' and educator' in this publication to acknowledge the growing recognition of the educative role of those working with young children.

Content of this publication

Can We Help? is primarily a practical guide rather than an academic text. It includes practice examples/models, reflective questions for early years practitioners to think about in relation to their service and sample scenarios, all of which can act as a resource for early years practitioners and managers seeking to implement best practice in relation to working with families.

This guide has a sound theoretical foundation and is informed by Irish and international research, relevant legislation, regulations, national guidelines, *Siolta* - The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and *Aistear* - The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (hereafter referred to as *Siolta* and *Aistear*), in addition to Barnardos' extensive experience in this area.

Key Messages

This publication is underpinned by the following key messages:

Child-centred practice

Children's individuality, strengths, rights and needs are central in the provision of quality early childhood care and education. Their welfare is always of paramount importance.

Relationships are important

Children do not exist in isolation but as part of an interconnected system of family, extended family and community relationships, which influence and shape their learning, development and overall well-being.

Partnership with parents

Meeting children's needs in early years services requires a partnership relationship with parents that is non-judgemental and respects their key role in their children's lives and the responsibility they have for their child's learning, development and overall well-being.

Family-focused practice

Family-focused practice in early years services benefits children. Centred on the learning and development needs of children, a family-focused approach seeks to:

- ◆ Support parent-child relationships.
- ◆ Enhance the capacity of parents to understand and meet their child's early learning and development needs.

Strengths-focused

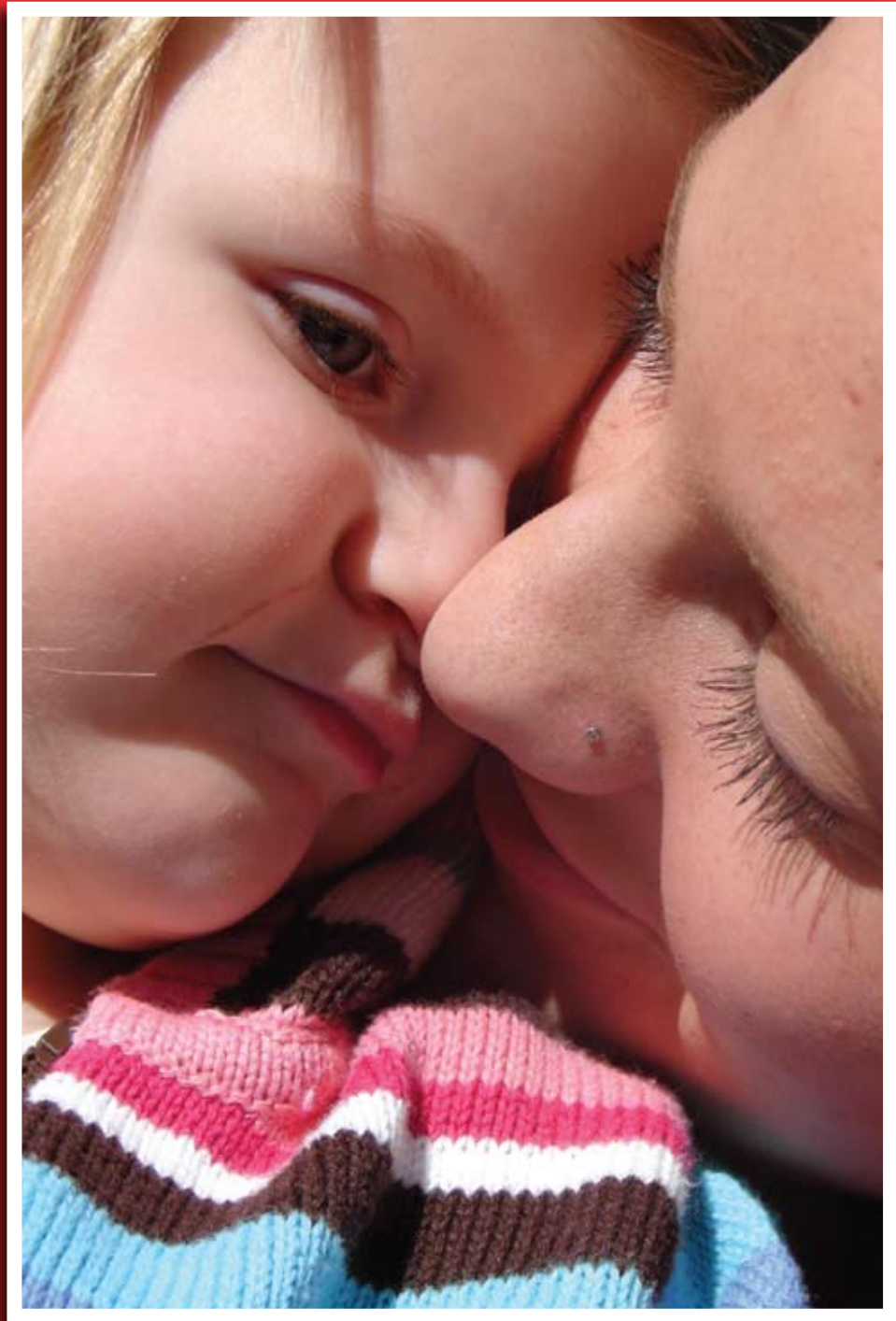
Building on the strengths and resilience of children and families, and assisting them in developing support networks in their own community, can benefit individual and family well-being and promote supportive family environments for young children's learning and development.

Informed

Keeping informed about the range of needs, issues and challenges facing children and families, and the support services available to them, is an important component of early years practice. This involves getting to know the roles and responsibilities of relevant professionals, community groups and organisations in your area and how they can be accessed by families. It also involves knowing how to respond effectively to child welfare and protection concerns.

Community links

Good practice is based on extending and supporting children's and adults' engagement with the wider community. In addition to promoting learning opportunities for children, this involves developing links and effective working relationships with the relevant (community, voluntary and statutory) services and acting as a bridge between families and these services, based on their needs.



PART 1
POLICY, RESEARCH
AND PRACTICE



Section 1:

Understanding the Context of Children's Lives

1.1 Introduction

Every child is an individual with his or her own unique family and community context which influences and shapes his or her learning, development and overall well-being. Children also play an active part in their own development through their relationships and interactions with their environment.

In order to understand and respond to children's needs, early childhood care and education (ECCE) services need to connect and interact with the environment in which children live and grow, thus reflecting the reality of children's lives.

Where the term 'parent' is used in this guide, it refers to a parent or any person who is the primary caregiver of a child, such as a legal guardian, grandparent, foster parent, step parent etc.

Where the term 'family' is used, it refers to the full range of guiding influences in a child's life (mothers, fathers, siblings, grandparents, wider family and other caregivers). This is in recognition of the fact that other family members can be engaged in and influence a child's early learning and development.

1.2 The Role of Relationships

Relationships are central to children's development. According to the Siolta framework:

Responsive, sensitive and reciprocal relationships, which are consistent over time, are essential to the well-being, learning and development of the young child. The relationships that the child forms within his/her immediate and extended environment from birth will significantly influence his/her well-being, development and learning. These relationships are two-way and include adults, peers, family and the extended community. Positive relationships, which are secure, responsive and respectful and which provide consistency and continuity over time, are the cornerstone of the child's well-being.

Children's relationships with parents and family members provide them with their first opportunity to learn how to relate to others, to trust that others will meet their needs, to take appropriate risks and to express and work through their emotions. This promotes children's sense of feeling secure emotionally. With emotional security, children are able to manage the day-to-day challenges and anxieties they may experience (Barnardos Practice Framework, 2009).

A supportive family environment is the ideal foundation on which children learn, develop and reach their potential. It also forms the foundation from which children build the wider network of relationships they need.

Beyond the family (and extended family), peers and the community have the potential to contribute to the development of a supportive environment for children, through the development of social support networks. Strong communities can be a special resource for children, supporting and nurturing them and, in some cases, ameliorating difficult family or social circumstances, in addition to promoting children's independence, individuality, maturity and enhancing their social skills.

The quality of children's relationships within their family and their community has a direct influence on their development. Supporting families and communities is therefore essential to supporting children (National Children's Strategy, 2000).

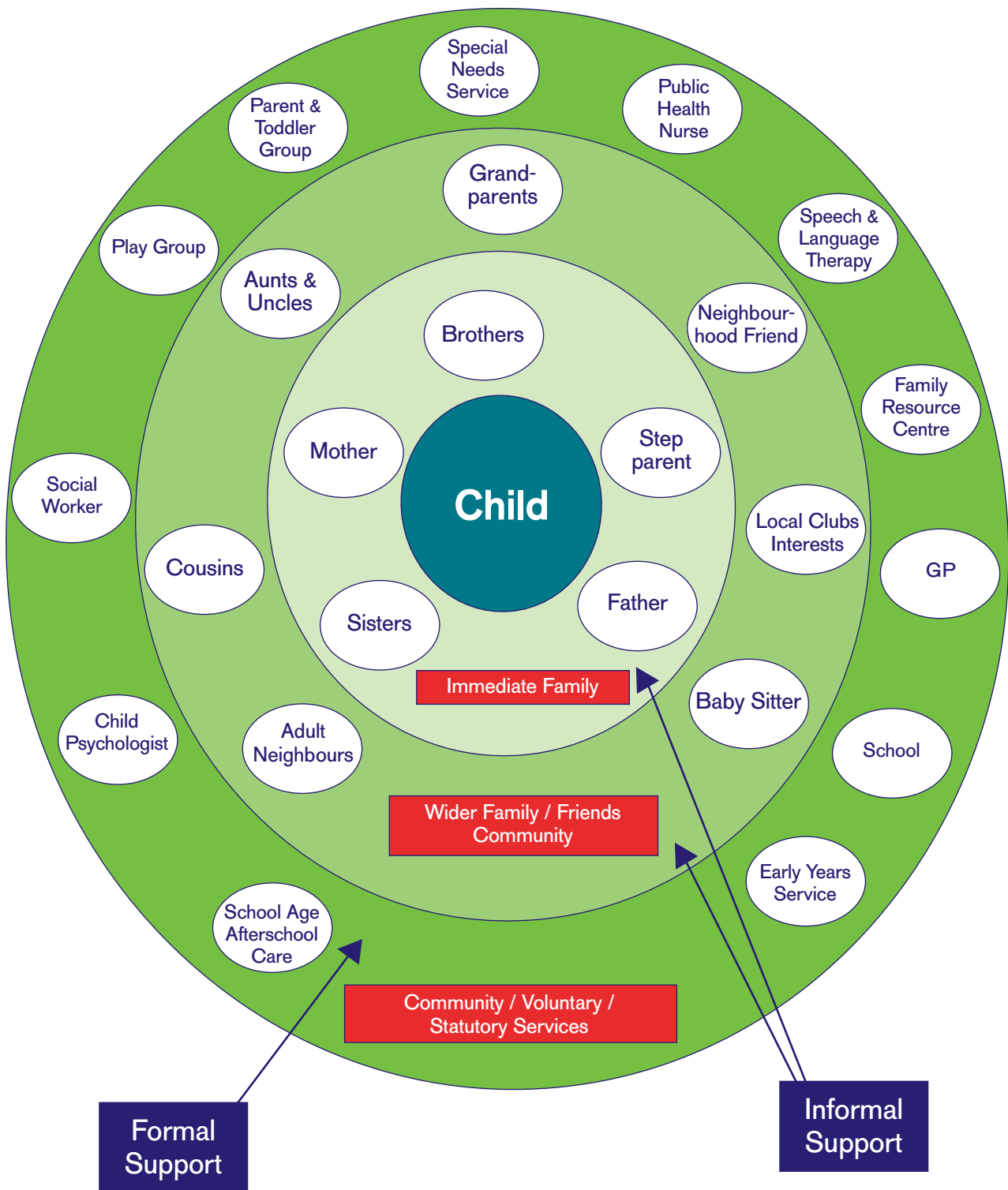


Figure 1 Children's sources of support

Ecological Systems Theory

Looking at children's development within the context of their family and community relationships is a model called *Ecological Systems Theory*, developed by Uri Bronfenbrenner (1989). By examining the interconnections and interactions between a child's own unique biological make-up and temperament and their family and community relationships, Bronfenbrenner helps us to understand the key influences on children's development and well-being.

Figure 1 on the opposite page is an eco-map that illustrates the relationships that are important and central to a child's world, and ideally their most important sources of support.

1.3 Sources of Support for Children

While all children need support, the reality is that for some, their families and/or their communities may be a source of stress or a threat to their well-being.

The range of supports to children are provided along a continuum, ranging from their family, their primary source of care and protection, to the state, which acts as the ultimate guarantor of their rights (i.e. when their well-being cannot be safeguarded within their family).

Informal support

Informal supports are those provided for children through their primary social networks, that is, their family, extended family, friends and key people within the community. As they exist in the immediate world of children and families, these are ideally the most important and enduring sources of support for children.

Formal support

Formal support services are those provided by some sections of the community sector, the voluntary sector, private providers, the state and its agencies. They involve a combination of universal and targeted services. (*For more information see Section 3.2.*)

Universal services (often called 'open-door' services) are services that are open to all children and families to use (such as public health nurses, early childhood care and education services, and school age childcare services).

Targeted services are generally designed for groups of children and families who have been perceived as being particularly vulnerable, or to have difficulty in accessing services, and for whom targeted provision may be needed.

Some services involve a combination of both universal and targeted provision.

Additional support

For some children, there is a need for additional supports and services because of disadvantage due to issues such as social exclusion (related to factors such as poverty, disability, mental health difficulties, membership of minority ethnic and cultural communities) or the need for care and protection. These additional needs are ideally met by a mix of informal

and formal supports. The state has a special responsibility to ensure that these needs are met and in the main this means supporting families and communities to provide for their children (OMC, DOHC, 2007).

Different families need different levels of support. In a minority of cases where the welfare of the child cannot be safeguarded within the family, it can mean that the state may intervene to provide alternative care for children.

Thus, from these varied and interacting sources, children gain the support they need to grow and develop. The attainments of individual children will reflect both their own capacity and resilience, and the supports, resources and services available to them and their families.

Thinking About Your Practice

Task: Compile two eco-maps

Purpose: To develop your understanding of the importance of support networks, both informal and formal

Stage 1: Compile an eco-map with yourself as the subject

Take a blank page and place your name in a circle at the centre. Using Figure 1 on page 4 as an example, map out who you consider to be your informal sources of support. Place those who you consider your most important sources of support in individual circles closest to you. Then map out your formal sources of support (for example, your GP etc.).

Take some time to consider the diagram.

Stage 2: Compile an eco-map with a child in your setting as the subject

Repeat the exercise. On this occasion, choose a child currently attending your early years setting or school age childcare service, and place their name in a circle at the centre of the page. Based on your existing knowledge, map out the child's informal and formal sources of support.

Take some time to consider the diagram.

What have you learnt from this exercise?





Section 2:

Supporting Children and Families – A Policy Perspective

2.1 What is a Family?

The Commission on the Family described the experience of family living as ‘... the single greatest influence on an individual’s life, and the family unit a fundamental building block for society’ (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 1998).

Irish society has undergone many changes in recent years. The most dramatic changes are that families tend to be smaller and there is a greater likelihood of both parents working outside the home than in the past. The understanding of what constitutes a family has also broadened to reflect changes in Irish society. Families come in all shapes and sizes and take many different forms, comprising two parent families, lone parents, teenage parents, children being cared for by other family members such as grandparents or siblings, children in foster care etc. In some instances a family may extend beyond one household, such as reconstituted families (i.e. step families).

There is also anecdotal evidence that the recent economic downturn and rise in unemployment has led to an increase in the number of men becoming the primary carers of children.

Did you know that Ireland has the most youthful population in the European Union and the highest birth rate? In the last census in 2006, there were approximately 1.1 million children under 18 years. Of these, 33% were aged 0-5 years and 36% were aged 6-12 years.

Diversity of families

The population of Ireland is more diverse than ever before in terms of the racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic and faith background of individuals and families. In the last population census, those who defined themselves as belonging to a different ethnic or cultural group comprised 12.6% of the total population (CSO, 2006).

Cultural diversity, however, is not new to Ireland. The Traveller Community is the minority ethnic group of longest standing here. There have also been long established Jewish, Islamic, Indian and Chinese communities in Ireland. Increasing cultural diversity in recent years has arisen from the greater numbers of EU and non-EU citizens living in Ireland, either due to inward migration or those seeking asylum. Unaccompanied children are among those coming to Ireland seeking refugee status.

It is important that early years practitioners are aware of the culturally sensitive approaches required to engage and work with children and families from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. For additional information, see Barnardos' publication *Every Child Matters: Developing Anti-discriminatory Practice in Early Childhood Services* (2004).

2.2 Why Support Families?

Bringing up children is perhaps the most challenging and important task that most of us perform. It is a lifelong commitment and sometimes described as the only job we have for life.

(Pugh et al, 1994)

As outlined in Section 1, parents are generally the most important people in children's lives and their most influential educators. Children rely on their parents to meet their needs for basic care, safety, security and stability, emotional warmth and nurturing, stimulation, identity, guidance and boundaries. The way parents care for their children, teach them values and skills, and guide them in their encounters with the world outside the home lays the foundation for children's emotional, social and intellectual development.

Parenting can be challenging, both physically and emotionally, and most parents need support at some stage. In an Irish study of parents' support needs in 2001 (involving a sample of 1,000 parents), the vast majority stated that they would welcome the provision of more parenting education or support groups (Riordan, 2001).

When do parents need support?

'I feel parents are struggling on their own to a large extent... it's getting more difficult to parent these days. With my first child, without the back-up of the staff at the crèche I don't know who I would have turned to.'

(Comment from a parent)



Whether it is adjusting to the demands of a new baby, coping with childhood illness, feeding and nutrition, childhood behaviour, developmental milestones or general parenting, parents benefit from information, help and advice. Changes over time in Irish society have meant that traditional support for childrearing by extended families in local communities has lessened, with many families feeling isolated. Others report increasing pressures and time constraints arising from the demands of work and busy lifestyles.

At particular times, families may need additional support due to changes in their circumstances or a serious life event, for example, unemployment, money problems, ill health, death of a loved one, suicide or parental separation.

Some families need ongoing support arising from the challenges of being a teenage parent, chronic illness or mental health difficulties, a family member with a disability or other special needs.

Other families face difficulties and challenges on a daily basis, which, without the necessary help and support, present an ongoing threat to their well-being and those of their children. These may include problems associated with social isolation, poverty, discrimination related to cultural identity, migrant, refugee or asylum seeker status, or homelessness.

Specialised supports and interventions are needed by children and families where there are problems associated with chronic addiction, domestic abuse, child abuse or neglect.

In supporting families, the welfare of the child must always be the paramount consideration.

An overview of some of the more serious stresses and challenges facing some children and families are explored in more detail in Part 2, including practice examples and ways in which early years practitioners and managers can provide appropriate support.

2.3 How the State Supports Families

It is generally accepted that nearly all parents will require support at some stage and that while family and friends may be able to meet the needs of some, others may need additional support from more formal sources. How a state supports families (or otherwise) is defined by its family policy. Family policy can be described as everything a government does that affects families (Kamerman and Kahn, 1978).

Historically, family policy in Ireland has developed very gradually and in a piecemeal way, with responsibility shared between a number of different government departments and agencies. The most significant phase of development has occurred from the 1990s onwards.

Currently, family policy in Ireland broadly includes the following:

- ◆ Income supports for families with children (such as child benefit and assistance through family-related taxation, income supports to lone parents, social welfare allowances and the carer's allowance).
- ◆ Measures to reconcile work and family life (such as paid maternity leave, parental leave).
- ◆ The development of early childhood care and education services and school age childcare services.
- ◆ The development of child welfare and protection services.
- ◆ The development of family support services.
- ◆ Measures to promote the rights of children (such as the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child by the Irish government in 1992 and the development of The National Children's Strategy, 2000).

Policy priorities

The priorities that drive family policy develop and change over time. Current government priorities that relate to all services for children include:

- ◆ A whole child/whole system approach to meeting children's needs. This involves greater co-ordination between services so that contact with any one service should offer children and families access into a system of integrated support services based on their needs.
- ◆ Partnership with parents, families and communities, which is focused on promoting their strengths and building resilience as a basis for supporting children.
- ◆ Ensuring that protecting children and promoting their welfare is a collective activity and responsibility.
- ◆ Further strengthening children's rights. A Referendum to strengthen children's rights in the Irish Constitution is due to be held in 2012. As of February 2012, the Government is finalising the wording with the Attorney General.
- ◆ Improving the quality, efficiency and accountability of services generally.

(UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; The Report of the Commission on the Family, 1998; National Children's Strategy, 2000; Our Duty to Care, 2002; The Agenda for Children's Services, 2007; Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children, 1999, 2011)

Integrating services for children and families

In 2011, for the first time in Ireland's history, a government ministry was given sole responsibility for children (0-18 years). The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs will play a key role in improving the co-ordination and integration of children's services at national and local levels.

Early years services and school age childcare services come under the responsibility of this ministry (in addition to adoption, child welfare and protection, youth affairs, youth justice services, family support services and related areas).

As of January 2012, plans are underway to establish a Child and Family Support Agency, outside the Health Services Executive (HSE), with responsibility for child welfare and protection and family support services.

A policy focus on family-focused practice by services for children, underpinned by partnership with parents, is not seen as an alternative to providing an individual service to a child but is something to be considered alongside it. In relation to early years services, this means thinking about the individual learning and development needs of children in the context of their family relationships and their environment, taking into account family circumstances and responsibilities.

2.4 Key Policy Documents, Legislation and Guidance

Work undertaken by services in engaging and supporting families is informed by a combination of legislation and government policy. The following are of particular relevance to all services for children.

Child Care Act 1991

The main piece of legislation is the Child Care Act, 1991, which places a statutory obligation on health boards (now HSE) to promote the welfare of children (0-18 years) who are not receiving adequate care and protection and to provide child care and family support services (Section 3). The Act also enables the HSE to contract voluntary agencies to provide such services on their behalf (Sections 9 and 10). The emphasis is on providing family support and assistance so that children can remain at home and only in exceptional circumstances are children to be taken into care.



Under the Act, the HSE has statutory responsibility to receive, investigate and take appropriate action in respect of child welfare and protection concerns.

It is the Child Care Act, 1991 that provides for the inspection of pre-school services (Section 7).

The absence of a clear definition in the Child Care Act of what constitutes family support has meant that it has been interpreted differently within HSE areas, leading to variations in the type and extent of family support service provision around the country.

It is also generally accepted that the care and protection of children at risk has become the dominant focus of family support policy. As a result, family support has often been viewed as a type of service for families in greatest need only, instead of one which promotes the well-being of families generally. There is now a growing recognition that policy needs to have a more broadly based family support approach, which embraces both children and parents, and focuses on early intervention and the promotion of the well-being of all families.

(Details of other relevant legislation are contained in Appendix 1.)

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

In addition to promoting the fundamental rights of children, the ratification by the Irish government of the UNCRC in 1992 has contributed to a growing awareness of the state's role in supporting families. It highlights the central role of families in the lives of children and calls for greater state involvement in the development of services to assist families in their care-giving roles:

State parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.

(Article 18)

The Report of the Commission on the Family, 1998

The report of the Commission is viewed as a major landmark in Irish family policy. It called for a more co-ordinated and coherent approach by the state in the development of services to support and strengthen families, and suggested six principles to underpin effective family policy:

1. Recognition that the family unit is a fundamental unit providing stability and well-being in our society.
2. The unique and essential family function is that of caring for and nurturing all its members.
3. Continuity and stability are major requirements in family relationships.
4. An equality of well-being is recognised between individual family members.

5. Family membership confers rights, duties and responsibilities.
6. A diversity of family forms and relationships should be recognised.

(The Report of the Commission on the Family, 1998; p.4-5)

The impact of the Commission included the establishment of the Family Support Agency (FSA), which developed a network of over a hundred family resource centres around the country. The FSA also supports the development of support services for families needing mediation, marriage or bereavement counselling. The FSA has been placed under the responsibility of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.

National Children's Strategy (2000)

Although over a decade in existence, the National Children's Strategy (NCS) is the first policy document dedicated to children. It outlines the Irish government's commitment to enhancing the status and improving the quality of children's lives through integrated delivery of services, in partnership with children, young people, their families and their communities.

Work is underway on the development of the National Children's Strategy 2012-2017.

The Whole Child Perspective

The National Children's Strategy set out a 'whole child' perspective as a means of expressing the holistic needs of children and young people. It recognises all of the different interconnected dimensions of childhood development – physical and mental well-being, emotional and behavioural well-being, intellectual capacity, spiritual and moral well-being, identity, self-care, family relationships, social and peer relationships and social presentation.

For children to realise and express their potential along these dimensions, they require supportive relationships. The strategy identifies supporting families and communities as key to supporting children, and seeks to establish the 'whole child' perspective at the centre of policy development and service delivery

Our Duty to Care – The Principles of Good Practice for the Protection of Children and Young People (2002)

Our Duty to Care is a document published by the Department of Health and Children in 2002, which is aimed at community and voluntary organisations of any size or type that provides services for children. It offers practical guidance on the promotion of child welfare and the development of safe practices in work with children. It also provides useful material and fact sheets to assist organisations in developing their child protection policy and procedures.

Our Duty to Care outlines a number of principles of good practice which will:

- ◆ Help create an environment in which children are listened to, given a sense of belonging and kept safe.
- ◆ Ensure parents are supported and encouraged.
- ◆ Ensure staff and volunteers who work with children are supported and protected.

It also outlines ways in which individual workers can exercise their responsibility to protect and promote children's rights.

