

Keeping parents at the heart of what we do...

Good parenting is the cornerstone of strong families. Parents should be supported to provide their children with a positive upbringing. That support should be delivered in a way that promotes respectful and empowering attitudes and which values parents' unique knowledge of their own children.

There are around 450,000 children in Northern Ireland, all from differing family structures, with differing family backgrounds and all with their own hopes and aspirations. To give these children the best possible start in life, they need to be guided and supported to reach their full potential.

Parenting NI fully endorses the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which sees the role of parents as providing appropriate guidance and direction (in a non violent manner); providing materially for the child; and enabling the child's voice to be heard.

The theme of the family is central to the preamble of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The preamble sets out, in unambiguous terms, that families are the building blocks of society, that the family is the natural environment for the growth and well being of children and that families should be afforded all necessary protection and assistance needed to fully assume their nurturing and caring roles and responsibilities within the family. By ratifying the Convention, the UK is explicitly committed to supporting parents in their role.

The challenge of supporting all children and families across our society is considerable. The activities by the Government in recent years to establish robust family support, child protection models and intervention are to be welcomed. The development of the strategies, Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006-2016 and Families Matter:- Supporting Families in Northern Ireland are specifically targeted to improve the outcomes for children in Northern Ireland. The more recent establishment of the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership, led by the Health and Social Care Board, should further progress the recognition that children

and young people and their families are best supported where there is integrated planning of all services.

Parenting NI strongly endorses the principle of positive parenting as recommended by the Council of Europe (REC.19 2006). It is defined as 'parental behaviour based on the best interests of the child that is nurturing, empowering, non violent and provides recognition and guidance which involves setting of boundaries to enable the full development of the child'. Parenting NI would wish to see this principle underpinning the approach taken by all those supporting parents and families and for Government Departments to reinforce this recommendation through policy and practice.

Parenting NI would advocate that early intervention and prevention services are the most effective in securing long term change for children and young people. Children and young people of all ages can benefit from services that intervene as soon as possible, to tackle problems that have already emerged or work towards preventing potential poor outcomes for children and young people.

Parenting NI believes that to achieve lasting positive change for children, the Government must focus more on

supporting parents. We currently live in a society where not enough value is placed on parenting. Parents are often unfairly stigmatised and blamed for many of the country's ills. Together as a society we should offer parents encouragement, praise and support. A more positive view of parenting needs to be adopted.

"Put succinctly, parents create people. It is the entrusted and abiding task of parents to prepare their offspring for the physical, psychosocial, and economic conditions in which they will eventually fare, and it is hoped, flourish... Parents are the 'final common pathway' to children's development and stature, adjustment and success". (Bornstein 2002)

We need to strive to ensure that all parents are supported to help their children to lead happy, healthy lives, gain greater life chances and in time become responsible adults and effective parents.

This Manifesto is calling for policy changes in four key themes, value, support, education and a voice for parents. Parenting NI believe these calls should be taken forward under the parenting agenda and are based on the indisputable fact that parents are a major influence on children's lives.

What is needed? Policy Calls

- Policy on parenting needs a more co-ordinated approach within and across Government Departments, to ensure that parenting support is integrated into their policies.
- Early intervention and prevention services need to be promoted, protected and resourced to ensure the medium and long-term benefits for children.



ParentingNI

Valuing Parents

Parenting and parenting support has implications for all Government Departments, yet there continues to be a lack of any co-ordinated focus. We feel that there is an urgent need for joined up policy on parenting, where all areas of policy that impact on families acknowledge and take account of each other.

We are encouraged by the aims of the Health and Social Care Board led Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership and their recognition that children and young people are best supported and protected when there is integrated planning of all services, from universal to those targeted to address specific needs.

We would promote this co-ordinated method of working and would encourage Government Departments to show that they value the role of parents by moving parents to a central position in

policy terms. All Government Departments need to integrate parents into their thinking and planning to ensure that all work carried out to benefit children and young people is complemented by the work being done to support parents.

However, support for parents cannot be provided by Government alone. Voluntary and community organisations play a vital and complementary role and their contribution should not be underestimated.

While we are aware of the current economic climate, we fear that early intervention and prevention may be viewed as a luxury that cannot be afforded. Government need to fully endorse the fact that when good practice, early intervention and prevention services are in place, they produce better outcomes for children and young people in the medium and

long terms. This endorsement should then be evidenced by the commissioning of services. Parenting NI is concerned that the temptation to cut early intervention and prevention programmes may be seen as an easy way out for those making decisions, with immense negative consequences for children and young people.

What is needed? Policy Calls

- Parents need to be able to access support as a universal right, with targeted interventions for parents who have additional needs.
- Effective interagency collaboration needs to be developed, especially in respect of information sharing.



ParentingNI

Supporting Parents

Parents need to be supported so they can parent confidently and responsibly whilst they are facing diverse family difficulties.

“Many parents need support at some point in their career, and efforts to normalise access as a universal right seem likely to generate strong benefits” (Moran et al 2004)

If this sentiment were accepted fully by our community, support for parents would become an integral part of bringing up children.

Parenting NI views parent support as being ‘any intervention for parents or carers aimed at reducing risks and/or promoting protective factors for their children, in relation to social, physical and emotional well being’. There is a substantial amount of theoretical literature and empirical research in psychology and related disciplines that has considered the role of parents in influencing child

development. While recognising this development has multiple determinants, it is clear that parents represent an important source of influence in their child’s lives.

Parents and parental behaviours have been highlighted as both risk and protective factors in the development of behavioural problems for both typically developing children and children with developmental problems. This being the case, advice, support and education should be available to parents to help them in their parenting roles, delivered in ways which promote respectful and empowering attitudes and which value parents’ unique knowledge of their own children. Only when this becomes the norm will we begin to remove the stigma attached to accessing parenting support.

As the needs of parents can change, some quite significantly,

more work is required to develop mechanisms for parents to move smoothly between services. There is also a need for greater collaboration between services. The developments under the Think Child Think Parent Think Family initiative, for adult mental health and child care services to co-ordinate, has highlighted gaps in interagency working and can provide a model to others for cross agency sharing.

One of the major challenges for interagency work is the issue of information sharing. Translating the principles of guidance of information sharing into interagency practice is a gap in our working arrangements. If this could be improved there could be great benefits for parents and families.

In recognition of the need for parents and practitioners to be informed about family support services, the Family Support NI

database has been implemented and is to be welcomed. It should facilitate a greater understanding of available support services. However, there needs to be a quality standard developed and used as a benchmark for inclusion in this system so that users can feel confident about the services.

What is needed? Policy Calls

- There is a need for a co-ordinated approach to parenting education programmes, based on the principle of positive parenting.
- All parents should have access to universal, quality assured parenting education programmes at all stages throughout their child's life.



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Educating Parents

The increased interest in parenting has given rise to the growth in parenting education programmes, many of which reflect the principles of early intervention and prevention. We welcome this emphasis on programmes, which promote positive parenting and help parents to maximise their child's potential and avoid situations deteriorating.

Given the increase in available programmes, the number of providers and