(Our Duty to Care principles of good practice are outlined in Appendix 2.)

This document should be read in conjunction with *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (2011).

The Agenda for Children's Services (2007)

The Agenda for Children's Services is a policy framework that sets out the goals and priorities of government policy for children's health and social services in Ireland. It focuses on greater integration between services for children based on a whole child/whole system approach, in which the child is first and foremost supported within their family and within their community.

Partnership with families is viewed as the most effective way of promoting all children's well-being and ensuring effective protection for children at risk. Services are advised to identify and optimise the strengths within the informal networks of which children are a part, while not ignoring the limitations and the harm that families, neighbourhoods and communities can hold for children.

The Agenda for Children's Services also focuses on the achievement of better outcomes for children and families, and offers a set of reflective questions for those involved in planning and delivering services for children to actively consider.



Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2011)

Children First contains policy and practice guidelines on the protection and welfare of children. A key message is that protecting children and promoting their welfare is a collective activity and responsibility. Children First emphasises that the needs of children and families must be at the centre of child protection and welfare services, and that the welfare of children is of paramount importance.

The document provides guidance to agencies and community and voluntary organisations that have contact with or provide services to children on their roles and responsibilities in identifying and reporting child protection and welfare concerns. It states that all organisations working with children should have policy and procedures derived from Children First, in addition to a policy of co-operating with HSE Children and Family Services.

The responsibilities of early years services and school age childcare services in promoting the welfare and protection of children are explored in more detail in Sections 8.7 and 10.4.

Thinking About Your Practice

Consider the following questions about your work with children:

- ◆ How do you promote children's needs and rights in your setting?
- ◆ What are the ways in which a 'Whole Child' perspective can be implemented in your work?

2.5 Good Practice Principles and Standards for Early Years Services

In addition to the legislation and policy documents outlined in Section 2.4, the work of early years settings in engaging and supporting families is guided by the following:

- ◆ Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations (2006)
- ◆ Siolta - The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006)
- ◆ Aistear - The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009)
- ◆ National Standards for Pre-School Services (2010)

Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations (2006)

The Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations came into effect in order to improve childcare standards and ensure the health, safety and welfare of pre-school children. The purpose is to set minimum standards throughout the sector. (*The Regulations do not apply to school age childcare services.*) The Regulations focus on the development of children, the physical environment for children's services, safety and emergency aspects, behaviour management and appropriate record-keeping.

Of particular relevance to the work of early years services in engaging and supporting families are the following:

- ◆ Regulation 5 requires that when planning activities to support children's learning, development and well-being, early years educators should consider each child's individual needs, stage of development, interests and abilities. They should also work in co-operation with parents to ensure that each child's needs are met appropriately and take into account their cultural context.
- ◆ In relation to behaviour management, Regulation 9 requires educators to have in place a written policy and procedures, which address how to manage a child's challenging behaviour appropriately and to assist children in managing their own behaviour as appropriate to their age and stage of development. Educators must ensure that no corporal punishment is used and that practices are not disrespectful, degrading, intimidating, emotionally or physically harmful or neglectful in respect of any child attending a service.
- ◆ Regulation 9(2) specifies the requirement for early years educators to develop clear guidelines on the identification and reporting of child welfare and protection concerns within the framework of Children First. Educators must also ensure appropriate vetting of all staff, students and volunteers who have access to children.

Síolta - The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006)

Síolta was developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) in consultation with the early years sector. It aims to facilitate the advancement of quality standards across a range of ECCE settings for children aged from birth to six years.

The Síolta framework comprises a set of 12 Principles of Quality, which are the ultimate benchmark for all quality practice and service provision in ECCE, and 16 Standards to guide early years services towards quality. The standards are interrelated and interdependent and should be viewed as a whole. Implementing a total quality approach means giving equal consideration to each of the standards.

Of particular relevance to this publication are principles and standards relating to the following themes:

- ◆ Partnership relationships with parents and families, which support parents' key role in the learning and development of their children.
- ◆ Parental involvement in early years services.
- ◆ Promoting the welfare and protection of children.
- ◆ Community involvement in order to extend and support adults' and children's engagement with the wider community.

These themes are outlined in Síolta principles and standards as follows:

Síolta Principle**Parents, family and community**

Parents are the primary educators of the child and have a pre-eminent role in promoting his/her well-being, learning and development. Quality early childhood care and education must value and support the role of parents. Open, honest and respectful partnership with parents is essential in promoting the best interests of the child. Mutual partnership contributes to establishing harmony and continuity between the diverse environments the child experiences in the early years.

The development of connections and interactions between the early childhood setting, parents, the extended family and the wider community also adds to the enrichment of early childhood experiences by reflecting the environment in which the child lives and grows.

Síolta Standards**Partnership with parents**

Síolta promotes a partnership approach with parents as a core value in an early years service, which is outlined in Standard 3 as follows:

Standard 3 – Parents and Families

Valuing and involving parents and families requires a proactive partnership approach evidenced by a range of clearly stated, accessible and implemented processes, policies and procedures.

Key components

- 3.1 Staff and parents have both formal and informal opportunities for communication and information sharing about the child.
- 3.2 There are a variety of opportunities for parents to be involved in activities within the setting, taking into account the range of parents' interests and time constraints.
- 3.3 Staff are responsive and sensitive in the provision of information and support to parents in their key role in the learning and development of the child.
- 3.4 The setting has written records of all policies and procedures regarding parental involvement and makes them available to all stakeholders.

Promoting Children's Welfare

This is outlined in Standard 9, as follows:

Standard 9: Health and Welfare

Promoting the health and welfare of the child requires protection from harm, provision of nutritious food, appropriate opportunities for rest, and secure relationships characterised by trust and respect.

Key component

9.3 The setting has implemented the guidelines from *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (1999, 2011)* and *Our Duty to Care – The Principles of Good Practice for the Protection of Children and Young People (2002)*.

Community Involvement

Promoting community involvement in order to extend and support adult's and children's engagement with the wider community is outlined in Standard 16, as follows:

Standard 16: Community Involvement

Promoting community involvement requires the establishment of networks and connections evidenced by policies, procedures and actions which extend and support all adults and children's engagement with the wider community.

Key components

- 16.1 The setting has gathered and made available a comprehensive range of information on resources at local, regional and national levels.
- 16.2 The setting has established links which have the potential to extend and develop its involvement in the wider community.
- 16.3 The setting is connected and integrated with the local, regional and national community.
- 16.4 The setting actively promotes children's citizenship in their local regional and national community.

Other relevant standards

Practice in relation to partnerships with parents and community engagement in early years settings, is also informed by other Siolta standards, in particular:

Standard 4: Consultation – (Components 4.1 - 4.2) The setting actively invites and acts upon contributions to decision-making processes and strategies for the development and delivery of the service, involving children, parents, staff and other stakeholders.

Standard 5: Interactions – (Component 5.5) Interactions between the adults within, and associated with the setting, act as a model of respect, support and partnership for the child.

Standard 12: Communication – (Components 12.1 - 12.4) The setting undertakes the collection of relevant and appropriate information on all children, and is proactive in sharing information with other stakeholders in the best interests of children. Policies, procedures and confidentiality guide the way staff record, store and share information.

Aistear - The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009)

Aistear was developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to support children's learning from birth to six years. It describes the types of learning experiences that are important to enable children to develop as competent and confident learners. Aistear also provides guidelines for adults in planning, providing for and supporting these experiences.

Partnership with parents and parental involvement are key elements within the Aistear curriculum. Guidelines for good practice focus on play, assessments, interactions and partnerships with parents. The four Aistear themes – exploring and thinking, identity and belonging, communicating, and well-being – underpin all of the learning experiences suggested.

Aistear provides guidelines to early years services on building partnerships between parents and practitioners. It is also aimed at parents, providing ideas and suggestions to understand how their children learn and how they can support and extend their child's learning and development in the home

National Standards for Pre-School Services (2010)

The National Standards for Pre-School Services are intended as a resource for pre-school inspectors, pre-school service providers and parents using pre-school services. There are 20 standards in total. Of particular relevance to this publication are Standards relating to working in partnership with parents.

Standard 3 - Working in partnership with parents or guardians

Outcome: Parents or guardians are kept fully informed and involved as partners in their children's activities, achievements and progress.

(See Appendix 3 for additional details.)

Thinking About Your Practice

Consider the following questions.

- ◆ What arrangements are in place to ensure your early years setting keeps up-to-date with new legislation, regulations, policy or practice developments in relation to supporting children and families?
- ◆ Can you think of ways in which these arrangements can be improved or further developed?
- ◆ Linked to your own professional development, what steps do you take to keep in touch with relevant new developments?



Section 3:

The Concept of Family Support

3.1 What is Family Support?

Family support can be difficult to define as it is often viewed as an umbrella term to describe both a style of work and a wide range of activities and types of services provided by community, voluntary, statutory and private organisations.

Family support aims to promote the health, well-being and rights of children, young people and families in their own homes and communities, primarily focused on early intervention across a range of levels and needs.

(Pinkerton, Dolan and Canavan, 2004)

Broadly-speaking, the goal of family support is to ensure that families are able to meet their needs and overcome stressors, or underlying factors, that impact negatively on their parenting and overall family well-being.

By helping family members to meet their needs and provide a stable, nurturing environment, family support plays a critical role in fostering the healthy development of children. Additionally, family support is seen as a crucial early intervention strategy for children who are vulnerable or at risk, or those with special needs.

What is early intervention?

Early intervention approaches are those aimed at families where early signs of problems may be visible at a low level. This may be early in a child's life (i.e. early childhood interventions) or at the early stages in the development of difficulties. The aim is generally to nip difficulties in the bud and prevent their evolution into bigger problems.

General assumptions

A number of general assumptions underpin family support, as follows:

- ◆ Family support enhances and benefits family life.
- ◆ The presence and availability of support when it is needed is important to all families.
- ◆ Families who are supported are in a better position to cope with stressful situations.
- ◆ Some families need more support than others and some families face more challenges than others.
- ◆ Strengthening informal social support networks within families and their communities is more beneficial to families than formal services.
- ◆ Strengthening parent-child relationships and overall family well-being promotes the welfare of children.
- ◆ Focusing on the strengths of families, promoting self esteem, self reliance and resilience is more effective than focusing on problems and deficits.
- ◆ Social conditions, such as poverty, social exclusion or lack of personal resources and support can disrupt a parent's ability to parent.

(Adapted from the Western Health Board, Family Support Guidelines, undated)

A key philosophy underpinning family support is that families should have access to a range of supports to meet their needs over time, within a reasonable distance from where they live.

Research also tells us that families who perceive services as supportive and non-stigmatising are more likely to request, access and gain support (McKeown, 2000).

3.2 Family Support Frameworks

Family support takes place in many different forms, across a range of levels and needs. It may be adopted as a core principle of practice by a particular service for children (encompassing measures to support parents and families), or alternatively, a service may have the provision of a family support service to a particular group of families or population as its core function.

Family support services themselves cover a variety of supports and measures on a continuum ranging from voluntary parenting support networks (such as parent and toddler groups), to parenting information and education programmes, to community development supports, to early years and school age childcare services, to professional therapeutic intervention, to family support measures provided by the statutory sector in the context of child welfare and protection issues within a family.

Models of categorising family support services can take a number of forms depending on the focus of the support. One framework (Holman, 1988) positions services according to the following groups:

- ◆ **Client-focused Model**, in which the service focuses on the needs of particular individuals and their families referred to the service.
- ◆ **Neighbourhood Model**, which has an 'open door' policy to the community and offers a wide range of activities and programmes to support families.
- ◆ **Community Development Model**, which is concerned with building communities to address the contextual factors which impinge on, and often exacerbate, the problems of families. This is achieved through working with groups and organisations to develop collective strategies on common issues (such as housing, environment and local services), and to take on responsibility for developing and operating certain services. It focuses on strengths and weaknesses within the community rather than within the family.

Some services incorporate a combination of these three approaches to family support.

Meeting different levels of need

Understanding different levels of need is another way of categorising services. It can be illustrated using the Hardiker Model (1991), which categorises services according to the different levels of need experienced by families. As outlined in Section 1, services may be **universal** (available to all families) or **targeted** (focused on meeting the identified needs of a particular group).

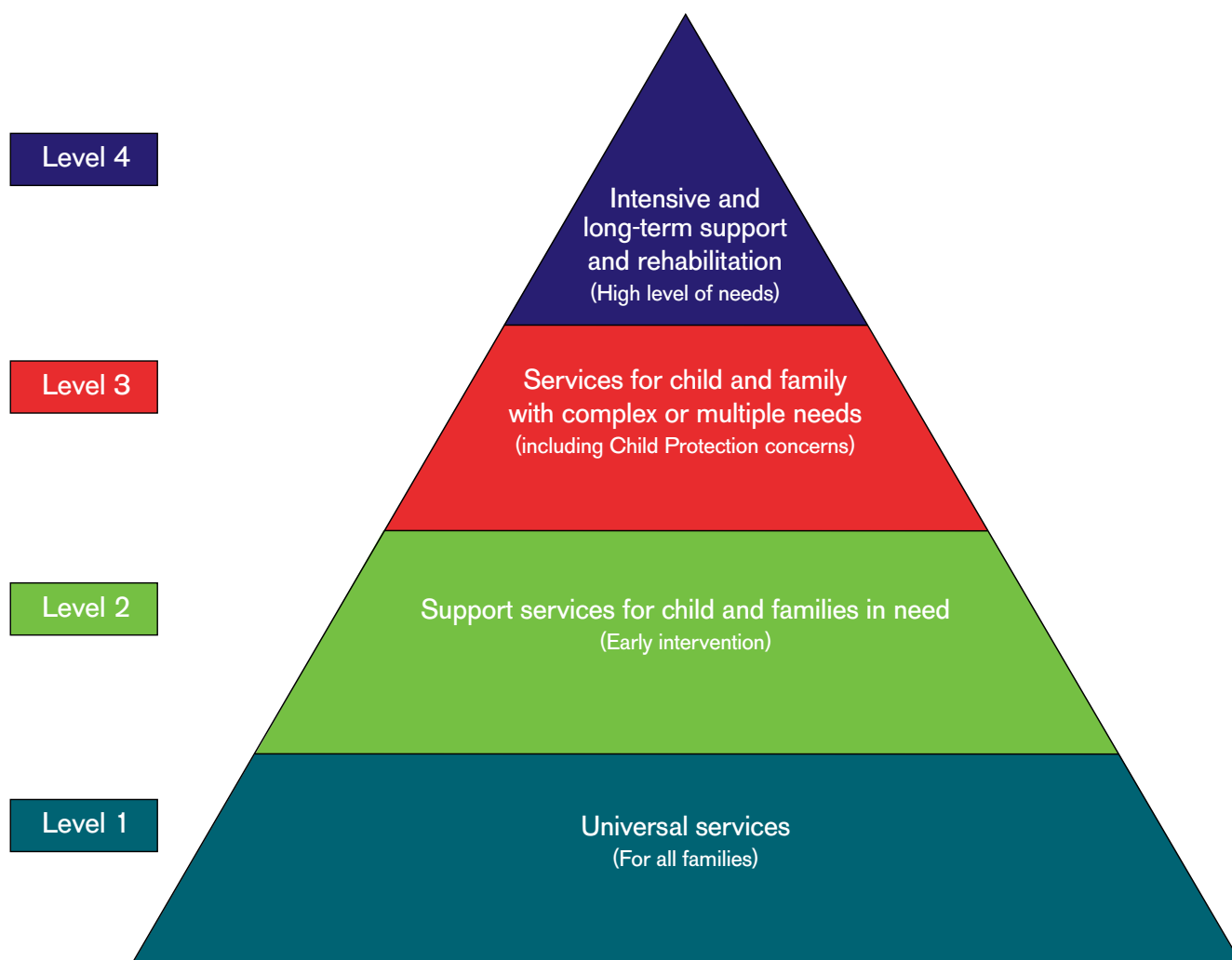


Figure 2 Levels of Need (Adapted from the Hardiker Model, 1991)

Level 1	Services at Level 1 are universal and provide open access support to all children and families, irrespective of their level of need (such as public health nurses, ante-natal classes, most early years services, school age childcare services, citizens information centres, schools, family resources centres etc.). These are used by the majority of families.
<i>Targeted services are at Levels 2–4.</i>	
Level 1	Level 2 encompasses support services for children and families in the early stage of difficulties who would benefit from support to help them deal with particular stresses and challenges, and/or to prevent the escalation of their difficulties. A small number of early years settings are established as targeted services for vulnerable children and families, comprising both early years and a range of needs-led parenting and family support services. Families may opt in to services at Level 2 themselves or may be referred, with their agreement, by a professional or organisation.
Level 3	Children and families who avail of services at Level 3 have complex or multiple needs, requiring intensive support and intervention. This may include families where there are concerns of chronic neglect or abuse of children. Access to such services is generally via a referral from another agency and includes the involvement of HSE Child and Family Services.
Level 4	This is also the situation for Level 4 , where children and families have high levels of needs, requiring specialised and intensive support on a long-term basis.

Table 1 Levels of need

It is important to remember that the levels of need are not rigid categories. Different families have different needs at different times and may avail of services from more than one level simultaneously.

'Well they gave me some help with housing, I think it was. That was nice. I never expected them to help with things like that ... I thought it was really doing things for the children. It makes a difference you know ... I feel like I might be able to ask them again for something.'

(Parent's viewpoint – 'The Da Project' Evaluation Report, Barnardos, 2006a)

Key role of universal services

Universal services have a particularly important role to play as they are readily available to families and provide an easily accessible and non-stigmatising way to provide support. They can also help by acting as:

- ◆ A 'step up' point for families in need of some additional support (such as an early years service supporting a family to access a service in the community).
- ◆ A 'step down' service by providing ongoing support to children and their families who have availed of an early intervention service (i.e. Level 2) or intensive specialised support (i.e. Levels 3-4) and who still require support but at a much lower level.

(Barnardos Practice Framework, 2009)

Some universal services (such as early years services) also have a valuable role in providing consistency, routines and a supportive environment for children during periods of family stress or crises.



3.3 Underlying Principles of Family Support

The following principles underpin practice in family support:

- ◆ Working in partnership is an integral part of family support. Partnership includes children, families, professionals and communities.
- ◆ Family support interventions are needs-led and strive for the minimum intervention required.
- ◆ Family support requires a clear focus on the wishes, feelings, safety and well-being of children.
- ◆ Family support services reflect a strengths-based perspective, which is mindful of resilience as a characteristic of many children and families' lives.
- ◆ Family support promotes the view that effective interventions are those that strengthen the informal support networks of children and families.
- ◆ Family support is accessible and flexible in respect of location, timing, setting and changing needs and can incorporate both child protection and out-of-home care.
- ◆ Families are encouraged to self-refer and multi-access referral paths are facilitated.
- ◆ Involvement of service users and providers in the planning, delivery and evaluation of family support services is promoted.
- ◆ Services aim to promote social inclusion, addressing issues of ethnicity, disability and rural/urban communities.
- ◆ Programmes and services are routinely reviewed and evaluated to promote quality service provision and good outcomes for children and families.

(Pinkerton, Dolan and Canavan, 2006)

A strengths-based approach

A strengths-based approach is based on the assumption that every child or person has strengths and when services focus on strengths rather than deficits, children and families are more likely to become engaged in addressing the issues involved, using their strengths and resources.

Thinking About Your Practice

- ◆ Can you identify ways in which any of the principles of family support listed above are relevant to your work in early years?
- ◆ What are the ways in which you acknowledge families' existing strengths as a basis for supporting them in the task of nurturing their child?

3.4 What Works in Family Support?

Family support services can bring about change by engendering a sense of hope, facilitating access to services and improving parental capacities and skills.

(French, 2005a)

Research tells us that to be effective, family support needs to:

- ◆ Be flexible, approachable and adaptable in engaging with families.
- ◆ Respond to families' expressed needs.
- ◆ Involve a partnership approach with parents and families.
- ◆ Be based on strong supportive relationships between practitioners and families.
- ◆ Employ a strengths-based approach, which focuses on solutions rather than problems, cultivates an attitude of hope and optimism, and helps to restore confidence in families' own innate coping skills.
- ◆ Operate from a community-based location that is responsive to the needs of the community and has strong linkages with other services for children and families.
- ◆ Use premises that are welcoming, accessible, informal and comfortable.
- ◆ Recognise that for vulnerable families with complex needs, support may need to be provided over a prolonged period of time.
- ◆ Take into account the broader context of families. It is difficult for stressed families to benefit from family support when they face multiple disadvantages (such as poverty, social exclusion, unemployment, poor health, housing and education), which reinforce their vulnerability. Policies that reduce such everyday stresses in the lives of families help parents to care for their children.
- ◆ Build and expand families' social support networks, including linking children and families with other community activities and services.
- ◆ Strengthen parent-child relationships.
- ◆ Be inclusive and respectful of the diversity of families' cultural and ethnic backgrounds.
- ◆ Have skilled and experienced staff, provided with ongoing training, support and supervision.

(McKeown 2000, 2001; French, 2002)

Does a family support approach work for everyone?

Research shows that there will always be a small minority of parents who cannot or will not benefit from family support services. This does not mean that a service is 'bad' or that anyone is necessarily to blame (Moran et al, 2004). In some situations, families may be difficult to engage. In others, the level of risk to children's welfare may warrant a response that is child protection-focused, rather than one concerned with family support only.



Social support networks

Support is most effective from those with whom we share close emotional bond.

(Cutrona, 2000)

Supporting families to develop and expand their social support networks is a key feature of effective family support. Social supports form part of the 'social capital' of children and families and are necessary for their well-being.

In an Irish study (Riordan, 2001), parents were asked who they believed was the most appropriate person to provide support to children and families. The most often identified sources were extended family (26%), other parents (13%) and state and other statutory services such as HSE staff (18%). Services should, therefore, seek to develop existing social networks of family and friends rather than attempting to create new sources of support.

Schools, community organisations and voluntary groups were also identified as other preferred sources of support for parents.

Thinking About Your Practice

- ◆ What are the ways in which your early years setting helps families to develop and expand their support networks?
- ◆ Can you think of ways in which your practice in this area can be improved or further developed?

3.5 Parents' Perspective

What parents want from support services

'The main problem with a lot of support is that you aren't always aware that there could be help out there for the particular problem you have.'

(Parent's viewpoint – Riordan, 2001)

Research tells us that parents want:

- ◆ Support that meets their information needs at different times. In particular, accurate and appropriate information about various aspects of parenting and child rearing, child health, family support services available etc.
- ◆ Emphasis on building their existing skills, which supports parents to understand, enjoy and feel more in control of their role.
- ◆ More emphasis on support rather than education. For example, parents prefer the use of 'parent group' to 'parenting class' and want support which focuses less on parenting skills and more on the range of concerns and needs that parent's have.
- ◆ Informal and flexible structures, which allow parents to actively participate and access support on a voluntary, non stigmatising basis. The majority of parents have a preference for 'open access' services (available to all parents).

- ◆ Help with overcoming barriers to availing of programmes and services including practical issues such as lack of childcare, work commitments, lack of transport, or personal issues such as lack of confidence.
- ◆ Openness and transparency from services about their purpose, policies and procedures.
- ◆ To have a say in relation to the support they receive and to be offered choice where possible.

(Riordan, 2001 ; French, 2002)

3.6 Why Families Might Experience Difficulties in Accessing Help and Support

Some families find it difficult to seek out and get the help they need themselves and may need support and encouragement to do so. This may be because parents:

- ◆ Feel overwhelmed by their problems.
- ◆ Are unsure where to go or who to ask for help (i.e. lack of information).
- ◆ May find it hard to admit that they need help and support.
- ◆ Lack the confidence and self esteem to engage with professionals and organisations.
- ◆ May be worried about confidentiality and family privacy.
- ◆ Have a mental illness such as depression or anxiety.
- ◆ Have literacy or language difficulties.
- ◆ Are fearful of the consequences, for example, worried that their child may be placed in care.
- ◆ Have been put off by a bad experience in the past.
- ◆ Think that staff in services may be judgemental, for example, that they would be judged as 'unfit parents' or 'unable to cope'.
- ◆ Worry that there is a stigma attached to going to certain services for help.

Additionally, parents with a disability or members of minority groups (such as Travellers, asylum seekers or migrants) may feel that it is more difficult to access help and support or that their options are more limited. This may be due to cultural factors, discrimination, difficulties in access, or services not meeting the needs of people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

There are specific organisations that aim to promote social inclusion and access to services for these groups, see Sources of Further Information at the back of this book.

'It was impossible to ask for help, I felt ashamed and fearful. I really had no access to services because I didn't know about them and even if I did I might not have taken it anyway or he [her husband] wouldn't let me go. Complete lack of information was the problem, combined with my situation.'

(Parent's viewpoint – French 2005a)

Thinking About Your Practice

Research tells us that parents value openness and transparency from settings about their ethos, aims and policies.

- ◆ What practical steps can you take in your setting to ensure greater openness and transparency in your relationships with families?
- ◆ From a parent's perspective, why might this be important?





Section 4:

Early Years Services and Family Support – What the Research Says

4.1 Why Is It Important to Support Children and Families in the Early Years?

The importance of the early years in a child's life in terms of their overall development cannot be overstated. Research has consistently highlighted the early years as a critical phase of brain development in children. It also recognises that both genetic and environmental factors play vital parts in a child's overall development and life chances. In terms of environmental factors, by virtue of coming first, the early years of a child's life set in motion a train of events that form the basis of later development (French and Murphy, 2005). These are also the years when children are most dependent on the care provided by adults.

The importance of early intervention

It has been well established that children's early experiences are of key importance and that support for parents at this stage of their child's life can positively contribute to children's overall intellectual, social, emotional and physical development (Johnson et al, 2000; Ghate et al, 2000; Sylva and Smart, 1999).

Research studies on the links between adversity in childhood and problems in later life (such as low achievement in education, poor health, teenage pregnancy, involvement in anti-social behaviour) have also highlighted the importance of supporting positive family experiences for children in order to prevent problems occurring in the first place, or prevent existing problems from getting worse (Kiernan, 1995).

If society intervenes early enough, it can raise cognitive and socioemotional abilities and the health of disadvantaged children.

(Heckman, 2011)

Preventative work with families, often called early intervention, has been identified by numerous sources as the most effective means of avoiding severe long-term problems for children (Pugh et al, 1994; Utting, 1995).

Brain development in the early years

Early childhood experiences profoundly shape the infant brain. Research has shown that the brain is uniquely constructed to benefit from experience and from positive caregiving during the first years of life (French, Murphy, 2005). This is the stage when the most rapid period of brain development occurs (particularly before birth and in the first year).

Early experience determines how the neural circuits in the brain are connected (Bertenthal and Campos, 1987). Children who are played with, spoken to and allowed to explore stimulating surroundings are more likely to develop improved neural connections which aid later learning (Karr-Morse and Wiley, 1997, cited in French and Murphy, 2005).

Research also tells us that brain development is vulnerable to environmental influences such as poor nutrition, stress, abuse or neglect:

Children who are neglected or who are in a permanent or semi-permanent state of fear or stress have been shown to have altered brain development, to find it more difficult to learn and to be less stable emotionally.

(Karr-Morse and Wiley, op cit)

Thus supporting parents in their critical early caregiving role (in particular reducing parental stress and promoting understanding of their child's learning and development) can promote children's welfare and help children to reach their educational and developmental potential. Early years services can also play a key role by providing supportive environments for infants and young children to enhance their development.

Attachment relationships in the early years

It is during the early months and years of their life that a child forms attachment relationships with their parents or main carer. The formation of at least one positive, nurturing attachment relationship, in which a child feels loved and emotionally secure, lays the critical foundation for healthy development (physically, psychologically, emotionally and behaviourally). Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1988) helps us to understand the relationships that are important and central to a young child's world.

What can we learn from Attachment Theory?

Generally, parents who provide reasonably warm, sensitive, responsive, interested, flexible, predictable and consistent care have children who develop secure attachments (Howe, 2000). Securely attached children see themselves as both loved and understood, and effective at eliciting care and protection at times of need. They generally develop high self esteem, have positive peer relationships, and cope well with their feelings and problems that confront them.

However, some parents experience difficulties, are hostile or are inconsistent in their ability to develop secure attachments with their children. There can be many reasons for this, perhaps they are overburdened or depressed, misuse drugs or alcohol, are preoccupied with their own needs or did not experience security in their attachment relationship with their own parents.

Children who don't experience the security of attachment relationships don't feel confident that their parents will be able to provide them with physical or psychological safety at times of need. They remain anxious and insecure and do not develop and internalise the skills they need to regulate their feelings. They can develop behavioural strategies to cope, such as minimising their feelings (for example, they don't let their parents or carers know when they are frightened or upset), suppress their expressions of need (for example, they don't indicate that they are hungry, cold or tired), or they may exaggerate their feelings (for example, they may scream or be destructive when in need of attention).



Because of insecure attachment, children's behaviour may be unpredictable and unmanageable, their emotional well-being may be poor and their social behaviour may be insensitive and/or awkward and uncomfortable (Barnardos Practice Framework, 2009).

Attachment Theory highlights why it is of key importance to support parent-child attachment relationships in the early years.

Thinking About Your Practice

What strategies do you currently employ in your setting to support parent-child relationships (see also Section 8.3)?

- ◆ What are the strengths?
- ◆ What are the limitations?
- ◆ Can you think of ways in which your practice in this area can be improved or further developed?

'It can be heartbreaking for parents who have to hand over the care of their very young babies to a service, especially if its full day care and they haven't really a choice. They need huge amounts of feedback and encouragement and reassurance.... It's about helping them to protect that bond [with their child].'

(Early years manager)

Risk factors and protective factors

In order to fully understand vulnerabilities or stresses in young children's lives, it is important to consider both risk factors and protective factors.

Risk factors

Research identifies risk factors for young children's health, development and well-being as including factors such as poverty and social isolation, parental mental illness, homelessness, alcohol or drug addiction, domestic abuse. The consequences may be short or long term. Children do not necessarily experience long-term consequences, such as emotional or behavioural problems, but when cumulative caring problems exist (i.e. when there is a cluster of risk factors) then the risk to children's development increases. Very young children are particularly vulnerable to the impact of inconsistent and ineffective parenting (Cleaver et al, 1999). UK research has also found that children 0-4 years are most at risk from child abuse (Corby, 2007).

Protective factors

Each child is unique and will respond to family stress and adversity in different ways. Some children may do well even in the most adverse circumstances (this is often described as resilience), while others appear to have little capacity to cope with stress. How children respond is related to:

- ◆ The nature and extent of the difficulties.
- ◆ Characteristics of individual children (such as temperament and personality).
- ◆ The presence or otherwise of *protective factors*.

A protective factor is an attribute or circumstance of the child that works to reduce or modify the impact on them of particular combinations of risk, and reduces their susceptibility to a range of social or psychological problems (Rutter, 1979).

Research stresses the importance of mobilising clusters of protective factors for vulnerable children (Buchanan, 1999). Key protective factors include at least one significant attachment relationship, a positive self esteem, social support networks and a positive education experience. Recent research on some 8,500 young children in Ireland confirms that strong parent-child relationships can act as a protective factor for children experiencing family difficulties such as a parent with depression or relationship problems (Nixon, 2012).

Quality ECCE is an important protective factor for all young children, but particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Children who have attended quality early childhood services are better prepared for school, better able to learn and have fewer emotional difficulties (Sylva, 1993). UK research has found that for children from disadvantaged backgrounds whose development was thought to be 'at risk', attending quality pre-school provision appeared to reduce the impact of these risks (Hall et al, 2009).

Thinking About Your Practice

Research tells us of the importance of promoting children's resilience. The existence of 'protective factors' (relating to the child or their environment) can support this process. A positive self esteem is an important protective factor for all children.

- ◆ Consider the ways in which you promote the self esteem of children in your setting.
- ◆ How do you involve parents in this process?

4.2 How Does Supporting Families Benefit Young Children's Learning and Development?

Why early years services engage and support families

- ◆ Parents are children's most influential educators and generally the most important people in their lives.
- ◆ Parents have a right to be involved in their child's ECCE and in decisions affecting their children. Early years services need to be as supportive as possible of parent's child-rearing values and interests, and support their relationships and attachment to their children.
- ◆ Early childhood services need the active support of parents to maximise the impact of programmes on children.
- ◆ To be effective, the work of early years services needs to be relevant to children's culture and everyday lives, and connected to the communities they serve.
- ◆ Building on the strengths and resilience of families, and assisting them in developing social supports in their own community, can benefit individual and family well-being and promote supportive family environments for young children's learning and development.

A review of international literature shows that there is a growing recognition of the role of family support in early childhood care and education services. Early years services are increasingly expected to be:

...culturally and socially relevant to the families they serve, foster mutually respectful and reciprocal relations between staff and families, empower parents with information and social support that promotes optimal engagement of the child-rearing role, and function as a bridge between families and other services in the community.
(Larner, 1997)

However, the full potential of this approach in Ireland is viewed as being largely underdeveloped to date. In the OECD report on Irish early years services (2004), it is noted that family support, parental engagement and information services:

*...may be weak in the (Irish) Early Childhood and Care system as a whole....
Quality early years centres that we have seen in other countries offer, as a matter of course, family support, referral, educational and recreational courses, and up-to-date information on all matters of concern to parents.*

What do we mean by family support in the context of early years?

Engaging and supporting families in the context of early years services involves early years services broadening the boundaries of their work to be more inclusive of families and their social contexts.

This has led to increased efforts by early years services to encourage parent's understanding of ECCE goals and curriculum, as well as initiatives aimed at supporting the capacity of families to promote the healthy development of young children (such as parenting information and education programmes, and initiatives aimed at improving the quality of parent's relationships with their child) and measures to promote families' social support networks. Where families need additional support, early years services can act as an important link to support services in the community.



Why is engaging and supporting families beneficial to children's learning and development?

Research tells us that:

- ◆ The engagement of parents and families in their child's education improves children's academic performance and their motivation and leads to higher adult expectations and increased parental confidence and aspirations (Schweinhart et al, 2004, cited in French, 2008b).
- ◆ The kind of involvement that parents are offered in early years services is of key importance. Good outcomes for children are linked to early years services that have strong parental involvement, especially in terms of parents and practitioners working together, sharing information on educational aims and how to extend children's learning and development (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002; Whalley, 2007, cited in French, 2008b).
- ◆ The quality of the home learning environment (HLE) is more important for children's intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income. This means that disadvantaged parents with poor qualifications can improve their children's progress and give them a better start at school by engaging in activities at home that engage and stretch the child's mind (Sylva et al, 1999, cited in Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).
- ◆ It is important to support children's learning and support families. The needs of children and parents should be viewed as different but complementary. For example, a service with excellent parental support but a poor quality learning environment (resulting in poor cognitive outcomes for children) is employing a less effective strategy by emphasising parent's needs above those of their children (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002).
- ◆ To be effective, early years services for disadvantaged children and families need to be strong on family engagement and support as well as providing high quality learning experiences to children. Creating linkages with local children and family support services and primary health and nutrition programmes for children are also seen to increase their effectiveness (OECD, 2004).
- ◆ The quality of parent-child relationships is more important for children's development than the structure or income level of families according to *Growing up in Ireland – A national longitudinal study on children in Ireland*. The study highlights the importance of programmes to help build children's skills in developing relationships and regulating emotions, and supports for parents to build positive relationships with their children (Nixon, 2012).

(See Section 6.2 for strategies to support parents' involvement with their child's learning and development.)

Community-based early years services

Although Irish research in this area is extremely limited, an evaluation of a Community Playgroup Initiative (involving five community playgroups in the south-east of Ireland) by French (2005b) highlights the ways in which community-based early years services can provide a valuable family support service to the communities they serve by:

- ◆ Supporting children's early learning and development directly through their involvement in the service, and increasing parents' awareness and understanding of the importance of play and socialisation in their child's early learning and development.
- ◆ Providing children with an integrated opportunity for development in their own community, particularly for social development and friendships.
- ◆ Promoting and facilitating the integration of children with special needs.
- ◆ Providing an opportunity for parents to develop social networks. Newcomers and young families in the community can be helped to integrate and to develop friendships.
- ◆ Providing accessible and flexible childcare to meet changing needs, including parent's needs to enhance their own development through access to training and work.
- ◆ Providing an opportunity for parental participation or committee roles. For many parents, participation in their local early years service has been a first step towards further training and education, and the beginning of their community involvement. Research also tells us that families involved in participative services become more knowledgeable about child development and good practice.
- ◆ Being not-for-profit, which makes early years services affordable for families on low incomes.
- ◆ Providing a listening ear, advice and support to families when needed.
- ◆ Providing information on accessing other supports and services, particularly for special needs, speech therapy, community involvement, training courses and job opportunities. Community-based early years services develop important links with public health nursing, speech and language support and other appropriate services for families with young children.



Practice Example

Sure Start, UK

Sure Start is a national, state-funded early years initiative in the UK to support better outcomes for children, particularly those living in disadvantaged areas. Sure Start aims to ensure every child has the best start in life by bringing together local support agencies to offer a range of services to children and families, all in one place. This includes health, early childhood care and education, play and family support services. It also provides help for parents and carers to find work or training opportunities.

Sure Start is committed to involving parents at every stage of service planning and evaluation. This is based on the belief that the right services provided at the right time in the right way cannot be achieved unless parents' voices are heard.

For more information, check out http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Preschooldevelopmentandlearning/NurseriesPlaygroupsReceptionClasses/DG_173054

Thinking About Your Practice

Identify the ways in which your early years service or school age childcare service currently supports families.





Section 5:

Engaging and Supporting Families through Partnership

5.1 Defining Partnership

In order to engage and support parents effectively, early years services need to work in partnership with parents. Aistear defines partnership as follows:

Partnership involves parents, families and practitioners working together to benefit children. Each recognises, respects and values what the other does and says. Partnership involves responsibility on both sides.

(NCCA, 2009, p.7)

Aistear provides guidelines for both early years practitioners and parents to support them in meeting their joint responsibilities for children's learning and development.

Parental involvement is regarded as an integral part of professional practice in early years settings. While there is support at policy and practice levels for a partnership approach with parents, there is no universal agreement on what parental involvement is, or the forms that it

can take (Evangelou et al, 2008). As a result, practice in early years services can often vary from one setting to the next.

Siolta endorses partnership and parental involvement as a core value in a setting. It suggests that there is no set recipe for building partnership and that each individual setting must reflect on its current approach and how this can be improved.

5.2 Models of Partnership

Partnership can take many different forms. Different models of partnership and parental involvement indicate that activities can encompass both:

- ◆ Parent's involvement in their individual child's early learning and development, as learners and educators.
- ◆ Parental involvement in the life of ECCE settings.

(Share et al, 2011)

The following two models highlight the different roles that can be played by parents in early years learning and in early years settings.

Pugh (1989), a UK researcher, outlined five possible dimensions of parental involvement in early years settings as shown in Table 2 on page 41.



Non-participation	Parents have consciously opted not to play an active role within the setting.
Support	Parents help with practical events (such as fundraising, school trips, sports days).
Participation	Parents participate in the setting by taking part in the daily classroom routine, as helpers (such as helping to run a particular group) or as learners (such as learning about their own child and the setting by attending meetings and workshops).
Partnership	Parents are involved in a working relationship defined by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate.
Control	Parents determine and implement decisions and have administrative responsibilities (such as selecting an employing staff, managing resources).

Table 2 Dimensions of parental involvement (Pugh, 1989, cited in Share et al, 2011)

According to Pugh, this framework is useful in evaluating the 'partnership proneness' of an early years setting, and in doing so measuring the relationships between workers and parents and where the balance of power lies.

Epstein (2002), a US researcher, recognises family / early years setting or school / community as three overlapping spheres of influence on children's learning and development, and breaks down the concept of parental involvement into six activities as shown in Table 3 on page 42.



Parenting	Helping families establish supportive learning environments for children at home (such as parent education courses, family literacy, offering a lending library that provides educational material).
Communicating	Designing effective forms of two-way communication (such as notices, newsletters, memos, calendars, face-to-face meetings with parents).
Volunteering	Recruiting and organising parental help and support (such as asking parents to help with trips, supervision of children, representatives on parents committees).
Learning at home	Supporting learning activities at home by providing families with information and ideas on how to help their children at home (such as hosting family workshops about the importance of learning and play, giving learning tips through the newsletter, encourage parents contributions in the newsletter).
Decision-making	Including parents in the setting's decisions, encouraging and developing parent leaders and representatives (such as parents committee, co-management of the setting).
Collaborating with the community	Identifying and integrating resources from the community to strengthen the setting's activities (such as information on health services advice, community activities, literacy programmes).

Table 3 Activities in parental involvement (Epstein, 1992, cited in Share et al, 2011)

These models are not mutually exclusive. Additionally, if parents are not participating in the early years setting, or engage little with early years educators, this does not mean that they are uninterested in their child's learning and development, or do not share activities with them in private that support learning.

Practice Examples

Pen Green Centre, Corby, UK

Designated a centre of excellence, the Pen Green Centre provides a 'one-stop-shop' model of early years service provision, supporting children and families experiencing social and economic disadvantage. Pen Green has developed a unique framework for encouraging a partnership between parents and early years practitioners to support children's early learning, called *Parent Involvement in Children's Learning (PICL)*.

The PICL framework proactively involves parents in their children's learning through sharing key child development concepts with them. It also includes pedagogical strategies that adults use to help children to learn. These strategies and concepts are used within a partnership approach, involving a continuous two-way flow of information between parents and practitioners, to plan curriculum for children and extend their learning.

The work with parents and families in the Pen Green Centre is underpinned by two firm beliefs:

- ◆ All parents are interested in their own children.
- ◆ It is our task to find out ways they can participate.

Interested in finding out more?

- ◆ For more information on the Pen Green Centre, check out their website at www.pengreen.org
- ◆ For information on the application of the Pen Green model in an Irish context, check out the research report – *Developing Early Years Professionalism - Evaluation of the Early Learning Initiatives Professional Development Programme in Community Childcare Centres in the Dublin Docklands* by Share et al (2011), Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin.

Tús Maith, Barnardos

Tús Maith is a centre-based model of early years care and education for children 3-5 years, in which parents are supported to support their child's early learning and development through a specific methodology. It is designed for children living in areas of disadvantage who are not reaching their developmental milestones as a result of reduced parenting capacity and/or a poor parent/child relationship.

Parents are actively involved in supporting their children's participation in the programme (including carrying out specific parent-child activities at home) to maximise the effectiveness of the programme and promote continuity between the children's home and school environments.

Tús Maith integrates the High Scope curriculum with the Research-Based Developmentally Informed programme (known as REDI) in order to maximise the developmental outcomes for children. The overall outcome of Tús Maith is that children will be ready for primary school and will develop the specific cognitive skills necessary for this transition. This is based on achieving specific measurable outcomes in relation to children's emotional, social, language/literacy/communication and physical development.

Interested in finding out more?

For more information on Barnardos' Tús Maith programme, check out www.barnardos.ie

Partnership with Parents, Barnardos

Partnership with Parents is a one-to-one, home-based parenting programme designed by Barnardos to meet the needs of children and families. It is suitable for families who are faced with complex challenges such as parents who are overburdened and have a poor relationship with their child.

The outcomes that the programme aims to achieve are:

- ◆ Improving parent-child communication.
- ◆ Increasing parental understanding of and ability to manage their child's behaviour.
- ◆ Improving child's social development.
- ◆ Introducing consistent routines.
- ◆ Increasing parental involvement in child's education.
- ◆ Ensuring child's physical needs are met.
- ◆ Increasing parental ability to manage crises effectively.

Partnership with Parents is a modular programme which is flexible to respond to the individual needs of different parents as identified in the assessment stage. The core programme, which focuses on the parent-child relationship, is offered to all parents. Alongside this there are five optional components – behaviour, social development, routines, education and physical development. The programme also includes a crisis management and practical support element.



5.3 Benefits of Partnership

The benefits for parents, early years practitioners and children of working together in partnership are outlined in Aistear. These are presented in Table 4 below.

Parenting	Practitioners	Children
<p>Feel valued and respected.</p> <p>Can share information about their children.</p> <p>Feel their family's values, practices, traditions and beliefs are understood and taken into account.</p> <p>Feel comfortable visiting the setting, talking to, and planning with practitioners.</p> <p>Know more about their children's experiences outside the home and use this information to support their learning and development more effectively.</p> <p>Understand why early childhood care and education are important.</p>	<p>Understand better the children and families in their settings and use this information to make learning more enjoyable and rewarding for all children.</p> <p>Can help children develop a sense of identity and belonging in the setting by actively engaging with and finding out about family values, traditions and beliefs, and building on these where appropriate.</p> <p>Benefit from parent's skills and expertise.</p> <p>Can provide a more emotionally secure environment for children.</p>	<p>Feel more secure and benefit more from the educational opportunities given to them.</p> <p>Move from one setting to another with greater confidence.</p> <p>See learning as more enjoyable when their home life is 'visible' in the setting.</p> <p>Enjoy hearing and seeing their home language in the setting when their home language is neither English nor Irish.</p> <p>Experience more connections between the different services that support them.</p>

Table 4 Benefits of partnership (Aistear, 2009)

Parents with higher levels of involvement also devote more time to providing a supportive home learning environment, likely to be beneficial for children's learning and development (Chaboudy, 2001).

5.4 Barriers to Effective Partnership

Research tells us that, as a result of different understanding and expectations of partnership by parents and practitioners, there can be real barriers to engagement in partnership. Other potential barriers include:

- ◆ Lack of clear and consistent policies on partnership and parental involvement.
- ◆ Parent's own negative educational experiences and perceptions of 'teachers'.

- ◆ Parent's lack of confidence or difficulties communicating with early years settings, which they perceive to be unwelcoming of parents.
- ◆ Competing time pressures relating to family and work commitments
- ◆ Living on a low income and pressure to do part-time work as it becomes available.
- ◆ Practical obstacles (such as lack of childcare facilities, particularly for lone parents).
- ◆ Lack of opportunity to participate.
- ◆ Previous experience of activities as staff directed and not characterised by a sense of partnership or mutual understanding.
- ◆ Language difficulties.
- ◆ Perception that the setting is not inclusive or respectful of a parent's ethnic, religious or cultural background, physical disability or sensory impairment.

Factors relating to the settings themselves

- ◆ Lack of leadership and commitment to partnership.
- ◆ Lack of structures and resources to support this work (such as staff time, training, support and supervision).
- ◆ Lack of skills and knowledge by educators to engage effectively with parents and external agencies (such as poor relationship building and communication skills).
- ◆ Lack of confidence in their knowledge of the curriculum by early years educators.
- ◆ Use of professional language and jargon by educators, which can be off-putting to some parents.
- ◆ Negative perceptions and attitudes by educators towards parents (such as being judgemental or critical).
- ◆ Lack of equality and anti-discriminatory policies and related staff training
- ◆ Staff concerns and fears that parents will 'take over', 'want their own way', 'form cliques', 'take up already scarce time', 'confuse the children' or 'result in problems with confidentiality' (Whalley, 2001).

Pen Green, UK has found that when teachers do not have a clearly articulated pedagogical approach or a deep understanding of child development, they find it more difficult to share information with parents and may perceive parents' questions as a challenge to their professionalism.

(Whalley, 2001)

Additional factors

Employment and training issues

In relation to community-based early years settings in Ireland, a study by Maloney (2010) found a lack of professional identity experienced by many community-based practitioners and a lack of clarity over their role, to the extent that many feel as if they are treated as babysitters rather than professionals.

Physical space

Research tells us that good practice in the promotion of parental partnership involves the provision of an area in which parents could meet, such as a parents' room (Batey, 1996) or a space in a setting for meetings, courses, activities or just to relax (Alexander et al, 1995). Also of importance is a space where staff can meet privately with parents.

'More and more services are saying that they need a designated room to talk with parents about issues that come up.'

(Development worker for early years services)

Thinking About Your Practice

- ◆ What does parental partnership mean to you?
- ◆ Think about the barriers which might make it difficult for parents to engage in your service.
- ◆ Taking Pugh's dimensions of parental involvement in Section 5.2, which dimension best describes parental involvement in your setting?

Parents can provide settings with important information to help with decisions about their children's learning and development. They also need to be included when important decisions are being made about their children in the setting (Aistear, NCCA, 2009).

- ◆ How do you make use of the feedback and information that you obtain from parents about their children?
- ◆ What strategies do you currently use to involve parents in making important decisions about their children's learning and development?





Section 6: Strategies to Engage Families through Partnership

6.1 Building Relationships with Parents and Families

Regular contact with parents over a sustained period, in a non-threatening, community-based environment, places early years practitioners in a unique position to engage and support families presenting with a range of needs.

It is of key importance that special attention is paid to developing open, working relationships with parents and families. Relationships based on trust and mutual respect provide the foundation for:

- ◆ Children's healthy learning and development.
- ◆ Real partnership with parents.
- ◆ Providing appropriate support to families.

Strategies to promote relationships with parents and families

- ◆ A respectful, warm approach.
- ◆ Being clear about your role and the focus of your work.
- ◆ Understanding children's needs and staying focused on children.
- ◆ Openness in your communication with parents from the beginning and on an ongoing basis, both formal and informal (i.e. daily chats).
- ◆ Engaging parents 'where they are at'.
- ◆ Setting aside any negative attitudes or stereotypes. Treating parents with dignity and respect at all times, taking into account their racial/ethnic group, cultural background, religion, disability, gender or sexual preference. This means acknowledging and respecting differences of all kinds, such as views of childhood, child rearing practices, education etc.
- ◆ Finding ways of tuning in to parent's interests and values.
- ◆ Avoiding the use of professional jargon.
- ◆ Sharing your interest and enthusiasm in their child's learning and development and unique potential.
- ◆ Being flexible in meeting parents at times that suit.
- ◆ Acknowledging the realities and stresses of parenting generally.
- ◆ Demonstrating continuity from one discussion or meeting to the next.
- ◆ Dealing with any disagreements in a constructive way. Considering any issues arising from the parent's perspective.
- ◆ Being open to feedback and seeking and valuing their opinions.
- ◆ Maintaining appropriate confidentiality and family privacy.
- ◆ Demonstrating openness and transparency in the way you share information with parents, and gaining their consent prior to sharing information with other professionals or organisations (unless it is not in the interests of the child to do so).
- ◆ Letting parents know that support is available and providing support when they think they need it.

(Adapted from Barnardos Practice Framework, 2009)

It is important to be honest with parents and let them know about problems and issues of concern, as well as progress and achievements, as early as possible.

Healthy relationships with parents are those in which their strengths are supported and encouraged while behaviour and attitudes which may be damaging to children's development are sensitively and appropriately challenged (Barnardos, 2009). If good relationships have been built up with parents, it is easier to talk with them about sensitive or difficult issues that may arise. It also means that parents are more likely to feel empowered to challenge any issues or concerns arising in the early years setting relating to their children, and to seek information and support based on their needs.

'It's not until parents have built up a relationship with you, and trust you, that they begin to share information about any family issues that may be there.'

(Early years manager)

6.2 Practical Strategies to Enable Parental Partnership

In a partnership, each person needs to be clear about the role and expectations of the other person. Building partnership between early years practitioners and parents is a daily process based on ongoing open communications. For practitioners, this involves commitment, time and a range of skills.

The ethos and climate of the setting needs to enable parents to feel welcomed, included and respected. The likelihood of sustained parental involvement and support will increase if parents enjoy their involvement, have choices, do things that interest them, and feel successful and competent in their efforts (French and Murphy, 2005).

Practitioners also need to learn to respect the level of involvement that each parent is comfortable with. Research tells us that parents themselves generally decide if and when they are ready to be involved (Whalley, 2001). For example, in some situations parents may decide not to become involved until their second or third child joins the setting and they have more experience of children. For other parents, non-participation is not as a result of lack of interest or apathy, but may be as a result of some of the barriers outlined in Section 5.4.

In the **Pen Green Centre, UK** there is a poster on the wall for parents, which states:

Parents relate to the centre according to their own needs and at their own pace.
(Pugh et al, 1997, cited in French, 2008b)

Communication

Open communication between parents and practitioners about the setting and their child's experiences and progress is a key component of effective partnership. Open communication with parents begins from the point of first contact with a setting. Thereafter, parents and practitioners need to communicate regularly about children's progress, interests, needs and daily experiences (Aistear, 2009).

Making a good start is important. Practitioners should show sensitivity to the transition between home and the early years setting, which can be an emotionally difficult time for both parents and children, and help parents to support their child in negotiating this transition in a positive way, through providing information, advice and support.

Strategies to promote good communication include:

- ◆ A clear process for the introduction of new children and parents into the setting, such as:
 - ◆ Pre-enrolment visit for children and parents
 - ◆ Registration meeting for parents
 - ◆ Settling-in programme for new children
- ◆ Key person system (see Section 6.3).
- ◆ A Parent's Handbook or Information Pack (see Appendix 4).

- ◆ Individual parent-staff meetings to discuss the developmental progress of individual children, in addition to informal daily information-sharing.
- ◆ A regular time when a staff member is available to talk on the phone, which may be especially helpful for parents for have difficulty coming in to the setting during the day.
- ◆ A Family Notice Board, displayed in a prominent position, which includes notices from the setting to parents and also space for parents to leave messages for others. The notices should be multilingual reflecting the languages spoken in the setting.
- ◆ Use of a variety of communication methods such as face-to-face contact, regular newsletters, calendars, memos, flyers, email, texting, website postings, information meetings, information stands.
- ◆ Mechanisms for consultation / dialogue with parents such as parents' groups / parents' committees, parents' representation on management boards / advisory committees, policy-making committees.
- ◆ Arrangements to consult with parents prior to making changes in the service provided, for example, opening times, change in fees, policies etc.
- ◆ Involving parents in developing and reviewing policies.
- ◆ Comments and Complaints Policy including mechanisms to invite feedback such as a comment/suggestions box.
- ◆ Involvement of parents in reviewing and evaluating the service such as focus groups, surveys, independent evaluation.
- ◆ Encouraging parents to comment and make suggestions about policies, both formally and informally. A policy folder/file should be kept at an accessible, central place in the setting, to be accessed by parents (staff and management) at any time.

'My children have been going to the same service for years and they're really happy... we all are. Its really about good communication... it's so important to talk everything through and not let tensions build up... so we have a good business-like relationship, but it's also a home-from-home for the kids.'

(Comment from a parent)

In situations where parents are separated or divorced, early years settings may need to communicate with both parents separately. This means that information may need to be sent to two different homes and separate appointments may need to be made to meet with the parents, depending on the family's individual circumstances.

Promoting parental involvement

Strategies to support parental involvement in their child's early learning and development

Share information with parents

- ◆ Share knowledge of young children's development and learning by explaining to parents why activities, materials and certain skills are encouraged and/or stressed during early childhood.
- ◆ Share information with parents about the concepts underpinning the approach used in the setting, how they are applied in practice, and why.

- ◆ Organise information sessions for parents. Some of these might be especially important before and/or after children join the setting. For example, a session might highlight the importance of play and how children can learn through it.
- ◆ Let parents know about topics that interest their children. Find out what their interests are at home and build on these.
- ◆ Share records and observations with parents.
- ◆ Invite parents to share information about their culture and traditions that might be useful in supporting their children's learning and development.
- ◆ Use the Family Notice Board to let parents know what activities children do on a particular day. Pictures might be useful in sharing this information with parents who have little English or Irish.
- ◆ Share examples of children's work with parents and families through open days, exhibitions, photographs and videos of children at play (made with permission from parents), portfolios of children's work, for example send home photographs of the children with captions which describe what they have been doing and learning.
- ◆ Develop a regular newsletter that provides useful information, such as the words of songs and rhymes that the children are learning, important dates, updates on policies, and snippets of theory followed by ideas for activities to do at home that are fun and don't cost much.
- ◆ Give parents the address of the NCCA website so that they can find out more about Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework's guidelines for parents on building partnerships with ECCE settings (see www.ncca.ie/earlylearning).
- ◆ Promote parent education courses and family literacy.



Invite parents into the setting

- ◆ Arrange a time for parents to spend time in the setting so that they can join in with activities and learn about what their children do, for example they could share a learning activity with their children, such as reading a story, planting bulbs in the garden or in window boxes.
- ◆ Have a weekly hour when parents are invited to drop in to share story-time and to see children's work for the week.

Share resources with parents

- ◆ Make leaflets, tip sheets, DVDs and other resources available to parents. Provide these in children's home languages where appropriate.
- ◆ Lend story books and tapes of songs and rhymes.

- ◆ Make learning kits with ideas for activities, and include items like chubby crayons and safety scissors if funds allow.
 - ◆ Share easy-to-read books on child development.
 - ◆ Develop a lending library of educational materials, for example a toy library (see Appendix 5 for information on developing a toy library).
- (Murphy, 2004; French, 2008b; Aistear, NCCA, 2009).

Strategies to support parental involvement in early years settings

Making parents welcome: The visual environment

The impression that parents get when they come in for the first time is crucial.

- ◆ Welcome signs should be in place and be written in at least as many languages as are spoken in the setting.
- ◆ Posters, images and displays should reflect the diversity of the families who use the service, including different family structures, ethnicities, religions, abilities and social classes.
- ◆ The setting should be physically accessible for everyone (including parents and children with physical disabilities, and parents with infants in prams or buggies).
- ◆ Photographs and names of all staff should be displayed so that parents, in particular new parents, know which adults are looking after their children.
- ◆ If space allows, have two or three adult-sized chairs near the entrance inviting parents to sit down.
- ◆ Toilets should be clearly sign-posted, with baby changing facilities for men and women.

Attitudes and values

The way early years educators and managers feel about the parents in the setting is reflected in the way parents are dealt with by staff.

- ◆ When parents first come to register their child, is it obvious where they have to go? Ensure that there are clear signs directing them to the office or to whoever deals with admissions.
- ◆ When parents are first shown around the setting, ensure that they are welcomed with a smile, even if staff are too busy to speak with them.
- ◆ When a child first starts, ensure that someone is assigned to make parents feel welcome. This could be a member of staff and/or another parent.
- ◆ Ensure that parents are greeted in a friendly way by staff at the beginning and end of a session. These times are vital for the development of the relationship between parents and educators. Flexible settling-in periods in the morning enable staff to greet parent and child individually.

Facilities for parents

The range of facilities for parents will depend on the resources and the space available.

Providing at least one or two of the following will help to create a welcoming environment:

- ◆ Parent's room.
- ◆ Parent and toddler group run by the parents themselves.
- ◆ Drop-in sessions managed by staff.
- ◆ Fathers/male carers group.
- ◆ Second-hand shop.
- ◆ Snack bar/lunches/place to make tea or coffee.

- ◆ Information leaflets and notices on a range of topics of relevance to parents, such as child and family health and nutrition, parenting courses, information meetings, further education, local library services, local councillors surgeries, support groups and services, telephone help lines etc.
- ◆ Information and advice sessions run by outside agencies.
- ◆ Opportunities for training run by outside trainers (such as adult education programmes) in collaboration with the setting.

(National Early Years Network, 1995, cited in French, 2008b)

(For a detailed practice example of developing relationships with parents see Appendix 6.)

Thinking About Your Practice

A home learning environment is defined as reading, library visits, playing with letters, numbers and shapes, painting and drawing, teaching through play the letters of the alphabet, teaching nursery rhymes and singing (Sylva et al, 1999).

- ◆ What can you do as an early years educator to support parents in providing a positive home learning environment for their children?
- ◆ What resources do you have that you could share with parents?

6.3 Role of the Key Person

Using a key person system in an early years setting promotes and facilitates partnership relationships with children and families. Under a key person system, each child and family is allocated a specific member of staff who will provide continuity between the home and the setting, and who has a special responsibility for the child and the relationship with the child's family.

The key person builds a relationship with the child and their family. They co-ordinate information about the individual child's needs and progress and share this with parents/ carers and other staff members to maintain consistency and continuity of care. The key person also observes children's play to extend learning and co-ordinates planning and record-keeping responsibilities for individual children.

Specific aspects of the role include:

- ◆ Linking closely with parents/carers in helping to settle a child in to the setting.
- ◆ Understanding the child's needs and the parents'/carers' wishes in relation to their child's learning and care.
- ◆ Observing changes in the child and how their particular interests might develop.
- ◆ Making contact at the beginning and end of each day with the child and parent/carer and providing updates on progress and developments.
- ◆ Taking part in the child's reviews.
- ◆ Monitoring the curriculum offered to individual children to ensure that it is matched to their particular abilities, interests, needs and developmental level.
- ◆ Understanding cultural differences and key words from the child's own language if English is not the child's first language.

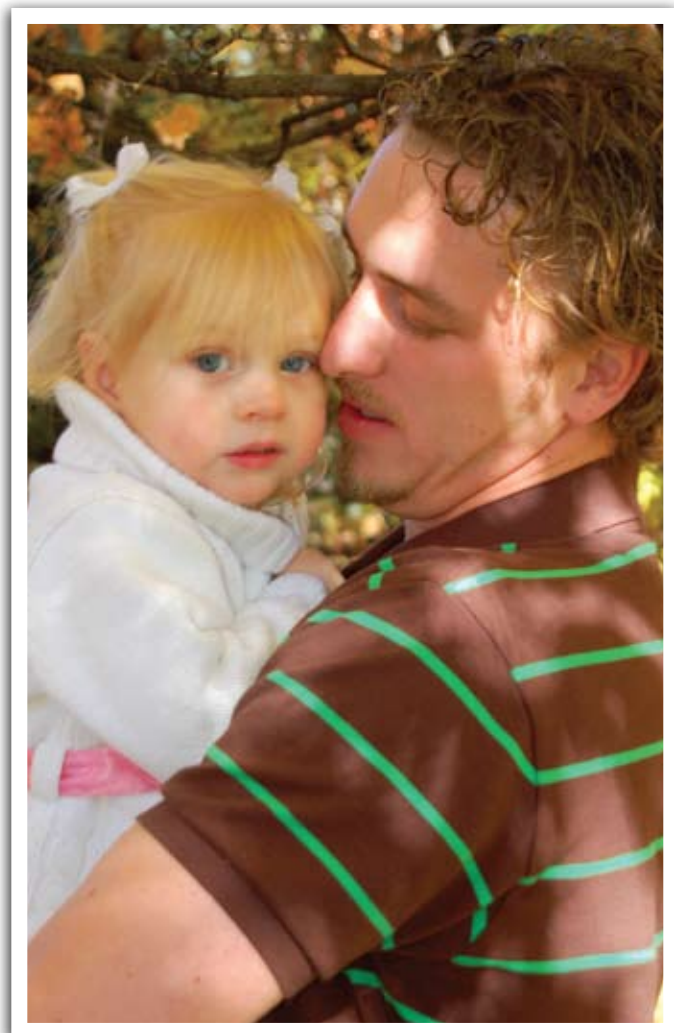
For older children, key persons do not remain with them all day and children are encouraged to develop relationships with other staff members. The key person role is supported by and supports the work of the whole staff team.

6.4 Engaging and Supporting Fathers

Men have a crucial role in their children's lives and active fatherhood should be proactively supported where possible (McKeown, 2001). Research tells us that children benefit from the active involvement of both parents in their care, education and overall upbringing (Barnardos, 2004b). While changes in Irish society have meant that many fathers have a greater level of involvement in their young children's lives than in the past, evidence suggest that male adults generally have minimal involvement in early years or family support services, either in their parental role or as practitioners.

Potential barriers to the involvement of fathers

- ◆ Traditional male and female role stereotypes, in which young children's care and education is viewed as a mother's responsibility.
- ◆ Patterns of employment and work commitments.
- ◆ Financial commitments.
- ◆ A lack of information and awareness on how to become involved.
- ◆ A tendency for early years services to communicate primarily with mothers.
- ◆ Mothers censoring information in the home.
- ◆ Limited support and encouragement from early years services.
- ◆ A failure to recognise the importance of becoming involved, both on the part of fathers and early years services.
- ◆ Family breakdown / parental separation in which the mother is awarded custody of the children and fathers contact with services is minimal or absent.
- ◆ For lone parent fathers – lack of childcare, time constraints.
- ◆ Lack of confidence that they have something to contribute.
- ◆ Lack of peer support.



Practical strategies in working with fathers

Engaging more fathers requires a pro-active approach on the part of early years services. This includes inserting a commitment to engage fathers in the setting's partnership with parents / parental involvement policy, and staff induction and training programmes, in addition to making efforts to create a father friendly environment.

Practical strategies to promote the involvement of fathers include:

- ◆ Ensuring images of fathers as carers (i.e. fathers and children together) are displayed on walls and the Family Notice Board within the setting and in leaflets, publications or advertising materials.
- ◆ Ensuring all methods of written communication (such as enrolment forms, parents handbooks, letters to parents, emails and texts etc.) are inclusive of fathers, that 'parent' means fathers as well as mothers, and the involvement of fathers is expected and welcomed.
- ◆ Building a relationship with fathers as they drop off and/or collect their children.
- ◆ Asking fathers for their ideas on how their involvement can be encouraged.
- ◆ Encouraging fathers to become volunteers.
- ◆ Scheduling meetings and activities to suit lone parent and working fathers, such as after work hours or at weekends.
- ◆ Providing crèche facilities to encourage and enable the attendance of both parents or lone parent fathers at meetings or social events.
- ◆ Organising achievement-orientated events that may appeal to fathers.
- ◆ Recruiting male staff. Research by Barnardos has found, however, that it is the attitudes of staff rather than their gender alone that is of importance to fathers, who explained that being listened to, helped and not judged was what mattered ('The Da Project' Evaluation Report, Barnardos, 2006a)

'She [the member of staff] just asked me if I wanted to go on trip and I said no problem... It was great. It's an opportunity for me to see the kids a bit more. It's good. It means that I get involved with them more and doing things with them.'

(Quotation from a father – 'The Da Project' Evaluation Report, 2006a)



Practice Example

'The Da Project'

In 2003 Barnardos set up 'The Da Project' in conjunction with the Barnardos Cherry Orchard Family Support Project, with the aim of engaging more fathers in their services and supporting parent-child relationships.

This initiative was independently evaluated in 2006. You can access the key learning from the evaluation report of the project at

<http://www.barnardos.ie/information-centre/publications/free-publications>

6.5 Working with Parents whose Children have Additional Needs

Developing an open and collaborative relationship with parents is particularly important when a child with additional needs is attending, or planning to attend, an early years setting. These needs may be a physical disability, developmental delay or other learning need. This may be the first occasion when a child will be cared for by adults outside the home. It can be an emotionally challenging time for families, who may have to engage with a number of health and educational professionals to secure a suitable placement for their child (*see also Section 10.2*).

Practice in relation to integrating children with additional needs is informed by good practice in relation to partnership with parents and inclusive and antidiscriminatory practice, which promotes equal opportunities for all children. Research has consistently confirmed the benefits of integration, in terms of the learning and development needs of individual children (Guralnick, 1994) and other children in the setting, linked to the quality of provision.

Successful integration involves:

- ◆ Shared focus on the needs and rights of the child.
- ◆ Good quality information based on an assessment of the child's needs.
- ◆ Good working relationships with the family and key specialists/professionals involved.
- ◆ A commitment to good communication.
- ◆ Understanding different roles and responsibilities.
- ◆ Planning and review.
- ◆ Staff training.
- ◆ Accessing whatever resources and supports are available.

Good planning is essential to ensure a co-ordinated approach to meeting the child's needs in the setting and ensure their fullest participation, ideally prior to a child attending a service. This process should involve the parents, the child (according to their age and stage of development), service manager and other key professionals involved, for example a member of the HSE Early Intervention Team, other specialist service etc.

A planning meeting can be structured around formulating an agreed plan to meet the needs of the child, including identifying any additional resources and supports required by the setting (Galway City and County Childcare Committee, 2010).

It is essential that close engagement and a good working relationship exists between the parents, any specialist staff and the child's key person in the setting, particularly in relation to the implementation of special learning programmes or treatment. For example, there may be a need to set up a joint process for assessment and the keeping of records.

Overall, it is important to remember that the same principles of childhood education and care remain, regardless of the abilities or disabilities of the child.

6.6 Building Partnerships with ‘Hard to Reach’ Families – Parents’ Perspectives

For parents and families experiencing high levels of stress and social exclusion, research on their experiences of engaging with early years and family support services can tell us a great deal about what makes a difference to families (French, 2005b). Although every family’s circumstances were unique, common issues at the point of first contact with services included being highly stressed, wary and suspicious of services, feeling lonely, isolated and unsupported.

Key factors identified that promote positive engagement with services

- ◆ **Building a trusting relationship between staff and parents.** Establishing trust takes time and the first contacts are crucial. Most families identified that it takes about six months before they felt they could ‘really be themselves’.
‘At first I was paranoid and thought she [the staff member] was in the Secret Service! It would have taken me six or eight months before I would’ve even opened up to her.’
- ◆ **Feeling staff were genuine, approachable, encouraging and believed in their abilities.**
‘Small things can make a huge difference.’
‘I thought they were nice, nice people. Easy-going and that and trying to help. When you don’t know people it takes a bit of time you know.’
- ◆ **Proactive strategies by staff to provide information about the service initially and to encourage participation, including home visits.**
- ◆ **Being accompanied by a staff member on their first engagement with the service.**
‘It’s hard to go in anywhere for the first time on your own.’
- ◆ **Combining early years service to children with opportunities for parents to meet, such as a parents morning / group.**
‘Parent’s mornings have helped me make friends and talk to other parents who are in the same position as myself without being judged and being able to get advice if I had a problem.’
- ◆ **Feeling involved and consulted in relation to their child’s ECCE.**
‘The teachers are very good. They’d always tell me what’s going on with the kids. I’ve asked, because they always do planning and reviewing, how I can do that at home; how I can follow what’s going on for the two hours that they are there.’

- ◆ **Being supported in developing links with other services.** For example, attending self development and parenting programmes delivered in partnership with other organisations helped parents to gain confidence and belief in themselves and inspired some parents to go on to further education.
- ◆ **Feeling empowered by staff to develop and expand their own coping skills.**
'The approach is that it is better for me to do things for myself, but to ask for guidance.'

(Quotations from French, 2005a and Barnardos, 2006a).

In general, support that communicates genuine caring, yet encourages the individual to solve his or her own problems, is most effective.

(Cutrona, 2000)

Thinking About Your Practice

- ◆ What strategies do you employ to build trusting relationships with parents?
- ◆ How can you promote the involvement of parents who are difficult to engage?
- ◆ How can you maintain a positive relationship with parents (in the best interests of the child) in situations where you may need to address sensitive or difficult issues with them?

6.7 Steps in Resolving Tensions or Conflict with Adults

Relationships between parents and early years practitioners and managers may encounter tensions or conflicts on occasion. It is important that practitioners and managers have the knowledge and skills to manage these situations in a sensitive, constructive and professional way.

Issues that may be possible sources of tension or conflict with parents include:

- ◆ Concerns about a child in the setting by a parent or practitioner.
- ◆ Behavioural management issues, for example, corporal punishment of a child by their parent in the setting or a parent's concerns about a practitioner's management of their child's behaviour.
- ◆ Introducing price increases.
- ◆ Chasing late payments.
- ◆ Consistent late pick-ups at the end of the day or session.
- ◆ Bullying, for example, allegation of bullying by a parent against a staff member or by a staff member against a parent.

Problem-solving approach

In considering how to resolve these, or other, issues, practitioners and managers can consider a broad six-step problem-solving approach as follows:

1. Identify the issue or problem.
2. Brainstorm possible solutions.
3. Evaluate possible solutions (i.e. advantages and disadvantages of each).
4. Decide on the best acceptable-to-all solution in consultation with the relevant parties.
5. Implement the solution.
6. Try it for a limited time and then evaluate how it is working in consultation with the relevant parties.

Preparation and planning

In preparing to meet with a parent, the following questions should be considered:

- ◆ What do I want to achieve?
- ◆ What do parents need?
- ◆ What can I say and how can I say it?
- ◆ How can I overcome the concerns of parents?
- ◆ Can the issue be addressed through an informal discussion with a parent or is a formal meeting necessary?
- ◆ Have I consulted with my supervisor or manager on this matter and what are their views?

Informal or formal meetings

Practitioners need practice, experience and training in dealing with one-to-one meetings with parents. Advance preparation, in consultation with a supervisor or manager, is essential. Most concerns can and should be dealt with through informal meetings where possible.

All meetings (informal and formal) should take place at a time agreeable to parents and practitioners and in a room where it is possible to speak uninterrupted and in privacy. The emphasis should be on reaching a mutually acceptable decision, based on sharing information in an open and respectful way. In situations where a resolution cannot be agreed, parents should be reminded clearly of their option to make a formal complaint, using the setting's complaints policy and procedures.

Practical tips for formal meetings with parents

- ◆ Ensure both parent and practitioner are seated for the discussion.
- ◆ Clarify the purpose of the meeting.
- ◆ Advise the parent that you will take notes and agree what is to be recorded.
- ◆ Listen attentively to the parent's point of view.
- ◆ Show understanding for their perspective.
- ◆ Ask questions for clarification – 'Can you give me an example?'
- ◆ Clarify the problem and invite discussion on how to work together to find a resolution.
- ◆ Genuinely ask for their opinions – 'Do you have any suggestions you would like us to consider?'

- ◆ Clearly contribute any useful ideas, opinions or relevant experiences to the discussion.
- ◆ Aim to find common ground.
- ◆ Be willing to apologise in situations where it is justified and necessary – ‘I am sorry this has happened.’
- ◆ Agree a plan to resolve the situation.
- ◆ Jointly agree a date to check in and review the progress of the planned solution.
- ◆ If necessary, ask to have time to consider the situation further, and make an appointment to phone or meet again at an agreed future time.

(Parental Involvement: A Handbook for Childcare Providers, Barnardos, 2006b)

Steps for conflict resolution

In situations where there is a serious or ongoing conflict, the following steps for conflict resolution are suggested,

1. Approach calmly

- ◆ Calm yourself, mentally acknowledging your own feelings.
- ◆ Prepare yourself to listen.
- ◆ Use a calm voice and gentle body language.

2. Acknowledge the other person’s feelings

- ◆ ‘You look really upset’, ‘I can see you have very strong feelings about . . .’

3. Exchange information

- ◆ Take turns describing the details of the problem situation and your specific needs.
- ◆ Diffuse conflict by using ‘I’ statements rather than ‘you’ statements, for example, instead of ‘You’re wrong’, say ‘I disagree’.
- ◆ Listen attentively as the other person speaks. Remember, this is a dialogue, not a debate.

4. Look at the problem from the other person’s viewpoint

- ◆ What is the other person showing or telling you through actions or words?
- ◆ How do your needs relate to the other person’s needs?

5. Restate the problem

- ◆ ‘So the problem is...’

6. Generate ideas for solutions, and chose one together

- ◆ Together, generate a variety of ideas for solutions – ‘What can we do to solve this problem?’
- ◆ Select an idea and jointly design a strategy to try.

7. Be prepared to follow up the problem.

- ◆ Agree a point when you will meet to review progress.
- ◆ Take turns describing how the strategy is working.
- ◆ If necessary, make adjustments together or return to Step 6.

(Adapted from Post and Hohmann, 2000, cited in French, 2008b).

Thinking About Your Practice – Sample Scenario

You and other practitioners in the pre-school have noted that Greg (2 ½ years) is not reaching his developmental milestones. You have attempted to speak with his parents on more than one occasion about the possibility of making a referral for an assessment, but they are unwilling to accept any suggestion that this is needed. It is in Greg's best interest to have an assessment as early as possible but his parents appear reluctant and unable to come to terms with the possibility that their child may need extra support or may have a developmental delay.

- ◆ How can you respond to this situation in a way that is supportive of Greg's needs?
- ◆ What feelings might Greg's parents be experiencing?
- ◆ How can you support Greg's parents?

6.8 Guidelines on Convening Meetings or Group Activities

The following guidelines are useful if planning a workshop or information session for parents.

Think about the four 'Ss'

1. Make it **S**afe, welcome and secure for participants

- ◆ Have informal seating arrangements.
- ◆ Ensure the venue/room is private and uninterrupted.
- ◆ Welcome everyone and make introductions.
- ◆ Have refreshments.
- ◆ Maintain a common focus – the children.
- ◆ Be positive and encouraging.

2. Make it **S**ane

- ◆ Ensure the session is well organised and runs efficiently.
- ◆ Have a clear agenda/plan and share it with participants.
- ◆ Jointly establish ground rules with participants (such as confidentiality, respecting the opinions of others etc.).
- ◆ Respect time pressures (start/finish on time).
- ◆ Deal effectively with any conflict arising between participants.

3. Make it **S**parkly

- ◆ Gain the audience's attention with something relevant to the topic in hand.
- ◆ Keep the emotional tone positive and the content interesting.
- ◆ Use energising techniques (such as movement and group interaction, for example, warm-up exercises, discussions in pairs or small groups).
- ◆ Use humour and laughter, as appropriate.

4. Make it **S**pecific

- ◆ Keep focused on the aims of the session, for example, 'Today we are going to review our _____ Policy'.
- ◆ Remember, sessions that meet the expressed need of a parent or child will be more meaningful and effective.
- ◆ End the session on a positive note. Recap on learning achieved/tasks completed. Compliment participants' involvement and thank them for attending.
- ◆ Invite participants to provide feedback on the session by completing a short evaluation form.
- ◆ Plan a future session as appropriate.

(Adapted from Barnardos, 2006b)

Thinking About Your Practice – Sample Scenario

Your early years setting has decided to run a two-hour workshop for parents, giving practical and affordable ideas on how they can provide learning activities for their children at home.

- ◆ Develop a plan for this workshop.
- ◆ How will parents find out about it and feel encouraged to attend?
- ◆ How will you know if parents have found it helpful?





Section 7:

How Early Years Services Support Children and Families

7.1 Factors Influencing Nature and Level of Support to Families

'Often just the experience of having the children in a childcare service gives parents enough support to deal with other issues.'

(Early years manager)

There is wide diversity within and between early years services in relation to the nature and level of support provided to families. It is influenced by a number of factors such as:

- ◆ Purpose, culture and ethos of individual services.
- ◆ Needs of families and the local community.
- ◆ Management / Board support structures for this work.
- ◆ Policies and practices relating to parental involvement and partnership.

- ◆ Staff training.
- ◆ Staff supervision and support.
- ◆ Overall resources available to operate services.

For some early years services, supporting families is a core part of their work.

'It's about looking at the child as a whole, as well as an individual. Your focus is the child. But they are part of a family. If the family is having difficulties this will affect the child. So any help to a family is for the child's benefit... We do a lot to support families. The needs are huge. Most of the day I'm standing with parents dealing with issues and problems coming up for them.'

(Early years manager)

In other services the support provided to families by early years services is not always explicit.

'There's a lot of stuff that we do to help families that we don't even realise at the time that we are doing it. I suppose it's the hidden supports you find in childcare services.'

(Early years manager)

In many early years services, supportive interventions with families are considered an important part of the role, but are not placed under the umbrella of family support.

'We call it "dealing with parents and any problems that might come up". But it's really about supporting the parents whatever way we can.'

(Early years practitioner and supervisor)

'Most services provide support for parents. But they don't usually describe what they are doing as family support – It's just part of their job.'

(Development worker for ECCE services)

In other settings, the support needs of families (outside those directly related to their child's learning and development needs) are viewed as separate and distinct to the role of the early years practitioner. In these situations, some services are in a position to employ a dedicated worker to undertake this work. This is usually undertaken by services where parents present with high levels of needs, engaging and supporting parents is a service priority, and the required structures and resources are available to employ and manage any additional staff members.



7.2 Role and Responsibilities of Early Years Services

Core principles

The role of early years services in engaging and supporting families centres on the learning and development needs of children.

Core principles underpinning practice in this area include:

- ◆ A partnership approach with parents, which is non-judgemental and respects their key role in their children's lives and the responsibility they have for their children's learning and development.
- ◆ The welfare of the child is the paramount consideration at all times.
- ◆ Confidentiality.
- ◆ Openness and transparency in the way information is shared with and about children and parents

'The focus of [early years] services is to provide the best possible quality care and early learning experience for the child. The child is at the centre. Any contact with the family must be framed in terms of the needs of the child. This is the boundary of the role. It's the basis for the contract with parents – what we can provide, what we cannot, how we deliver on these.'

(Early years manager)

Parameters of the role

It is **not** the role of the early years practitioner to:

- ◆ Make a diagnosis (of a particular syndrome or condition in relation to a child).
- ◆ Actively seek out problems or difficulties in children.
- ◆ Investigate child welfare or protection concerns.
- ◆ Take on a quasi-counselling role with parents.
- ◆ Assume responsibility for sorting out a family's problems (such as families in repeated crises and/or where there are multiple or complex needs).
- ◆ Actively pursue families to avail of support when they are resistant or do not wish to do so. The only instance where this would be appropriate is where a lack of a particular support or intervention for the child impacts negatively on his/her health, welfare or development, in which case, refer to the setting's Child Protection Policy.

'It's not about solving their [parents'] personal problems. But you can show them where and how they can get help if they are open to it.'

(Early years manager)

Confidentiality and information sharing

Respecting the confidentiality of information is also an important component of the role of early years practitioners and managers. Information about children and families should only be shared with staff members who need the information to effectively perform their work, and only shared with other professionals outside the service with the permission of families.

However, research and experience have repeatedly shown that safeguarding children requires professionals and others to share information about child welfare and protection issues, and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in these circumstances. Often, it is only when information from a number of sources has been shared that it becomes clear a child is at risk.



All reports of suspected child abuse should be notified to the HSE with the knowledge of families, unless it would not be in the interests of the child to do so.

Recording

Another key feature of professional practice involves keeping written records of work with children and families. Good record keeping provides transparency and accountability in relation to the work. It is also an aid to practice, including reviewing children's progress, identifying patterns, progress, suspected developmental delay or child welfare and protection concerns.

Written records should:

- ◆ Be factual (clearly differentiating between facts, opinion, judgements and hypothesis).
- ◆ Be clear and concise.
- ◆ Be legible.
- ◆ Use straightforward language.
- ◆ Be completed consistently and kept up-to-date.
- ◆ Be confidential.
- ◆ Be signed and dated.

All confidential records should be kept securely. Access should be limited to staff, authorised persons and parents regarding their own children. The length of time records are retained should be in accordance with legal advice.



7.3 What Family Support Needs Come to the Attention of Early Years Services?

As outlined in Section 2, the level of support required varies between families, depending on issues such as their circumstances, the nature of the challenges they face, the resilience of family members and the supports and resources available to them.

The most common and typical support needs that come to the attention of early years services centre on the general learning and development needs of children. Other parents may have additional support needs, relating to such issues as suspected developmental delay or children's behavioural issues. In some situations, parents may present, directly or indirectly, with issues and challenges which impact on the well-being of family members, including children. Such families may benefit from the assistance of relevant support services to help them to deal with their difficulties. In a small minority of situations, needs or concerns may arise in relation to the welfare and protection of children.

The range of possible family support needs which may come to the attention of early years services is presented in Table 5 (Note: This list is not exhaustive).

General support needs relating to children	
Types of support	Details of support
1. Information sharing linked to children's care, development and learning in the home and early years environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General progress • Learning and development • Peer relationships and socialisation • General behaviour • Managing transitions for the child, for example, settling in, moves between different rooms or sections of the early years service
2. Practical information and advice related to parent's child-rearing role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Childhood illnesses • Food, nutrition and eating patterns • Developmental milestones • Toilet training • Sleeping patterns • First aid • Dental care • Managing behaviour • Speech and language development • Transitions such as moving to primary school
3. Additional support needs of parents relating to children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behavioural difficulties • Suspected developmental delay or learning difficulty • Speech and language difficulties • Difficulties accessing assessment or treatment services for children • Mild concerns re. parent's meeting child's physical or emotional needs
Support needs which may impact on child and family well-being	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial pressures / poverty • Unemployment • Social isolation • Language and literacy difficulties • Family separation • Relationship difficulties within the family • Poor parent-child attachments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bereavement / suicide • Family illness • Parenting difficulties • Housing difficulties / homelessness • Mental health difficulties • Teenage parenting • Discrimination based on culture and ethnic background of the family
Concerns in relation to the safety and welfare of children	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chronic drug or alcohol problems • Domestic abuse • Suspected child abuse or neglect 	

Table 5 Sample family support needs identified by early years services

'It's just so hard to admit you can't cope... I just had to admit that I was failing at what I was doing. Mothers are supposed to just know and be able to cope. And I'd say "No, I'm not having that. I can cope. I'll get over it." But I wasn't going to get over it – the situation at home, my mental state, the depression was getting worse and worse. I couldn't function as a person.'

(Parent's viewpoint – French, 2005a)

7.4 Ways Early Years Services Support Families

The response of early years services to the support needs of families depends on the nature and level of needs presented as well as factors relating to services themselves, such the setting's aims, priorities and the resources available.

As a universal service, early years services are a non-threatening and non-stigmatising way of engaging parents with young children in relation to their child's early learning and development. They can be the first service parents engage with and are well placed to provide information and support to families at their most receptive and formative stage and during the critical early years of their child's development (French, 2005b).

Ways early years services can support children and families include:

- ◆ Providing information.
- ◆ Promoting and facilitating the integration of children with special needs and children from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.
- ◆ Supporting parent-child relationships (see Section 8.3).
- ◆ Making observations about children's physical, emotional, educational and social development, general behaviour and physical presentation. In this regard, early years services play an important early intervention role in identifying the needs of children.
- ◆ Developing relationships over time, centred on the learning and development needs of children. These relationships can be of key importance in engaging isolated or vulnerable families and/or when families are experiencing periods of stress or crisis. For some families, strategies such as home visiting can help to engage parents by acting as a bridge between the home and the setting.
- ◆ Supporting children's transition to primary school, including providing relevant information and advice to parents and creating linkages with local primary schools. A positive experience of an early years service can build confidence and set a positive pre-disposition towards education and education professionals and ease the transition to primary school for children and parents.
- ◆ Supporting parents in developing support networks in their own locality, which are known to affect family well-being and thus the capacity for positive parenting (McKeown, 2001).
- ◆ Providing support to children and families who are experiencing stress and family difficulties. In some instances, early years services can help compensate for deprivation, loss or stress being experienced by children and enhance the quality of their lives.
- ◆ Assisting parents in accessing support services in the community or beyond, based on their needs.

'It's about meeting parents where they are at. Your role is about supporting parents in relation to their child's learning and development but it's also about linking them to other services based on the needs that come up.'

(Early years practitioner)

Early years settings vary in relation to how and by whom different aspects of this work are undertaken. Providing appropriate support to families may be undertaken by:

- ◆ An individual key person or, in the absence of a key person system, a practitioner with whom a child and family has a relationship.
- ◆ The manager of the setting.
- ◆ An identified early years practitioner for whom work with families is named as a specific part of their role.
- ◆ A dedicated worker (attached to an early years setting) employed specifically to work with families (such as a family worker or parent/carer support worker).

In a small number of integrated settings (combining early years and family support services, such as community-based family support projects), the support needs of families may be met, with the agreement of family members, by a worker attached to the linked family support service, for example, a project worker.

'There should be a specific role to meet the support needs of families in any community-based early years service that is operating in an area of disadvantage, or at the very least, named as part of someone's role.'

(Early years practitioner)

7.5 Developing Links with Other Services

It is important that early years services establish and maintain a network of contacts with relevant professionals and support services for children and families in the community. Working with other organisations (often called interagency working) is considered essential to effective practice, as no single organisation can address the broad range of issues that impact on families.

Supporting families to access the support services they need requires practitioners to have up-to-date information about community resources, in particular the roles and responsibilities of different professionals and organisations and how they can be accessed by families. It is also important that early years practitioners share information about *their* role, responsibilities, skills and competencies in relation to children's early learning and development with relevant others.



Factors that facilitate and hinder interagency work

Developing effective working relationships with key professionals and representatives from community, voluntary and statutory agencies requires time and commitment on behalf of early years settings.

Facilitating factors include:

- ◆ Ensuring that children and families are always the first priority.
- ◆ Including all relevant services and organisations and promoting awareness of the benefits of partnership.
- ◆ Regular contacts and referrals, as well as shared training.
- ◆ Cultivating professional attitudes, which are open, trusting and sharing and which are respectful of the different objectives and ethos in each service and organisation.
- ◆ Ensuring that there is support for interagency work at all levels of services, in particular Management / Board levels.

Factors that hinder interagency work include:

- ◆ Excessive focus on power, territoriality and competition.
- ◆ Holding on to negative stereotypes about services and organisations.
- ◆ Failure to acknowledge misunderstandings and suspicions that arise between services.
- ◆ Staff shortages and turnover (especially in HSE Children and Family Services).
- ◆ Failure to appreciate the value of interagency work.
- ◆ Lack of contact with other services.
- ◆ Lack of training on the process of interagency work.

(McKeown, 2000)

Engagement with statutory organisations

Key contacts may include:

Health services (public health nurses, speech and language therapists, social workers, GP's, nutritionists, dentists, Early Intervention Teams, community welfare officers, psychologists)

In partnership with parents, links established with health care professionals in the local HSE health centre can play a key part in early identification and treatment of speech and language, physical, hearing and other developmental delay in children. Local HSE health information services can also be useful sources of information on issues relating to parenting and family health and well-being.



Education services (e.g. schools) – This may involve meeting with the infant class teacher(s) and/or home-school liaison officers to find out ways to enhance the transition to primary school for children and parents.

Engagement with community and voluntary organisations

Engagement with the local community (often called community involvement) involves:

- ◆ Seeking out and availing of resources, amenities and opportunities available in the community to support and enhance children's learning, development, and community connections.
- ◆ Establishing networks and working relationships with community and voluntary organisations.

There are a wide range of services involved, including:

- ◆ Parent and family support (such as lone parents groups, parenting programmes, support groups for families of a child with a disability, family support projects, family resource centres).
- ◆ Information services such as Citizens Information www.citizensinformation.ie.
- ◆ Counselling services.
- ◆ The money advice and budgeting service (MABS) www.mabs.ie.
- ◆ Adult education groups.
- ◆ Other ECCE services (such as parent and toddler groups, childminders, afterschool programmes etc.)
- ◆ Community development projects.
- ◆ Organisations representing the particular needs and issues of Travellers, refugees, asylum seekers and other ethnic groups, people with special needs etc.

Practical strategies to engage with other agencies

- ◆ Meet with key people in supporting organisations.
- ◆ Invite members of other organisations to join committees in your service.
- ◆ Sit on local committees.
- ◆ Partner with other services and hold joint events.
- ◆ Hold open days/displays of children's work/meetings on topic of interest to parents, and open it up to the community/other organisations.
- ◆ Hold public information evenings about the service.
- ◆ Post information leaflets about your service on notice boards.
- ◆ Become members of relevant local associations.
- ◆ Get involved in local issues that impact on children and families
- ◆ Support local events in the area.
- ◆ Develop a contact register/file of key people and organisations and their contact details.
- ◆ Assign a dedicated staff member with responsibility to develop and maintain links.

(French, 2008b)

Thinking About Your Practice – Community Links

Siolta (Standard 16) suggests early years settings consider the following in relation to community networks and connections:

- ◆ How do you make the community aware of the activities and services your setting contributes to supporting children and families?
- ◆ To what extent is your setting involved in networks at local, regional and national level that support the achievement of your goals and objectives?
- ◆ How familiar are you with the roles, responsibilities, programmes and services of other organisations involved with children and families in your local community?

Do you have a record of your setting's key contacts within local community, voluntary and statutory services? Why not consider keeping a record of them on page 133.





Section 8:

Providing Effective Support to Families – Practical Strategies

8.1 Providing Information

Early years services are in a useful position to help families identify their support needs at an early stage through provision of information. Research tells us that the majority of parents want more information to help them in caring for and parenting their children, particularly during the early childhood years. This is particularly important for first-time parents. Key topics include general care and parenting, children's health and dealing with children's behaviour.

Groups that experience the most difficulty in accessing information are families living in rural areas, parents who work on a full-time basis and families experiencing social isolation, in particular lone parents (Riordan, 2001).

'We put a lot of emphasis on supporting the parents as much as we can. Especially if a child is in full day care, we may be spending more time with them (the child) during the day than anyone else in the family. So we are helping parents by looking after their child and providing information about their general progress and development, any observations we've made and any issues that come up. In my experience parents do need a lot of information and advice, especially new parents, and usually appreciate any help you give them.'

(Early years practitioner and supervisor).

(See Section 6.2 for some ideas on ways early years settings can provide information to families.)

8.2 Supporting and Enhancing Social Networks

Strategies to promote and enhance families' support networks may involve:

- ◆ Parent's mornings or parent's groups.
- ◆ A parent's room.
- ◆ Information sessions and open meetings.
- ◆ Social events for parents.
- ◆ Volunteering or committee opportunities in the setting.
- ◆ Trips to local places of interest.
- ◆ Parent and toddler group run by the parents.
- ◆ Providing information on courses or events in the local area.
- ◆ Acting as a bridge to other services in the area, for example by inviting services to talk with parents at the setting about what they offer, facilitating training courses for parents by other agencies, accompanying parents on their first visit to a support group etc.
- ◆ Parent-to-parent mentoring.
- ◆ One-to-one discussion with parents to assist them in identifying their existing and potential sources of support, based on their needs. This may also involve helping parents to understand the importance of having support networks.
- ◆ In situations where another family member is a key source of support to the parent and child, for example, a grandparent, promoting their involvement in the setting to ensure consistency of care for the child.

8.3 Supporting Parent-Child Relationships

It is important that early years educators believe in the commitment of parents to support their child's learning and development. Engaging with parents in a way that doesn't undermine their relationship with their child, but instead strengthens their confidence and competence in their role, is an important component of early years practice. This involves an approach by early years educators that is child-centred, non-threatening, supportive and facilitative, and which promotes the quality of the relationship children have with both parents. It also involves identifying, encouraging and modelling the behaviours and interactions between parents and children that you wish to promote.

'Practitioners need to be constantly thinking through the eyes of the child . . . to be centred on how a child is experiencing a situation, what is happening for the child, what their needs are. This can then be reflected back to the parent.'

(Early years manager)

Strategies to support parent-child relationships

- ◆ Talking regularly with parents about their child's learning and development.
- ◆ Proactively seeking their views and opinions.
- ◆ Affirming and encouraging their central role in their child's learning and development.
- ◆ Noticing and valuing their strengths.
- ◆ Affirming and building on small achievements.
- ◆ Making positive, strengths-based comments on their child's progress, without reference to other children.
- ◆ Sharing interest and enthusiasm about their child's progress.
- ◆ Sharing information with parents about what to expect next for their child, and how they can support their child's learning and development.
- ◆ Providing parents with opportunities to play with and/or observe their child in the setting, or feed or bathe their infant.
- ◆ Helping parents to understand more about their relationship with their child.
- ◆ Careful and effective listening.
- ◆ Creating a positive climate where emotions and feelings can be expressed safely, for example by being empathetic and non-judgemental. Having opportunities to express emotions creates capacity for parents to focus on their child's needs.
- ◆ Creatively and proactively engaging fathers in their children's learning and development.
- ◆ Reinforcing positive parenting approaches, such as child-centred behaviour management/discipline, through modelling and discussion.
- ◆ Identifying the individual strengths and interests of children and parents, and building on these to provide parents and children with positive shared experiences.



Thinking About Your Practice – Sample Scenario

Think about the following scenario. What do you think of Joan's response to the situation?

Joan, an early years practitioner, was approached by a parent, Karen, expressing frustration that it was a struggle every morning to get her child (Sally, aged 3 years) to the pre-school on time and saying that she is usually late for work. She said that while Sally enjoyed her time at pre-school, a common behaviour pattern included Sally refusing to get out of bed or get dressed, running away to play, crying and ignoring requests, followed by Karen becoming angry and upset with her. Karen said that she had tried everything but nothing worked.

With Karen's agreement, Joan talked through the situation with her, focusing on:

- ◆ Supporting Karen's understanding of how children express their emotions through their behaviour.
- ◆ Helping Karen to identify the emotions that may be behind her daughter's behaviour.
- ◆ Discussing practical strategies to deal with the situation, which help Karen to manage her own emotions, stay in control of the situation in a positive way and prevent tensions from escalating. These included not reacting immediately to Sally's behaviour, taking a moment to pause and take a breath, tune in and name what may be going on emotionally for her daughter and offering her reassurance. For example, 'I see that you are tired and you want to stay home with me a bit longer... but I have to go to work and its good for you to spend time with your friends... but when we come home later we can take time to rest together... maybe cuddle on the couch and read a story or watch a dvd together.'

Joan invited Karen to let her know if she found the suggestions helpful and that they could meet again at any time.

8.4 Identifying and Responding to Needs through Observations

Early years practitioners may identify the needs of children and families in a number of ways, such as:

- ◆ Observing a particular issue in a child's behaviour or general presentation.
- ◆ Observing an interaction between a parent and a child which may raise questions or concerns.
- ◆ Observing a particular issue in a parent's behaviour, which may raise concerns about the welfare of a child.
- ◆ A parent informing a practitioner about a worry in relation to their child or of a particular family stress or difficulty.
- ◆ A child disclosing information.
- ◆ A third party providing information, for example, another professional or a parent attending the service.

Through general observations, practitioners can support parents in their primary care-giving role by providing information and feedback on the child's general development and learning.

Additionally, by making observations practitioners can:

- ◆ Ensure early identification of issues or concerns arising for a child.
- ◆ Consider what the child's needs may be, in consultation with a supervisor, based on well-recorded and considered information. These may include the need for a specialist assessment or intervention.
- ◆ Inform the parents about the needs or concern as early as possible, unless it is not deemed to be in the best interests of children to do so (see your service's Child Protection Policy).

Things to consider if there is a concern about a child's development

- ◆ Your knowledge of child development. To whom are you comparing the child?
- ◆ Your knowledge of the particular child. Do you have sufficient experience of him or her to make a balanced judgement?
- ◆ If not, who do you need to consult? Have you consulted with others who know the child well, particularly parents and other daily carers?
- ◆ Are you working to ensure you have a complete picture of the child's abilities and patterns to inform your view? Are you being overly influenced by one event or events that simply seem odd to you?

(Lindon, 1993, cited in French, 2008b)

The local public health nurse can often be a sound source of knowledge and information.

Supporting parents with a particular issue

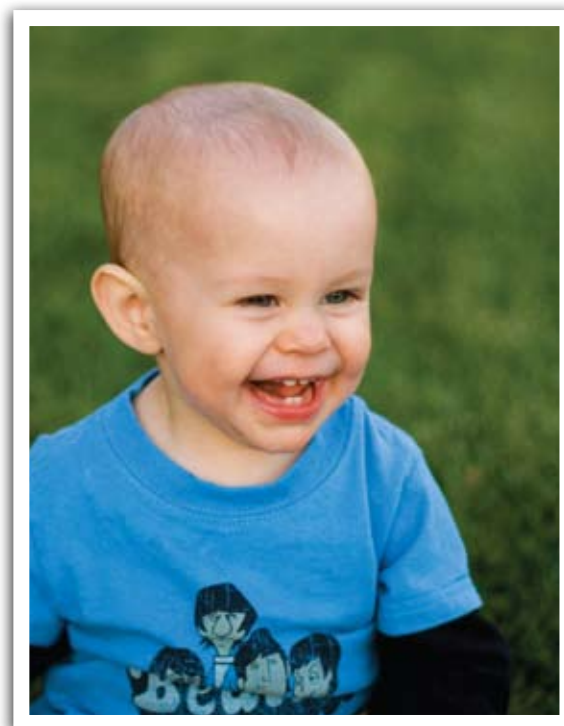
Early years practitioners can assist parents by:

- ◆ Providing clear and accurate information.
- ◆ Helping families in identifying their needs in relation to accessing a support service for themselves or their children, as appropriate. Key questions for early years practitioners can include – Can they meet the child's needs? If not, how can you help them to access the support they need to do so?
- ◆ Researching and identifying relevant support services on behalf of families, as required.
- ◆ Assisting families in accessing support services, as appropriate, by making a referral on their behalf or supporting them to make a self-referral.
- ◆ Advocating on behalf of the child or family as appropriate, in consultation with parents, for example, if the parent's first language is not English or if parents are experiencing difficulties in accessing a service.
- ◆ Providing appropriate emotional support and encouragement based on needs arising.
- ◆ Facilitating an intervention required for the child on site, as appropriate. For example, the implementation of a speech and language therapy programme or other educational or behavioural programme for a child with special needs.
- ◆ Providing ongoing feedback to parents on the child's progress.

- ◆ Providing follow-up information (such as progress reports) to other professionals involved as required and with the agreement of parents.
- ◆ In relation to any reports of child welfare or protection concerns to the HSE, ensuring ongoing co-operation with the HSE, as required.

'I think early years services shouldn't underestimate the impact they can have. Although the day-to-day contact with parents may be short, it's frequent and consistent. When you add it up, it's a huge amount of contact. Any positive seeds sown can potentially have a big impact... A lot can be measured in very little steps.'

(Early years manager)



8.5 Observing Signals of Stress in Young Children

Early years practitioners are in a position to observe any signs of stress in young children. For babies and toddlers who lack the verbal skills to express their feelings, signals of stress and upset may be evident in their behaviour. Young children may also express their feelings through their play and activities.

Practitioners may be alert to a change that they observe in a child's behaviour. While on its own a change in behaviour may not be significant, the intensity of the behaviour, or if there are a number of behavioural changes which persist over several days, may give rise to questions or concerns about the health or well-being of a young child. All children are different, and react to stress in different ways, and at different times. Behavioural signs may include:

- ◆ Irritability
- ◆ Changes in sleeping patterns
- ◆ Increased separation anxiety and clinginess to parents or carers
- ◆ Fretfulness and increased episodes of crying
- ◆ Changes in eating patterns
- ◆ Acting out behaviours, for example, temper tantrums
- ◆ Being subdued or withdrawn
- ◆ Hitting out at other children
- ◆ Regressive behaviours, for example, increased 'accidents' having been toilet-trained, wanting a bottle or soother again, thumb sucking

It is important to discuss any changes in behaviour as early as possible with the child's parents to ensure a partnership approach to meeting the child's needs. The parent may share information which helps to explain the change in the child's behaviour, or may be learning of the concerns for the first time.

Babies and toddlers are very sensitive to separations from family. Even short ones can distress them, as they don't have a developed sense of time. They will feel more secure in their normal routines and if they are cared for by people they know and trust. They may also need extra affection and cuddles to help them feel secure. Familiar toys are also important.

Signals of stress in children attending school age childcare services may include:

- ◆ Mood swings
- ◆ Being withdrawn
- ◆ Being tired and distracted
- ◆ Anger
- ◆ Aggression
- ◆ Attention-seeking behaviours
- ◆ Anxiety
- ◆ Crying
- ◆ Sadness
- ◆ Embarrassment
- ◆ Difficulties concentrating
- ◆ Complain of headaches or tummy aches

As with younger children, school age children will feel more secure if their normal routines are maintained. It may help them to work through their feelings through drawing, painting, scrap books, writing letters or stories etc.

Parents may also display general signs of stress such as anxiety, fatigue, feeling overwhelmed, sadness, irritability, anger, impatience or may seek to avoid engaging with staff in the early years service.

8.6 Supporting Families to Access Other Services

In some situations parents may need help to access another service in order to meet their identified needs or those of their child. This may involve:

- ◆ Supporting a parent to self-refer to a service, by providing information and advice.
- ◆ Undertaking a referral to a family support service or other specialist service, jointly with the parent or on their behalf.

Each service will have its own referral process, for example, a standard referral form or general letter of referral. The content of correspondence or accompanying reports should be discussed and agreed with parents where possible.

It is important that parents fully support any decision to access another service. This will involve discussing clearly with parents the reasons why a referral to another service is being recommended and clarifying their understanding of the purpose. It may be helpful, with their agreement, for them to speak with another parent who had a similar experience and found a particular service helpful.

'It's important to take time to work with parents around developing a shared understanding of the child's needs. You must have the parent on board and go at their pace. You can't rush the process.'

(Early years manager)

If a parent asks you about something you are not sure about, for example ask about a service with regard to a particular issue, it is okay to say that you don't know and that you will look into it and get back to them.

Thinking About Your Practice – Practice Example

Tiny Tots is a community-based early years service that places a lot of emphasis on supporting parent-child relationships, through modelling child-centred behaviour. As Rachel the service manager comments:

'It's important for parents to see how staff value the children and are genuinely enthusiastic about their achievements, however small. It's also good for children to see their parent's interest in what they are doing. We have seen parents grow...over time you can see their excitement growing when they see some new aspect of development in their child. Being child-centred is so important. Children notice it too. A staff member told me recently that a child had asked "Why do you treat us all so special when we come in?"'

- ◆ What do you think of this approach?

8.7 Promoting Children's Welfare and Protection

The child protection responsibilities of early years services and school age childcare are outlined in *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2011)*. It is the expressed intention of the current government to place Children First on a statutory footing, which means that early years services and school age childcare services will have a legal obligation to meet their child protection responsibilities under Children First.

Parents have the primary responsibility for the safety and welfare of the children in their care. If children are harmed or fail to receive adequate care, the HSE (through its Child and Family Service) is the statutory body responsible for child protection and welfare. In emergency situations, the Gardai also have responsibilities to act when alerted to concerns about the welfare and safety of a child.

Under Children First, every organisation, both public and private, that is providing services for children has an obligation to provide them with the highest possible standard of care in order to promote their well-being and safeguard them from abuse. This means that all early years services and school age childcare services should:

- ◆ Promote the general welfare, health, development and safety of children.
- ◆ Ensure best practice in the recruitment of staff or volunteers, which includes Garda vetting, taking up of references, good HR practices in interviewing, induction training, probation and ongoing supervision and management.
- ◆ Ensure that staff members and volunteers are aware of how to recognise signs of child abuse or neglect.
- ◆ Develop guidance and procedures for staff and/or volunteers who may have reasonable grounds for concern about the safety and welfare of children involved with the organisation. It is the responsibility of each organisation's Board of Directors or Management to ensure that such policies and procedures are in place and are operating effectively.
- ◆ Identify a Designated Person to act as a liaison with outside agencies and a resource person to any staff member or volunteer who has child protection concerns.
- ◆ Ensure that the organisation has clear written procedures on the action to be taken if allegations of abuse against employees or volunteers are received.
- ◆ Raise awareness within the organisation about potential risks to children's safety and welfare.
- ◆ Develop effective procedures for responding to accidents and complaints.
- ◆ Ensure that clear procedures are in place in relation to record-keeping of child protection and welfare concerns, ensuring that such records are kept securely and will be shared with the HSE Children and Family Services where a child welfare or protection concern arises.

(Children First, 2011)

For more information as to the role of early years practitioners and managers in relation to child protection see Section 10.4. For additional information, see *Protecting Children: A Child Protection Guide for Early Years and School Age Childcare Services* (Barnardos, 2010a).



Thinking About Your Practice – Child Protection

Siolta suggests early years settings consider the following in relation to meeting child welfare and protection responsibilities:

How does your setting ensure that all adults are fully briefed on good practice in relation to child protection?

Think about:

- ◆ Relevant information available and accessible to all.
- ◆ Briefing on child protection policies and procedures in your induction process for adults working in the setting.
- ◆ Involving all relevant adults in the development of a policy and procedures related to child protection.
- ◆ Role of in-service training to support the adult's engagement with child protection policies and procedures.
- ◆ Ensuring information updates are communicated to all adults, as appropriate.
- ◆ Ensuring that parents are familiarised with policies and procedures on child protection.

What processes are in place in your setting to ensure that children are treated with respect and dignity, especially in relation to personal care?

Think about:

- ◆ Supporting children to have a say in decision-making.
- ◆ Ensuring children's rights to privacy are respected.
- ◆ Ensuring that behaviour management processes maintain respect for the dignity and rights of children.
- ◆ Ensuring that all complaints are dealt with sensitively and responsively.
- ◆ Ensuring that adults are never unsupervised/alone with an individual child.
- ◆ Supporting children's understanding of their own role in respecting the rights of others.

What procedures do you have in place to deal with suspected or actual abuse of children in your setting or elsewhere?

Think about:

- ◆ A Designated Person who takes responsibility for issues related to child protection.
- ◆ Opportunity for the Designated Person to gain the skills and knowledge necessary for this important role.
- ◆ Recognition of, and response to, abuse.
- ◆ Reporting of suspected abuse.
- ◆ Supporting the child to report abuse.
- ◆ Provision of support to the child where abuse has been identified.
- ◆ Liaison with other agencies/individuals who can intervene and/or support you in dealing appropriately with this issue.

(Siolta, Standard 9, Component 9.3)



Section 9: Ensuring Best Practice

9.1 Support Structures

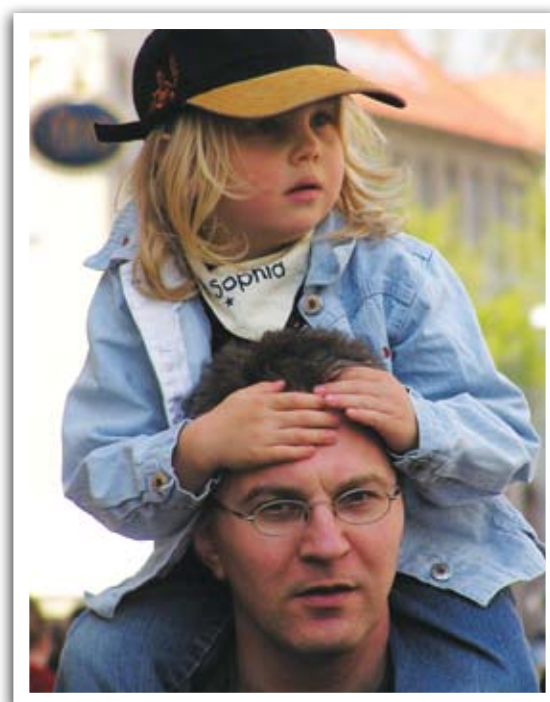
Partnership with parents in early years settings is underpinned by factors that support quality practice generally, in particular:

- ◆ Effective management structures and leadership.
- ◆ Adequate resources.
- ◆ Clear objectives, policies and procedures.
- ◆ Good team work and open communication.
- ◆ Clarity about roles and responsibilities.
- ◆ Appropriate staff training, support and supervision.

It is important that the central role of parents in their child's early learning and development forms part of the organisational culture and practice of early years services. For this to happen, strong leadership support for a partnership approach with parents must exist within the management structure of early years settings, namely:

- ◆ Owner/Contractor/Board of Management or Management Committee
- ◆ Service Manager

It should be reflected in the mission statement, ethos and principles, aims and objectives, and policies of individual early years settings and enabled by the provision of adequate resources to undertake this work.



For guidance on all aspects of quality and professional practice in early years settings, check out Barnardos' publications *Supporting Quality* (2008a, 2008b) and *Human Resource Management in Early Years Services* (2010).

9.2 Planning and Resources

Planning

Building relationships with parents and involving them in their child's learning and development requires skill, time and commitment from practitioners and managers. This needs to be taken into account by the management of early years settings when planning resources/budgets, programme planning and scheduling of staff. Staff development and training needs that arise will also need to be considered, in terms of staff time and cost.

Resources

Based on the resources available and knowledge of best practice standards, early years settings need to make realistic decisions about what is achievable in terms of the nature and level of their engagement with parents and families. Current practice can also be reviewed to determine if any improvements in this area can be made, based on existing resources. Where necessary, practitioners and managers may advocate for any additional resources required to facilitate the implementation of this core aspect of quality provision.

'Services generally do provide a lot of support to families... It's linked to a number of things – individual job descriptions, who the employer is, policies around families... A lot of community services are stretched to the limit and the reality is that a lot of early years practitioners are not employed to do the extra piece [with families]. Their hours are limited to the time they spend working with the children.'

(Development worker for early years services)

9.3 Policies

Good practice in engaging and supporting families through partnership is based on having clearly stated, accessible and implemented written policies and procedures, which are available to all stakeholders. The language used should be clear, plain and free of jargon. Policies give rise to procedures, which are written statements of how a policy will be carried out. (*For information about communicating policy information to parents see Section 6.2.*)

Relevant policies

While all policies are important, those with particular relevance for practice in engaging and supporting families include the following:

- ◆ Partnership with Parents/Carers – Parents/Carers Involvement Policy
- ◆ Key Person/Key Worker Policy
- ◆ Child Protection Policy
- ◆ Staff Support and Supervision Policy
- ◆ Equality and Anti-Discrimination Policy
- ◆ Confidentiality/Information Sharing Policy
- ◆ Community Engagement – Statutory and Voluntary Links Policy

See Barnardos publication *A Practical Guide to Developing Childcare Policies Books 1 and 2* (2008c, 2010a) for information on involving children in policy making and templates of the policies listed above.

9.4 Staff Support, Supervision and Training

Supervision is a key managerial activity – it is a 'reflective' process about professional thinking, actions and decisions.

(Social Care Institute for Excellence, cited in Barnardos, 2008)

Effective staff support and supervision are necessary to ensure good practice in working with families. Supervision sessions can be used as a forum to reflect on practice, discuss any ideas and concerns regarding the quality of service to children and families, clarify roles and responsibilities and give guidance needed on issues or challenges arising in the work.



'The reality for some services is that they are dealing with high levels of need and with families who have complex, long term issues... Often workers don't feel there's enough support for work with families, like policies and supervision and training... The support and supervision component must be stressed and resourced as this shapes and influences the type of response families get from services.'

(Development worker for ECCE services)

Staff training and development

All forms of training of those who work with families require an emphasis on the core themes of developing family strengths, restoring hope, building social networks and cultivating the capacity to survive adversity.

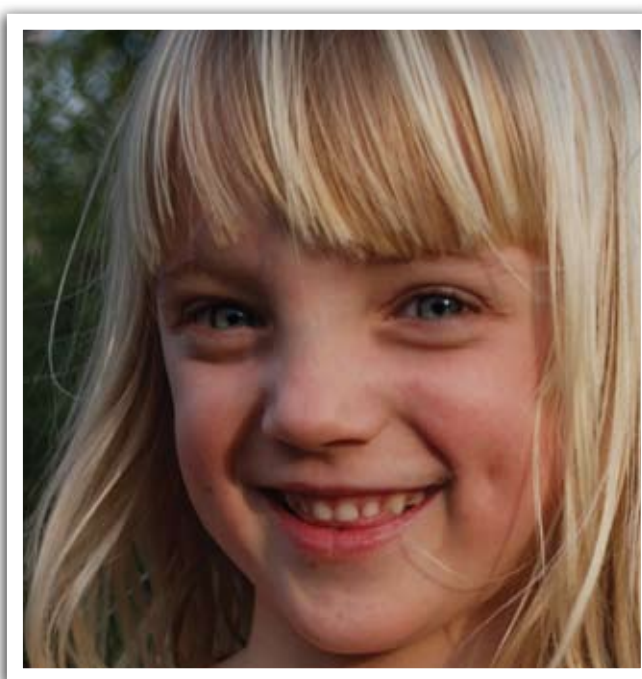
(McKeown, 2000)

Through training, practitioners develop, extend and update their skills, knowledge and confidence in order to enable them to fulfil their role more effectively. The training needs of staff in relation to engaging and supporting parents should be identified with their input as part of their Continuing Professional Development (CPD) plan.

Specific areas for skill development may include:

- ◆ Developing partnerships with parents and families
- ◆ Relationship building
- ◆ Communication skills
- ◆ Strengths-focused practice
- ◆ Anti-discriminatory practice
- ◆ Child welfare and protection
- ◆ Building networks and community links
- ◆ Problem-solving and conflict resolution skills
- ◆ Advocacy skills
- ◆ Group facilitation skills
- ◆ Record-keeping and report-writing

For more information on CPD see Barnardos publication *Your Learning and Development: Continuing Professional Development in Early Childhood Care and Education*, 2010.





PART 2

ENGAGING AND SUPPORTING FAMILIES EXPERIENCING SPECIFIC STRESSES AND CHALLENGES



Section 10:

Engaging and Supporting Children and Families Experiencing Specific Stresses and Challenges

10.1 Introduction

This section provides information on a number of the more serious stresses and challenges experienced by families. It is by no means a comprehensive overview of issues, but reflects themes identified by early years practitioners and managers who contributed to this publication, based on their experiences.

It is intended to assist early years practitioners and managers to develop their understanding of the:

- ◆ Context in which many children and families live their lives.
- ◆ Potential family support needs that may arise.
- ◆ Support services available for children and families.
- ◆ Child welfare and protection responsibilities of early years services.

Why might some families need additional or specialised support?

While the majority of children in Ireland grow up in physically and emotionally healthy and nurturing environments, the reality is that some Irish children and families face situations of great difficulty. The ability of some parents to provide the consistent quality of parenting that children need is often challenged. This may be as a result of factors such as:

- ◆ Vulnerabilities from the past, such as unmet needs of parents relating to a difficult childhood.
- ◆ Stressful life events that place families under increased pressure for particular periods, such as unemployment, separation, bereavement.
- ◆ Challenges which endure over time, such as mental health, addiction or chronic physical health problems.
- ◆ Background conditions beyond the control of families, such as poverty, social exclusion, inaccessible health care, educational disadvantage.
- ◆ The presence of risk factors, such as domestic abuse.

Some families may experience a combination of these issues. How, and the extent to which, these issues impact on children will only be clear through an assessment of their individual needs.

Although the issues and challenges facing some families are presented here separately, the reality is that they are often interrelated. For example, chronic addiction or domestic abuse may be an underlying factor contributing to family homelessness, or the stress associated with poverty and social exclusion may underpin some mental health difficulties. Research also tells us that factors such as chronic addiction, poverty, social exclusion and domestic abuse may be risk factors for child abuse or neglect.

The role of early years services

In situations where children and parents are experiencing stress or family difficulties, early years services play an important role. These are outlined below.

For children

- ◆ Providing a stable, caring and supportive environment.
- ◆ Maintaining consistency and routines, but being flexible according to the child's needs, for example late starts or early finish.
- ◆ Understanding how stress may impact on a child's development and behaviour, and dealing sensitively with any behavioural issues that may arise.

- ◆ Responding with respect, empathy and appropriate seriousness to a child who discloses information about a personal or family issue or difficulty.
- ◆ Recognising that emotional support can be just sitting quietly with a child.
- ◆ Reporting any concerns or disclosures of child abuse or neglect in accordance with the service's Child Protection Policy.

For parents

- ◆ Providing reassurance to parents that staff will remain a watchful and supportive presence for the child.
- ◆ Ensuring open communication with parents about their child, involving regular feedback.
- ◆ Responding with sensitivity and empathy to a parent who may confide details of a personal issue or challenge they are experiencing.
- ◆ Providing information to parents on support services available.
- ◆ Assisting parents in accessing support services, as appropriate.
- ◆ Practical help, such as reduced fees in relation to vulnerable family situations, as considered necessary and appropriate, to facilitate children's continued attendance at a service.

Thinking About Your Practice

Based on the resources available to your setting:

- ◆ What are the strengths of your service in engaging and supporting families?
- ◆ What are the limitations?
- ◆ Are there ways in which practice can be improved or developed further?
- ◆ What supports and resources do you need for this to happen?

It is important that families experiencing difficulties are not all viewed as being the same. Each family has its own history, range of experiences, strengths and challenges and will experience difficulties and stresses differently depending on their individual context. Additionally, some families may be more open to help and support than others.

10.2 Support Needs Relating To Parenting and Concerns About Children’s Learning and Development

Parenting Support – Behavioural Issues

Some parents experience particular challenges in caring for their children, such as behavioural issues, requiring additional help and support. Behavioural issues can occur in children of all ages but very often start early in life.

Understanding behavioural issues

Children are unique individuals who express their feelings and emotions through their behaviour. Social and emotional skills-building is an essential part of children’s development. They need help and support, according to their developmental needs, to express their individual thoughts and feelings, to manage their emotions and to self-regulate their behaviour effectively.

Social and emotional development is affected and influenced by experiences in children’s lives, some of which may have made them feel unsafe about expressing their feelings and emotions. This suppression of emotions may lead to expression of feelings through unpredictable or challenging behaviour (Barnardos Promoting Positive Behaviour Guidelines, Barnardos, 2011).

What kinds of factors can affect children’s social and emotional development?

The child’s home environment and how their parents and carers deal with their behaviour are extremely important. Other factors can include the fact that a child may:

- ◆ Have a ‘difficult’ temperament. As caring for such babies or toddlers can be more challenging, they are more often the subject of criticism than ‘easy’ children. They benefit from supportive, responsive adults and a low-stress, accepting environment.
- ◆ Have learning or sensory difficulties, which make it difficult for them to understand or process information.
- ◆ Have experienced bereavement or other loss that is unresolved.
- ◆ Have attachment difficulties. Some parents are unable to develop a secure attachment with their children. Insecurely attached children have problems developing and internalising the skills they need to regulate their feelings and behaviour.
- ◆ Have been abused or neglected or lived with domestic abuse.
- ◆ Have parents who have difficulties that impact on their ability to provide the consistent quality of parenting that the child needs, such as depression or other mental health problems, alcohol or drug problems, or other family stresses.
- ◆ Be ‘hyperactive’, which causes difficulties with self-control, paying attention and following rules (such as ADHD or hyperkinetic disorder).

The needs of children

- ◆ To be accepted as an individual child with needs and strengths.
- ◆ To know that they are loved by their parents.
- ◆ To know what is expected of them in different situations.
- ◆ To receive plenty of positive feedback, praise and encouragement for good behaviour and small, everyday things.
- ◆ To be taught about boundaries and rules and to have them explained and fairly and consistently applied by both parents and everyone involved in their care.
- ◆ To be supported and encouraged to express feelings in a variety of ways.
- ◆ To have their parents and the staff of their early years service or school age childcare service (and school) working together to help meet their needs.
- ◆ To receive the help and support they need if underlying issues exist.

Every child needs and deserves positive attention. Time spent with a child in activities chosen by the child, even if it is only for a few minutes of every day, can have a positive effect on behaviour.

The needs of parents

With the right information and support, parents can do a great deal to support their child's social and emotional development.

Some parents may find that discussing their child's behaviour with their public health nurse or GP or attending a parenting course may give them the information and insight they need to help their child. In other situations, a specialist assessment of the child's needs may be required to see if there is an underlying problem causing the behavioural issues.



Support services available

Seek advice from:

- ◆ Public health nurse (usually based in local health centres)
- ◆ Family GP
- ◆ Web based support for parents, for example www.rollercoaster.ie
- ◆ Parentline – Tel : 1980 92 7277

If more specialist help is needed:

- ◆ The local Child Guidance Service or Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) (contact details available from HSE Local Health Offices see www.hse.ie or the HSE information line – 1850 24 1850)

Parenting education and support courses:

- ◆ See Barnardos database on parenting courses available throughout Ireland on www.barnardos.ie, or check out what is available locally from community centres, family resource centres, social services centres, schools, city and county childcare committee information services.

Recommended reading:

- ◆ *Barnardos Parenting Positively: Parenting Skills*, which can be downloaded from the Barnardos website at <http://www.barnardos.ie/information-centre/publications/free-publications.html>
- ◆ Also check out Barnardos Training and Resource Service's wide range of books, leaflets and DVDs on the subject of parenting education and support.

Thinking About Your Practice – Sample Scenario

Max (aged 3 years) has been attending the pre-school for the past two months. His behaviour is a growing cause for concern. Max has a shorter attention span than the other children and tires easily of games or tasks. He is unpredictable and aggressive, frequently lashing out at other children (hitting or grabbing their toys). Max is very difficult to manage in a group context but appears to respond reasonably well when he gets individual attention. He is taking up a considerable amount of staff time and you are worried about the impact on the other children. You are aware that a parent has complained that Max has hit their child, who is now reluctant to attend the pre-school because of his behaviour.

Max's mother is a young lone parent, with a second younger child. She frequently appears stressed and tired. You are aware that she lives with her parents.

- ◆ What are Max's needs?
- ◆ How can you approach the issue with Max's parent in a sensitive and supportive way?
- ◆ What are the ways in which you can help and support Max in the pre-school?
- ◆ How can you support Max's parent to meet his needs in the home?

Suspected Developmental Delay or Other Special Needs

The term 'special needs' is viewed as an umbrella term covering a wide range of conditions that mean a child will have special needs as they grow and develop. The needs may include medical/physical, behavioural, emotional, developmental, sensory or learning related issues, or a combination of these. The important thing to remember is that every child with special needs is unique and so too are their families.

Some parents may be aware from birth that their child has a disability or other special needs. For others, it might be months or years before it is identified and diagnosed. Some parents never get a clear diagnosis as to what the underlying cause of their child's special needs is.

How families react to the news that their child has special needs will be individual to that family. Generally, parents experience a range of emotions on receiving a diagnosis for their child, including shock, denial, guilt, sadness, anger, fear for the future and grief for the loss of a child who would have followed the usual path of development.

Making the necessary adjustments, both emotionally and practically, such as adjustments to family routines and plans, takes time. It is a stressful and challenging period for families, who typically have to engage with a number of health professionals and organisations in order to obtain access to the services they need to care for and educate their child.

Over time, at various points in their child's life, parents are faced with new challenges and significant reminders of their child's differences from other children (such as starting school, family occasions, teenage years etc.).

Families need:

- ◆ Quality information.
- ◆ Access to the appropriate professionals and support services.
- ◆ Emotional support and encouragement.
- ◆ Practical help, as required.

Remember, it is not the role of early years practitioners to make a diagnosis. This is the responsibility of professionals with relevant expertise in the area.

Support services available

If a child has a suspected disability or other special needs, support services can be accessed through the following:

- ◆ Public health nurse (usually based in local health centres)
- ◆ Family GP
- ◆ Paediatrician (community or hospital-based)
- ◆ Early Intervention Team (details available from the relevant HSE Local Health Office – www.hse.ie or Tel: 1850 24 1850 for information)

Early Intervention Team

The Early Intervention Team is a support service for children from birth to six years with childhood developmental delay or disabilities. In some areas it is provided directly by the HSE and in others by voluntary organisations. The team works in partnership with parents. Parents can contact the team directly or through a referral by any of the professionals listed above. The team screens, assesses and identifies the child's needs and develops, together with parents, a plan of action for providing services (often called a Family Partnership Plan or individual Family Service Plan). Services are provided based on available resources. If the child's needs can't be met by this service, they are referred to a more appropriate service.

Assessment of need

All children have a right under the Disability Act 2005 to an assessment of their health and educational needs arising from their disability. This includes an Assessment Report that contains a statement of the services they will receive. The report is completed by an Assessment Officer (employed by the HSE but required by the legislation to be independent). The report is then forwarded to a Liaison Officer (also known as a case manager) who prepares a service statement outlining the services and supports that will be provided.

Depending on family circumstances and the nature of a child's special needs, the family may be entitled to supports such as:

- ◆ Medical card
- ◆ Long term illness card (free drugs, medicines, approved appliances)
- ◆ GP visit card
- ◆ Drugs payment scheme (reimbursement of expenses over a certain amount per month)

Sources of further information:

- ◆ HSE information line – 1850 24 1850
- ◆ HSE Local Health Offices – see www.hse.ie
- ◆ Citizens Information Board – www.citizensinformation.ie

Thinking About Your Practice – Sample Scenario

Susie (aged 4 years) has been in full day care in your setting for the past three months. Both parents work on a full-time basis. Susie's speech and language development is delayed for her age, and she is shy and withdrawn. You are concerned about the impact on her confidence and relationships with other children and think she could benefit from a speech and language therapy assessment.

- ◆ How can you respond in this situation in a way that is supportive of Susie's needs?
- ◆ What approaches can you use generally when you wish to discuss difficult or sensitive issues with parents?

10.3 Support Needs That May Impact on the Well-being of Children and Family Members

Drug or Alcohol Problems

Drug or alcohol problems can have a serious negative impact on a parent's capacity to look after their children and meet their needs. Whether one or both parents have drug or alcohol problems, family life can be chaotic, stressful and children's emotional well-being and safety put at risk. Children usually witness and know more about a parent's problems than parents realise. Children in this situation may have feelings such as sadness, anxiety, confusion, fear and anger. While every situation is different, ways a problem with drugs or alcohol can impact on children include:

- ◆ Newborn babies can be born with harmful physical effects.
- ◆ Normal family routines can become interrupted and unpredictable. One day a parent may be attentive and caring towards a child, while the next day they may appear angry, can't organise a meal or get out of bed.
- ◆ Children can be tired and hungry if bedtimes and mealtimes are affected.
- ◆ Young children's early learning may be compromised as they may miss days or have difficulties settling or concentrating. This can also be true of the school performance of older children.
- ◆ Family income may be used to buy alcohol or drugs and there may be times when there is little money for food, clothes or other family expenses.
- ◆ Parents may behave differently when under the influence of substances. This can be confusing and often frightening for children, who may witness their parent out of control or feel ashamed of their parent's behaviour.
- ◆ Some children may take on adult responsibilities in the home and may feel they have to look after their parent.
- ◆ Children can feel alone and isolated. As it is often the case that parent's drug or alcohol misuse is not talked about, children may feel they are the only family with this problem or that they have to keep it a secret.
- ◆ Research also tells us that there is an increased risk of neglect or abuse of children in families where parents misuse drugs or alcohol. There is also an increased risk of domestic abuse.

The needs of children

Children need to live in a nurturing, secure and safe environment free of alcohol or drug misuse. They need:

- ◆ Someone to talk to about their feelings and worries (if not a parent, then another trusted adult).
- ◆ Reassurance that their parent's drug or alcohol problem is not their fault and it is ok to talk about it.
- ◆ Support to take part in activities and develop a network of relationships and friendships outside the home.

Children will feel more secure if their routines are kept as normal as possible. In addition to parents, key sources of support for young children include grandparents, other family members, family friends, early years practitioners and teachers.

The needs of parents

The best protection for children living with harmful parental drug or alcohol use is that their parent gets help to deal with their problems. It is very difficult to make this decision. Some parents find that it is the effect their behaviour is having on their children that motivates them to get help. Such problems are not easy to recover from, and usually require medical and other specialist help, such as counselling.

The first step is usually that the parent meets with their GP who assesses their health and drug and alcohol misuse, and then recommends what options are available. There is no single treatment appropriate for all individuals, so a treatment programme will usually be matched to a parent's needs. Community-based support services and self-help groups are also available to the individual and their family, to help with the recovery process.

Support services available

There are a number of specialised services that can support parents and children in this situation:

- ◆ Family GP
- ◆ HSE Drugs Helpline: 1800 459 459 or www.drugs.ie
- ◆ Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)
- ◆ Al-Anon (for people affected by a problem drinker) – www.al-anon-ireland.org
- ◆ The Alcohol Action Ireland alcohol service finder can be found at www.alcoholireland.ie/get-help

Recommended reading:

Parenting Positively: Coping with a Parent's Problem Drug or Alcohol Use which can be downloaded from the Barnardos website at <http://www.barnardos.ie/information-centre/publications/free-publications.html>

Thinking About Your Practice – Sample Scenario

Michelle has been attending the pre-school service for nearly two years and you have a good relationship with Paula, her mother. One day Paula tells you she is concerned because her partner has started to drink heavily and she asks you for advice on what to do. Paula is worried his drinking is getting out of control and that the children are beginning to notice the changes in his behaviour.

- ◆ How can you respond to this situation in a way that is supportive of Michelle's needs?
- ◆ What are the ways in which you can support Paula?

Death and Suicide

Death is an inevitable part of life and grief is a universal human process. Children cannot be shielded from the reality of death or the pain of loss. What can be done, is to help them to understand and grieve, and so equip them to be better able to cope.
(Barnardos Bereavement Counselling Service, 2007)

Children's understanding of death

Children's understanding of death depends on their age and stage of development. Younger children, including infants, will react both to the separation from the person who has died and to changes in their normal routines.

Children 2-5 years cannot understand the permanence of death and often think it is reversible. They may search for the person who has died and keep asking questions about when they will be coming back. They need to hear the same information over and over to help them to understand, as well as reassurance that they are not to blame.

As children get older, they begin to understand more about death, that it is permanent and that the person is not coming back. They can be very curious and ask many detailed questions. They may worry about their own death and the death of others close to them. This can leave them feeling insecure and may cause separation anxiety.

Children's reactions to death

Children will react to death in a variety of ways. Some may react immediately to the loss, while others can have delayed reactions. Common early responses include shock, numbness, withdrawal, denial and sleep disturbance.

After the initial reaction, over time children may experience degrees of some or all of the following – anxiety, loneliness, anger, guilt and wishful thinking (wishing to be reunited with the person who has died). They may regress on previously achieved developmental milestones such as having nightmares, fear of the dark, bedwetting, thumb sucking.

Over time, the loss may no longer be felt so acutely and children can begin to settle into their new circumstances and begin to adjust to the death. However, some children may not show grief until many years after a death.

Dealing with suicide

Telling children about a family member that has died by suicide is very difficult. It is important that they are told by a parent, or an adult they are close to, and given accurate, basic facts in a way that is appropriate to their needs. Understanding and coming to terms with the reality of a death by suicide may take years. While children will be told of a suicide very close to the event, exploring why the person died by suicide will need to be returned to again and again.

The needs of children

- ◆ An honest, clear and simple explanation of the death, from their parent or someone very close to them.
- ◆ Reassurance that they are not in any way responsible.
- ◆ Encouragement to talk about the death, to ask questions and to talk about their worries and feelings whenever they want to.
- ◆ Reassurance that it's ok to talk about the person who has died.
- ◆ Encouragement to be involved in the funeral arrangements and services (without having to do anything they are not comfortable with).
- ◆ Reassurance that they are loved and will be taken care of.
- ◆ Patience and understanding if they act out their grief and stress through their behaviour.
- ◆ Help to cope with fears should they arise, and reassurance that they might be feeling anxious and that this is normal.
- ◆ Permission to play and get on with their life.
- ◆ Support and understanding from other adults involved in their care and education.

The needs of parents

Many of the feelings of loss can be overwhelming and difficult to cope with. Often parents are worried about how their children are coping and are at a loss to know what is and is not normal. Parents need practical help and someone with whom they can discuss their feelings and worries. Family and friends can often give parents the support they need, but there may be times when it would be helpful for parents to talk to a professional (such as a counsellor or therapist) who understands bereavement or with others who have experienced a similar loss (such as a support group).

Support services available

Children and parents may need extra support to deal with grief. Organisations that offer support services to families include:

- ◆ Barnardos Bereavement Counselling for Children – Tel: 01 4530355
- ◆ Bereavement Counselling Service – Tel: 01 8391766
- ◆ Console – Tel: 01 8574300 www.console.ie
- ◆ Rainbows – Tel: 01 4734175 www.rainbowsireland.com

Recommended reading:

- ◆ *Someone to Talk To: A Handbook on Childhood Bereavement* (2001) by P. Donnelly. See details on Barnardos website at www.barnardos.ie.
- ◆ *Bereavement - When Someone Close Dies* (HSE, 2007). Available from www.healthinfo.ie
- ◆ *Parenting Positively: Coping with Death* which can be downloaded from the Barnardos website at <http://www.barnardos.ie/information-centre/publications/free-publications.html>

Thinking About Your Practice – Sample Scenario

Mandy (3 years) has been absent from the crèche for the past week. You receive a telephone call from her father to say that their baby (Ella, 6 months) had died a week ago as a result of a sudden infant death (SIDS). Sounding distressed, he outlined that Mandy would be returning to the crèche the next day 'to help get things back to some kind of normality'.

- ◆ What are the feelings Mandy is likely to be experiencing?
- ◆ How can you respond to the situation in a way that is responsive to Mandy's needs?
- ◆ In what ways can you support Mandy's parents?

Financial Difficulties / Poverty

Money problems and debt can be a huge source of worry and stress for families, both for those where parents are unemployed due to Ireland's economic downturn in recent years and others for whom financial hardship and poverty are an ongoing feature of their everyday lives.

The effects of poverty

Parents who experience poverty often feel stigmatised and find it difficult to ask for help, which can contribute to their isolation. They are also at greater risk of:

- ◆ Getting into debt.
- ◆ Being socially isolated.
- ◆ Having poor mental and physical health.
- ◆ Living in sub-standard accommodation and/or becoming homeless.
- ◆ Remaining unemployed or in low income jobs.
- ◆ Social exclusion. This is when a person's circumstances prevent them from participating as equals in society, from feeling part of their community and from developing their skills and talents. It has a negative effect on the quality of life of parents and children and the opportunities open to them.

The impact of family poverty on children

Poverty for children means that they are excluded from doing things that are considered normal in society because of inadequate income in the household. Family poverty also has a direct impact on children's education, health and overall well-being, placing them at increased risk of factors such as:

- ◆ Failing to reach their potential in their early learning and overall education.
- ◆ Experiencing poor physical and mental health.
- ◆ Emotional stress. A UK study on the effect of family poverty on children found that children experienced high levels of stress and often hide their own needs so as not to distress their parents further (Hooper et al, 2007).
- ◆ Bullying by peers.
- ◆ Teenage pregnancy.
- ◆ Child abuse and neglect.

The needs of children

Children need to have their basic needs met in an environment that is nurturing, safe and secure. Factors that can help children to cope with poverty include:

- ◆ Having someone to talk to who will listen and understand their feelings and worries.
- ◆ Spending time with friends and other adults in their lives who care about them (such as grandparents and other relatives).

An early years service or school age childcare service can offer children a safe, secure environment, the opportunity to be with friends and to take part in activities. This enables them to get a break from their home situation and also access supportive relationships with adults outside the home.

The needs of parents

The daily grind of financial hardship places an enormous burden on parents and can affect some people's mental and physical health. It is important that parents in this situation:

- ◆ Have someone to talk to about their feelings and the stress they are under, such as family or friends or their GP.
- ◆ Get practical advice and support on dealing with their money problems, which may help to reduce stress levels.

Support services available

In situations where a family may need financial help:

- ◆ Community Welfare Officer (usually based at the local HSE health centre)
- ◆ St Vincent de Paul Society – www.svp.ie
- ◆ The Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) – www.mabs.ie
Tel: 0761 072000
- ◆ Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs – Local Office
- ◆ For some people, debt can be related to gambling problems and they may have an underlying addiction to gambling. Gamblers Anonymous may be of help
www.gamblersanonymous.ie
- ◆ Unemployment support services can be found at www.citizensinformation.ie

Thinking About Your Practice – Sample Scenario

Staff at the pre-school have noticed that over the past few weeks Tommy (2½ years) has been irritable and unsettled. On more than one occasion they have felt that he might be hungry, as he grabs food at snack time, stuffs food into his mouth and takes food from other children. When you discuss this behaviour with Tommy's father, he becomes anxious and upset and tells you that he is under a lot of pressure. He lost his job 10 months ago and it is a constant struggle to make ends meet. He confirms that they have been short of food on occasion.

- ◆ How can you respond to this situation in a way that is supportive of Tommy's needs?
- ◆ In what ways can you support Tommy's parents?

Housing Problems / Homelessness

There are different types of homelessness. There is visible homelessness – those living on the streets, sleeping rough or in shelters. There is also hidden homelessness, which involves people living in temporary, insecure, low quality or overcrowded housing with relatives or friends, living in bed and breakfast accommodation, and squatting.

Homeless families

The Homeless Agency's 2008 survey found that in Dublin alone there were 249 homeless families, comprising 576 children in total. The majority of these families were living in emergency bed and breakfast accommodation. A study by Wafer in 2006 found that the most commonly reported length of time families stayed in emergency accommodation was more than 36 months.

The impact on family well-being

Living in emergency accommodation places families under extreme stress due to the following factors:

- ◆ There is a lack of facilities usual for family life, for example, facilities for cooking, washing and drying clothes etc.
- ◆ Families have little time to be together except in cramped, overcrowded conditions.
- ◆ Inadequate facilities to store and prepare food means that family meals are often of a poor nutritional quality.
- ◆ The accommodation is temporary and insecure, involving frequent changes of addresses and family disruption.

Parents can become de-skilled over time as a result of long periods of homelessness. Additionally, they can be socially isolated as potential support networks within the neighbourhood or local community are generally less available or non-existent. First time young mothers who are homeless may also lack the support and skills they need to establish and maintain a home.

The impact on children

Education and social development

- ◆ Early learning and schooling may be disrupted by frequent change of address and a stressful home environment.
- ◆ There may be a lack of facilities and space for children to play, store toys, make friends, for school age children to do homework, invite friends over etc.

Health and well-being

Research on the well-being of homeless families in Ireland (O'Brien, 2000) tells us that, in comparison to children in the general population, children in homeless families:

- ◆ Go to their GP more often with acute and chronic illness such as respiratory and gastro conditions, hearing problems and skin conditions.
- ◆ Are more likely to use the A&E and hospital services due to accidental injuries.
- ◆ Experience higher rates of developmental delay and behaviour and emotional problems. This includes reading difficulties, speech and language problems, aggression, hyperactivity, anxiety and depression.

The needs of children

Children need to be brought up in an environment which is nurturing, stable, safe and secure. Factors that can help children to cope with homelessness include:

- ◆ Having someone to talk to who will listen and understand their feelings.
- ◆ Keeping their routines as normal as possible.
- ◆ Spending time with friends and other adults in their lives who care about them (such as grandparents and other relatives).

An early years service or school age childcare service can offer children a safe, secure environment, the opportunity to be with friends and to take part in activities. This enables them to get a break from their home situation and to access supportive relationships with adults outside the home.

The needs of parents

Many homeless parents have troubled and unstable lives, requiring intensive support to meet their own needs and those of their children. Being able to avail of a high quality early years service, or school age childcare service, for their children is one important strand of an overall integrated programme of support to meet the family's needs.

Homeless families also need support from services such as housing authorities, voluntary organisations with expertise in the area of homelessness, primary and specialist health services, children and family support services etc.

Support services available

Housing:

- ◆ Local Authority Housing Departments
- ◆ The Homeless Agency – www.homelessagency.ie
- ◆ Focus Ireland – www.focusireland.ie
- ◆ Respond – www.respond.ie
- ◆ Threshold – www.threshold.ie
- ◆ Simon Community – www.simoncommunity.ie
- ◆ Irish Council for Social Housing – www.icsh.ie

Financial worries:

- ◆ Community Welfare Officer (usually based at the local HSE health centre)
- ◆ The Money Advice and Budgeting Service – www.mabs.ie
Tel: 076 1 072000
- ◆ St Vincent de Paul Society – www.svp.ie

Children's health:

- ◆ Public health nurses
- ◆ Family GP

Thinking About Your Practice – Sample Scenario

Beth (4 years) and John (18 months) have been attending the pre-school for the past year. You are aware that the children's parents have both had problems with drugs in the past and that the family is homeless. They are living in a B&B in the local area, which is their third address since the children first attended the pre-school. The children appear reasonably well-cared for and are clearly attached to their parents. However, they are frequently sick and their attendance can be quite erratic. You have noticed that both children are physically very small for their age and that the 18-month-old, John, is not yet walking.

- ◆ How can you respond to this situation in a way that is supportive of the children's needs?
- ◆ What service might be able to assist with the health needs of the children?
- ◆ How can you support the parents?

Mental Health Difficulties

Good mental health is vital for everyone and needs to be looked after in the same way we look after our physical health. However, mental health problems are not something people usually talk about and negative attitudes can make it difficult for people with mental health difficulties to seek the help and support they need.

When a parent has a mental health problem, it affects the whole family. Most parents have mild or short-lived illnesses, and will usually be treated by their GP. But some children live with a parent who has a long-term mental health problem such as depression, personality disorder, alcohol or drug problems. Others live with a parent who has a severe mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar affective disorder.

The impact on children

Children can generally cope well when a parent is ill for a short time and if things are explained to them, rather than being kept a secret. However, when the problem is more long term, children are more likely to feel upset, confused, frightened or worried by their parent's illness or behaviour.

It is particularly difficult for children who are:

- ◆ Separated again and again from a parent who needs to go into hospital for treatment.
- ◆ Living with a parent who is very unwell and being treated at home.
- ◆ Not being looked after properly.
- ◆ Feeling unsure of their relationship with their ill parent who may be emotionally distant and unavailable when unwell.
- ◆ Having to take on adult responsibilities, such as looking after their ill parent or younger brothers and sisters.
- ◆ Being teased or bullied by others, who may say unkind things about their ill parent.

- ◆ Being abused or neglected (research tells us that this is more likely if parents have alcohol or drug related problems or personality difficulties) or live with domestic abuse.
- ◆ Living in poverty / experiencing social exclusion.

Some children withdraw into themselves, become anxious or find it difficult to talk about their parent's illness. They may blame themselves or worry about becoming ill too.

The needs of children

- ◆ To be given information and an explanation about their parent's illness so they can understand why their parent has become unwell.
- ◆ Reassurance that it is not their fault.
- ◆ Having someone to talk to who will listen and understand their feelings, such as a parent or another trusted adult.
- ◆ Continuity of care and minimal disruption of routines during a crisis, for example, hospitalisation of a parent.
- ◆ Spending time with friends and other adults in their lives who care about them such as grandparents and other relatives.

The needs of parents

Parents need advice, information and support in relation to their mental health needs and access to specialist treatment services, as required.

General factors that are helpful in looking after mental health include:

- ◆ Talking to and connecting with people, such as friends or family members.
- ◆ Getting out and about more.
- ◆ Regular exercise and healthy eating.
- ◆ Avoiding binge-drinking.
- ◆ Speaking with people who have had similar experiences.
- ◆ Counselling / Psychotherapy.

Support services available

- ◆ Family GP
- ◆ Aware – www.aware.ie Helpline: 1890 303 302
- ◆ Grow in Ireland – www.grow.ie Infoline: 1890 474 474
- ◆ Mental Health Ireland – www.mentalhealthireland.ie
- ◆ Samaritans – Tel: 1850 60 90 90
- ◆ Console – www.console.ie Helpline: 1800 201 890

Thinking About Your Practice – Sample Scenario

You notice that Stevie's (4 years) mother, Mali, appears quiet and withdrawn and doesn't mix with the other parents at the pre-school, or become involved in any of the activities. Stevie is usually anxious and clingy to her when dropped off each day and tends to miss a lot of days. The family came to Ireland from Africa a number of years ago, and has been granted asylum.

You decide to talk to Mali about how Stevie is getting on. In the course of the conversation, Mali becomes tearful and tells you that she suffers from depression and finds it hard to get out of bed some mornings.

- ◆ How can you respond to this situation in a way that is supportive of Stevie's needs?
- ◆ In what ways can you support his mother, Mali?

Separation

When parents separate it is a painful and challenging time for the entire family, adults and children alike. Every family member needs help and support to cope with the emotional consequences and changes it brings.

Children also need support after separation as it isn't just a once-off event. It involves a whole process of change and adjustment, taking place over months or years. This means that children's needs in relation to the separation change as they grow and develop.

Family changes

A separation may mean dramatic family changes, such as the departure of one parent from the family home and changes in family routines and how special occasions (such as Christmas and birthdays) are celebrated. A change of family home for a child may mean adjustments to a new early years service or school, and loss of friendships. Other changes may include a drop in family income, which may have a direct impact on the day-to-day lifestyle of a family.

Loss and grief

The emotional response to separation is often compared to grief, as it is a time of loss for everyone. It is normal that family members grieve the loss of the:

- ◆ Family as they knew it.
- ◆ Future they had hoped for.
- ◆ Daily presence and availability of a parent.

Feelings

It's normal for children to experience a range of strong emotions linked to the separation. These may include shock, sadness, anxiety, confusion, worry, fear, rejection and guilt.

Babies and toddlers, although they may not fully understand the situation, will also be aware of, and sensitive to, their parents stress levels and emotional reactions to the separation.

Children's responses are likely to be expressed in their behaviour (see *signs of stress in young children in Section 8.5*). With support and understanding, these are usually resolved over time as children adjust to their new situation.

What can be harmful for children

Research tells us that the factors that put children most at risk of emotional harm from separation are:

- ◆ Conflict between parents before, during and after separation. Arguments and tensions between parents affect children deeply, leaving them anxious, aggressive or withdrawn, and more likely to develop emotional and behavioural problems.
- ◆ Repeated disruptions to their lives. This means having to move homes, change early years service or school and lose contact with family members, friends or other significant people in their lives. This might result from several family changes and/or adjusting to more than one new step-family.
- ◆ Feeling their life is out of control. This happens when children don't receive adequate explanations or reassurances from parents about the separation or are not involved (in an age-appropriate way) in decisions that affect them.
- ◆ Feeling alone or different. This can result from children feeling isolated and without support inside or outside the family.

The needs of children

Children need reassurance from their parents that:

- ◆ They love them and will be there for them throughout this difficult process of family change.
- ◆ They will put their children's needs and best interests first.
- ◆ The separation is not their fault.
- ◆ Their feelings are normal and it is important to express them.
- ◆ Things will get better over time.
- ◆ It is ok to play and get on with their life.

Children will feel more secure if their routines are kept as normal as possible. In addition to parents, key sources of support for young children include grandparents, other family members, family friends, early years practitioners and teachers.

The needs of parents

Parents also have a range of strong feelings about the separation. These might include shock, sadness, regret, loneliness, foolishness, blame, guilt, anger, worry about the future (for example, about children, about money), shame, relief, hopelessness or exhaustion.

It is important that parents get the support they need to take care of their own emotional needs arising from the separation. This can help parents to maintain a secure and nurturing environment in which children can make the necessary adjustments to their new family

circumstances. Sources of support for parents include trusted friends or family members, support groups, services for separating families or a counsellor or therapist.

Support services available

- ◆ Accord (Catholic Marriage Care Service) – www.accord.ie
Tel: 01 505 3112
- ◆ Clanwilliam Marriage & Family Institute – www.clanwilliam.ie
Tel: 01 676 1363
- ◆ Marriage and Relationship Counselling Service – www.mrcs.ie
Tel: 1890 380 380 / 01 6785256
- ◆ The Family Mediation Service – Tel: 01 8728277
- ◆ Citizens Information Service – www.citizensinformation.ie Tel: 01 605 9000
- ◆ Gingerbread Ireland – www.gingerbread.ie Tel: 01 814 6618
- ◆ One Family – www.onefamily.ie Tel: 1890 662212
- ◆ Treoir – www.treoir.ie Tel: 01 6700120

Recommended reading:

- ◆ *Parenting Positively: Coping with Separation* can be downloaded from the Barnardos website at
<http://www.barnardos.ie/information-centre/publications/free-publications.html>
- ◆ *Help for Separating Families* by The Family Mediation Service (A series of 7 booklets)

Thinking About Your Practice – Sample Scenario

Evan (10 months) is in full-time day care in your crèche. His parents are not well-known to you or to other staff. They always appear to be rushing and everything is at the 'last minute'. Evan is usually the last child to be collected each day.

You have begun to notice that Evan often comes in in the mornings wearing the same clothes that he went home in the previous day. His nappy is usually very wet and heavy and you think it's possible that it's the same nappy he went home also.

When you attempt to gently raise your concerns with his mother, she bursts into tears and tells you that she and her husband have decided to separate, that she is at her wits end and doesn't know how she will cope.

- ◆ How can you respond to this situation in a way that is supportive of Evan's needs?
- ◆ What feelings might Evan's parents be experiencing?
- ◆ How can you support Evan's parents?

10.4 Concerns in Relation to the Safety and Welfare of Children

Children's Rights

All children have the right:

- ◆ To be safe, cared for and protected from violence, abuse and neglect.
- ◆ To be brought up by their parents in a family where it is safe.
- ◆ To have their wishes taken into account in matters affecting them.
- ◆ To be treated with dignity and respect.

(United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989)

Suspected Child Abuse or Neglect

Any child can be at risk of abuse or neglect but some children, including very young children and children with special needs, are more vulnerable. This is because of their age, their limited language development, their dependence on adult carers and their lack of understanding about inappropriate behaviour. Babies and pre-school children are also dependent on their carers for intimate care.

Practitioners working with children in any early years service are well placed to observe and monitor children for signs of child abuse and neglect. They are often the main caregivers outside the family context and have regular contact with children. Their understanding of child development can help to put into context the normal development of children for their age, ability and behaviour.

Children can develop a close trusting relationship with early years practitioners, which may lead to a child feeling comfortable enough to talk about their worries or anxieties. A child may therefore disclose information that may raise concerns about possible child abuse or neglect.

Intervening as early as possible to protect children and provide them with the help and support they need, is of key importance. Their welfare is of paramount importance.

All concerns of child abuse or neglect must be reported to HSE Children and Family Services.

Children First: National Guidance categorises child abuse into four different types – emotional, sexual or physical abuse and neglect. More detail on each type of abuse and signs and symptoms are contained in *Children First*. Additionally, Barnardos' publication *Protecting Children* (2010a) contains details on how each type of abuse may present in an early years setting.

The impact on children

Child abuse is very damaging for children, affecting them physically, emotionally and behaviourally or in some combination of all three ways. Consequences may be mild or severe,

disappear after a short period or last a lifetime. The effects vary depending on the child's age and developmental status when the abuse or neglect occurred; the type of abuse; the frequency, duration and severity of abuse; and the relationship between the victim and his or her abuser.

The needs of children

- ◆ Protection from all forms of abuse or neglect.
- ◆ To have any disclosure of abuse or neglect taken seriously.
- ◆ To be listened to and have their views taken on board, taking account of their age and understanding.
- ◆ To be surrounded by professionals who are alert to the signs and symptoms of child abuse, and know what action to take to ensure children's safety and protection.
- ◆ To have someone to talk to who will listen and understand their feelings.
- ◆ To have their routines kept as normal as possible.
- ◆ Reassurance that the abuse is not their fault.
- ◆ To spend time with friends and other adults in their lives who care about them (such as grandparents and other relatives).
- ◆ To receive appropriate help and support (such as therapy), based on an assessment of their individual needs.

An early years service or school age childcare service can offer children a safe, secure environment, the opportunity to be with friends and to take part in activities. This enables them to get a break from their home situation and also access supportive relationships with adults outside the home.

Following a report of suspected child abuse to the HSE, every effort should be made to maintain relationships with children and parents throughout any subsequent HSE involvement, including the child's continued attendance at the service.

The needs of parents

Parents should be treated with respect. It is important that all child welfare and protection concerns are reported to the HSE with the knowledge of parents, except where doing so would not be in the child's best interests.

A meeting may be held with parents to:

- ◆ Enquire about or seek an explanation for a mark such as a bruise, burn or bite that practitioners have noticed on a child.
- ◆ Discuss ongoing concerns regarding issues of suspected neglect, such as persistent head lice, the child being hungry or wearing inappropriate clothing for the weather.
- ◆ Inform parents of a disclosure made by their child, or behaviour displayed by the child of a sexualised nature.
- ◆ Discuss an allegation made against a staff member.

Dealing with a child protection concern can be difficult and challenging for everyone involved and careful preparation is needed. Meeting with parents to discuss concerns is never about making judgements or accusations. Instead, the focus of discussions should be:

- ◆ To inform parents that a decision has been made to inform the HSE of a child welfare or protection concern and to explain the reasons for this decision.
- ◆ To remind parents that the service has a Child Protection Policy and that practitioners have a duty to report any concerns about child protection issues to the HSE.
- ◆ To explain to parents that the service always works in the best interests of children and to reassure them that their child's welfare is what is most important.
- ◆ To reassure parents that a decision has not been made that child abuse has taken place, but that a child protection concern has been passed to the HSE who will then assess the situation further.

(Protecting Children: A Child Protection Guide for Early Years and School Age Childcare Services, Barnardos, 2010a).

Parents can also be advised to identify a source of support for themselves to help them in dealing with this difficult and stressful situation.

It should always be remembered that advice can be sought at any point from the Duty Social Worker of the HSE Children and Family Services.

Reporting child protection concerns

If you have a reasonable suspicion that a child is at risk of abuse (physical, sexual, emotional or neglect) or you have other concerns about their welfare, inform the Designated Person in your service immediately, in accordance with Children First and your service's Child Protection Policy. It is the responsibility of the Designated Person to immediately notify HSE Children and Family Services of child protection and welfare concerns using the HSE Standard Report Form.

The HSE Children and Family Services duty social worker will be based at your local HSE health centre. For details contact: HSE Infoline, Lo-call 1850 24 1850
www.hse.ie

If you have concerns that a child is in immediate danger, contact the Gardai at your local Garda station.

Working with the HSE – The role of early years services

When a child protection concern is reported to the HSE, the HSE considers the concern based on all the information available.

Professionals from different backgrounds working together (multidisciplinary work) is regarded as fundamental to good practice in child protection and welfare. In situations where children (about whom there is a welfare or protection concern) are attending an early years service, practitioners and managers may be required to assist the HSE in assessments and decision-making about children.

The type of information that can be contributed includes:

- ◆ Physical health of the child.
- ◆ Emotional well-being of the child.

- ◆ Developmental milestones the child has or has not reached.
- ◆ General appearance of the child.
- ◆ Child's way of playing.
- ◆ Child's ability to perform tasks.
- ◆ Child's level of appropriate social skills.
- ◆ Parent/child interaction.
- ◆ Parent/child relationship, including separation issues and how this relates to attachment.
- ◆ Parenting skills.
- ◆ Parent's ability to follow advice regarding children's needs.

(Buckley et al 2006, contained in the *HSE Child Protection and Welfare Practice Handbook*, 2011)

Developing child protection policy and procedures

The HSE employs Children First Information and Advice Officers who are available to assist voluntary and community organisations in meeting their obligations under Children First: National Guidance. They are available to:

- ◆ Provide information and advice on developing child protection policy and procedures.
- ◆ Give advice on child protection issues.
- ◆ Provide child protection training.

For details of your local Children First Information and Advice Officer contact: HSE Infoline, Lo-call 1850 24 1850, www.hse.ie.

Recommended reading:

- ◆ *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (HSE, 2011)
- ◆ *Child Protection and Welfare Practice Handbook* (HSE, 2011)
- ◆ *Protecting Children: A Child Protection Guide for Early Years and School Age Childcare Services* (Barnardos, 2010a)

Thinking About Your Practice – Sample Scenario

Eoin (aged 4½ years) has been attending the pre-school for over a year. Staff members have mentioned seeing him out playing on the street at night. There appears to be little parental supervision of Eoin while he is out playing.

Eoin is usually shabbily dressed, often wearing light clothing even in cold weather. He frequently comes to the pre-school without underwear or socks on. He is always hungry and grabs food from other children. He has had head lice on more than one occasion and other children have complained that he smells. He is pale and tired-looking and always seems to have a cold or cough. In the pre-school, Eoin finds it difficult to cope with structure and his behaviour is challenging on occasions.

- ◆ How do you feel about this situation?
- ◆ What are your initial concerns?
- ◆ How do you respond to this situation?
- ◆ What procedures do you follow?

Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse is one of the most difficult situations parents and children can face. The secrecy and stigma that surround it make it difficult for people who experience it to seek help, but with adequate information and support they are more likely to get the help they need. It is now widely understood that supporting and protecting the abused parent is often the best way to protect children.

The vast majority of parents, both mothers and fathers, want what is best for their children and work hard to meet their needs. However, in abusive relationships, one partner uses abusive tactics to control and undermine the other. This can affect many aspects of family life, including parenting.

Parents who are abused usually try to look after their children and to protect them as much as possible, often at risk to themselves. However, physical injuries, stress, fear, emotional confusion and exhaustion can all affect how the abused parent responds to their children's needs. In some situations, parents may use medication, alcohol or other drugs to help them cope. This can also lessen their capacity to take care of themselves or their children.

Options for parents

The best way for parents who are abused to protect their children is to take steps to ensure their own safety. Options may include:

- ◆ Getting a Safety Order (which prevents a partner being violent in the home) or a Barring Order (which prevents an abusive partner coming into the home).
- ◆ Leaving the family home and relationship.

Leaving home is not an easy decision for parents and there may be many obstacles to overcome. Research tells us that violence often increases if the abuser knows they are going to be challenged or if their partner decides to leave. Trained staff in refuges and domestic abuse support services can provide the skilled support that parents need to make informed decisions.

Domestic abuse and children

Exposure to domestic violence is detrimental to children's physical, emotional and psychological well-being.

(Children First, 2011)

In families where there is domestic abuse, both mothers and fathers generally underestimate what children see and hear. Research shows that children are either in the same or next room in over 60% of cases when domestic abuse occurs.

How much children understand about domestic abuse differs according to their age, ability, experience and the response of those around them. Babies and toddlers will pick up on the tension and stress within the household and may overhear fighting, but will not yet understand the power dynamics involved. Older children have a strong sense of what is fair and may try to make sense of what is happening in that way. Some children may deny or minimise both the

violence and its impact as a way of coping. Often an abuser will blame his or her victim and this can add to a child's confusion.

All children who live with domestic abuse are harmed by it. Each child's experience and reaction is unique and some children are affected more than others. A parent who is abusive to their partner is also abusing their children emotionally, even if they are not physically abusive to them. Research also tells us that parents who are violent are more likely to use physical punishment, threats or fear to discipline their children.

However, once the abuse stops, children are safe and they receive appropriate support and care, many children can learn to cope and recover from their experience of domestic abuse.

The needs of children

Children need to be brought up in an environment which is safe and free of violence, fear or abuse.

Factors that can help children to cope include:

- ◆ Having someone to talk to who will listen and understand their feelings.
- ◆ Keeping their routines as normal as possible.
- ◆ Reassurance that the abuse is not their fault.
- ◆ Spending time with friends and other adults in their lives who care about them (such as grandparents and other relatives).

An early years service or school age childcare service can offer children a safe, secure environment, the opportunity to be with friends and to take part in activities. This enables them to get a break from their home situation and also access supportive relationships with adults outside the home.

The needs of the abused parent

- ◆ Emotional support.
- ◆ A place of safety when required.
- ◆ Access to the protection of the Gardai when in danger.
- ◆ Quality information on the legal and other options open to them.
- ◆ Ongoing support and assistance (particularly if they decide to leave their home or take other steps to protect themselves and their children).

Support services available

There are a number of organisations with expertise, skills and experience in dealing with domestic abuse such as:

- ◆ Local refuges or domestic abuse support services
- ◆ National Network of Women's Refuges and Support Services – www.nnrwss.ie
Tel: 090 647 9078
- ◆ Women's Aid National – www.womensaid.ie Freephone Helpline 1800 341 900
- ◆ Amen (A service for male victims of domestic abuse) – www.amen.ie
Tel: 046 9023718

Other sources of support include:

- ◆ Family GP
- ◆ Gardai
- ◆ Social Work Department at the local HSE health centre (HSE Infoline Tel: 1850 241 850)
- ◆ Citizen's Information Board – www.citizensinformation.ie
- ◆ A solicitor or the Free Legal Aid Centre
- ◆ Trained staff based in local Family Resource Centres

Recommended reading:

Parenting Positively: Coping with Domestic Abuse can be downloaded from the Barnardos website at

<http://www.barnardos.ie/information-centre/publications/free-publications.html>

Thinking About Your Practice – Sample Scenario

Kathleen (3 years) attends the pre-school daily. Practitioners are aware that there is a history of domestic violence in the family. Kathleen's mother is 25 years old and has three children under four years of age.

Kathleen's attendance at the pre-school is erratic but when she comes she is very happy and rarely wants to leave.

Kathleen was playing with the mum and dad figures in the doll's house and they appeared to be fighting. Her key person overheard her say:

'Daddy is kicking Mammy. Daddy bold. Mammy sad'. She then threw the Daddy figure on the ground.

- ◆ How do you feel about this situation?
- ◆ What are your initial concerns?
- ◆ How do you respond to this situation?
- ◆ How would your Child Protection Policy guide your response?

Final Thoughts

All families need support at some point in their lives. Knowing that support is available when it is needed is important to families and enhances family life and well-being.

Can We Help? has sought to highlight the unique role that early years services can play in supporting children and families, focusing on the research and policy frameworks underpinning this work and how a family-focused approach, underpinned by family support principles, can be implemented in practice.

Core components include a partnership approach with parents centred around their child's learning and development needs that is strengths-focused, supports parent-child relationships and strengthens parent's support networks. The latter is largely achieved through the development of collaborative relationships between early years settings and other services for children and families in communities, working together to respond to the broad range of issues impacting on children and families.

While the full potential of this approach in Irish early years services is viewed as being underdeveloped to date (OECD, 2004), *Can We Help?* seeks to contribute to the development of improved practice in this area. Research tells us that quality early years services can make a real difference. In addition to providing quality learning environments, early years practitioners build relationships with children and make informed observations which contribute to their overall development, protection and well-being. They are also in a unique position to engage and support families through accessible and non-threatening relationships that are built up over time, centred around their children's needs. The proven capacity of early years services to help address the cycle of inter-generational disadvantage through targeted early intervention and family support services is also well established.

In 2010, 94% of pre-school children participated in the free pre-school year (with a further 3% in other schemes). More than ever before, this presents an important opportunity to develop and expand the unique potential of early years services to engage and support families.

Providing information, resources, training, supervision and support to practitioners will encourage them to approach their work with children and families with greater confidence and creativity, leading to more effective practice and improved outcomes for children.

As one early years manager commented:
I think early years services shouldn't underestimate the impact they can have . . . a lot can be measured in very little steps.



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Appendices

Appendix 1 Other Relevant Legislation

Protection for Person's Reporting Child Abuse Act, 1998

This Act provides for the protection from civil liability of persons who have reported child abuse 'reasonably and in good faith' to designated officers of the HSE or to any member of an Garda Síochána. This protection applies to organisations as well as individuals.

This Act also introduced an offence of false reporting of child abuse, where a person reports child abuse knowing that statement to be false, which is designed to protect innocent people from malicious reports.

Domestic Violence Act, 1996

This Act provides for legal remedies to address domestic violence, such as Safety Orders and the Barring Orders. It also gives the HSE powers to intervene to protect individuals and their children from violence.

Criminal Justice Act, 2006

This Act introduces the charge of 'reckless endangerment' of children. The Act makes it an offence for anyone with responsibility for a child to intentionally leave a child in a situation which creates a substantial risk to the child of being a victim of serious harm or sexual abuse, or who fails to take reasonable steps to protect a child from such risk.

Freedom of Information Act, 1997 and Freedom of Information (Amendment) Act, 2003

This Act confers a legal right, subject to certain restrictions, for every person to access personal records concerning them being held by any public body and to have any such information that is incorrect amended.

Under the Act, there are regulations relating to access by parents to their children's records, which emphasises that the overriding concern is the best interests of the child.

Data Protection Acts, 1988 and 2003

The Data Protection Acts apply to anyone (public and private) who holds records. A record can be a document (paper or electronic) which must be retained by an organisation for a period of time until the information contained in it is of little or no value.

Appendix 2 Principles of Good Practice – Our Duty to Care

Adopting the following principles in your organisation will help to create an environment in which children are listened to, given a sense of belonging, and kept safe; parents are supported and encouraged; and staff and volunteers who work with children and young people are supported and protected.

All organisations providing services for children should:

- ◆ Acknowledge the rights of children to be protected, treated with respect, listened to and have their own views taken into consideration.
- ◆ Recognise that the welfare of children must always come first, regardless of all other considerations.
- ◆ Develop a child protection policy that raises awareness about the possibility of child abuse occurring and outlines the steps to be taken if it is suspected.
- ◆ Adopt the safest possible practices to minimise the possibility of harm or accidents happening to children and protect workers from the necessity to take risks and leave themselves open to accusations of abuse or neglect.
- ◆ Adopt and consistently apply clearly defined methods of recruiting staff and volunteers.
- ◆ Develop procedures for responding to accidents and complaints.
- ◆ Remember that early intervention with children who are vulnerable or at risk may prevent serious harm from happening to them at a later stage.
- ◆ Remember that a child's age, gender and background affect the way they experience and understand what is happening to them.
- ◆ Provide child protection training for workers.
- ◆ Develop a policy of openness with parents that involves consulting them about everything that concerns their children, and encouraging them to get involved with the organisation wherever possible.
- ◆ Co-operate with any other child care and protection agencies and professionals by sharing information when necessary and working together towards the best possible outcome for the children concerned.
- ◆ Make links with other relevant organisations in order to promote child protection and welfare policies and practices.

(Our Duty to Care, 2002. p, 4)

Appendix 3 National Standards for Pre-school Services

Standard 3 - Working in Partnership with Parents or Guardians

Outcome

Parents or guardians are kept fully informed and involved as partners in their children's activities, achievements and progress.

Criteria

3.1 Staff develop and maintain a good working relationship with parents or guardians, encourage parental involvement, and respect the parents' or guardian's primary responsibility for the child.

3.2 Details concerning the child's activities during the day, and any event or change in their behaviour, are shared with the parents or guardians at the end of the day by the child's key worker.

3.3 Any issues or difficulties relating to an individual child are raised with the parents or guardians at an early stage to ensure the maintenance of good relationships.

3.4 Confidentiality in relation to children and their families is respected at all times (except where responsibilities arise under child protection procedures).

3.5 The wishes of parents or guardians in relation to children's participation in religious practices are respected.

3.6 Parents or guardians of children attending the service are free to visit the service at any time (insofar as is practicable).



Appendix 4 Developing a Parent's Handbook

A Parent's Handbook is a useful way to provide parents with the information they need to know about their child's early years setting. Suggested contents include:

- ◆ The service's Mission Statement and aims.
- ◆ Contact information for the setting.
- ◆ The type of services provided and the age range of the children.
- ◆ The childcare policies and information about the programme/curriculum.
- ◆ A diagram of the setting's layout.
- ◆ The Admission's Policy.
- ◆ Information on staffing including staff qualifications and ratios.
- ◆ The hours of opening.
- ◆ Costs and charges/fees.
- ◆ The settling-in procedure.
- ◆ Routines and activities provided for the children.
- ◆ The Behaviour Guidance and Discipline Policy.
- ◆ The Specific Educational Needs Policy.
- ◆ Equality and Non-discrimination Policy.
- ◆ Information about the management structure.
- ◆ A statement to confirm the service is notified and inspected.
- ◆ Information about how the service engages with other organisations/agencies.
- ◆ Catering arrangements.
- ◆ The policy on Children's Illnesses.
- ◆ What parents/carers should bring with them.
- ◆ What the children should and should not bring with them from home.
- ◆ Information about the Key Person system.
- ◆ Information about partnership with parents and the systems for regular exchange of information about the child between parents/carers and staff.
- ◆ The Comments/Complaints Policy.
- ◆ Record-keeping and arrangements for parents/carers to have access to their own records.
- ◆ Date the handbook was developed.

(Barnardos, 2008)

Appendix 5 Developing a Toy Library

What is toy library?

Toy libraries offer services to children, families and carers based on regular toy loan (for a nominal fee or sometimes for free). They provide carefully selected toys to borrow, play sessions and a friendly, informative meeting place for parents and carers.

Toy libraries offer:

- ◆ Loan of a wide range of toys.
- ◆ Play sessions for children and parents.
- ◆ Information and advice about play.
- ◆ A friendly meeting place for parents and carers.

They help children by:

- ◆ Giving them access to a rich variety of high quality toys.
- ◆ Offering toys to suit the abilities of children with special needs.
- ◆ Enabling all children to develop vital skills.
- ◆ Helping children learn to share.
- ◆ Providing spaces to play, learn and have fun.

Toy libraries help parents to:

- ◆ Discover the appropriate toys and play activities for their children.
- ◆ Understand the role of play in child development.
- ◆ Develop their parenting skills.

Toy libraries also provide parents with a meeting place for peer support and learning new skills.

Toy libraries can be established and run by volunteers (many of which may be parents themselves), paid workers or operate as part of an established service offered by professionals, such as early years services (or a combination of each).

Additional information

For more information on establishing a toy library in your service, check out:

'Nuts and Bolts: A Practical Guide to Setting up and Running a Toy Library' – available from the National Association of Toy and Leisure Libraries (www.natll.org.uk)

Appendix 6 Developing a Relationship with Parents – Practice Model, Pen Green

Pen Green's early years model provides a number of strategies and tools to support the development of relationships with parents and facilitate their involvement. These include:

- ◆ **Information forms** – A standardised form is completed by each family allocated a place in the nursery, providing details of the child (including where their children are during the week, who they spend time with etc.) and parent's work/training patterns. This information helps Pen Green staff to understand and respond to children's experiences and also to consider how best to engage with parents.
- ◆ **Home visiting** – Staff visit children and families on a regular basis to understand the child's context. There is an initial visit by the key worker before a child begins attending the nursery, and thereafter two or three times each year. The key worker also uses visits to understand how engaged the parents already are, what other services they can be offered, and parent's own educational experiences.
- ◆ **Family worker** – When children are allocated a place in the nursery they are also allocated a family worker. Each family worker has 8-10 families. They get to know the whole family and conduct regular home visits.
- ◆ **Key working** – Each child and family has a key person in the nursery (See Section 6.3 below for additional information on the role).
- ◆ **Settling-in period** – All children have at least a two-week settling-in period when they are accompanied by a parent/carer. This is considered an important time when parents and staff can share information and develop a relationship.
- ◆ **Daily chats** – Over time these can help to build a picture of a child's interests and development. A home/school nursery book can be used to record short messages on the child that goes back and forth between home and nursery. As the written word may not suit all, audio tapes are also used.
- ◆ **Staggered starts** – Families can bring their children to nursery any time between 8.15am and 9.30am. This system enables key workers to greet parents and children individually and enables parents to chat to workers or simply spend time settling their child into nursery.
- ◆ **Portfolios** – Each child has a portfolio, which is a comprehensive record of the learning that is happening at home and school. It is used as a focus of discussion on home visits or meetings at the nursery, and is given to parents when a child is leaving the nursery.
- ◆ **Making narrative observations** – A picture is built up of what each child is learning through dialogue with their parents, and by making written or video observations of each child in a systematic way. Two children are targeted for close observation in each session. Observations are shared with parents.

- ◆ **Curriculum planning** – Each child’s learning is planned by making a ‘Possible Lines of Direction’ chart and an individual learning plan is created. The child’s interests are in the centre. These interests are linked with the UK national curriculum.
- ◆ **Photographs and video** – Pen Green use photographs and video vignettes to share knowledge with parents, children and each other. Parents can borrow video cameras from and they are offered camcorder lessons.
- ◆ **Attending initial key concept training sessions** – These are run at the beginning of the nursery year and look at the four key concepts of the Pen Green model. The sessions are run three times a day (morning, afternoon and evening) and a free crèche is available to support attendance. Some parents get one-to one training.
- ◆ **Attending a long term weekly research group** – These groups run every week and parents have the option to attend the morning or afternoon session. The group provides parents with an opportunity to discuss with nursery workers their child’s development, both at home and at nursery. This group is also help once monthly in the evening.
- ◆ **Individual sessions** – These combine personal support, key concept training and information exchange.
- ◆ **Family group meetings** – Held each term, this time is used to informally discuss child development and reinforce the key concepts used on a daily basis in the nursery.

For parents who do not enjoy being part of a group, other strategies are provided. Generally carried out by the family worker, these include:

- ◆ **Home/nursery books** – This is a way of exchanging information with parents. The book may include photographs of the child in nursery explained by the family worker. The family worker may ask for comments from the parents about similar things the child is doing at home.
- ◆ **Home/school video** – The family worker films the child in nursery and adds some comments to the film to initiate a dialogue with the parents about the child. This could be sent home for the family to watch. Parents can also borrow the camera and initiate discussion.
- ◆ **Evenings devoted to one issue** – These events may focus, for example, on maths or technology, and they tend to be run as interactive workshops.

(Whalley 2001, cited in Share et al, 2011)

Sources of Further Information

Sources of further information for particular issues that may require family support can be found throughout Section 10.

Barnardos' Training and Resource Service

Christchurch Square, Dublin 8

T: 01 4549699

E: resources@barnardos.ie or training@barnardos.ie

www.barnardos.ie

Childminding Ireland

9 Bulford Business Campus, Kilcoole, Co Wicklow

T: 01 287 8466

E: info@childminding.ie

www.childminding.ie

Department of Children and Youth Affairs

43-49 Mespil Road, Dublin 4

T: 0 1 6473000

E: omc@dcya.gov.ie

www.dcy.gov.ie

Early Childhood Ireland

Unit 4 Broomhill Business Complex, Broomhill Road, Tallaght, Dublin 24

T: 01 4630010

www.earlychildhoodireland.ie

Early Years Education and Policy Unit - Department of Education and Skills

43-49 Mespil Road, Dublin 4

T: 01 6473250

E: TheresaM_Ryan@education.gov.ie

Forbairt Naíonraí Teo

St. Patrick's Hall, Marino Institute of Education, Griffith Avenue, Dublin 9

T: 01 853 5101

E: eolas@naionrai.ie

Government Publications Sales Office

Sun Alliance House, Molesworth Street, Dublin 2

T: 01 6476879

Health Service Executive

Head Office, Oak House, Millennium Park, Naas, Co. Kildare

T: 045 880400

www.hse.ie (See local telephone directory or www.hse.ie for the HSE authority in your area for relevant numbers)

High/Scope Ireland

c/o Early Years, 6c Wildflower Way, Apollo Road, Boucher Road, Belfast, BT12 6TA

T: 0044 (0) 289 0662825

E: Margaretf@early-years.org

Irish Refugee Council

2nd Floor, Ballast House, Dublin 2.

T: 01 7645854

E info@irishrefugeecouncil.ie

www.irishrefugeecouncil.ie

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)

24 Merrion Square, Dublin 2

T: 01 6617177

E: info@ncca.ie

www.ncca.ie

Parent Child Home Programme

Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland, Mayor Street, IFSC, Dublin 1

T: 01 4498627

E: bfagan@ncirl.ie

Pavee Point (Traveller's Centre)

46 North Great Charles Street, Dublin 1

T: 01 8780255

E: info@pavee.ie

www.paveepoint.ie

Pobal

Holbrook House, Holles St, Dublin 2

T: 01 5117000

E: enquiries@pobal.ie

www.pobal.ie

Contact details for City/County Childcare committees can be found on
www.pobal.ie/childcare

My Contacts List

My Contacts List

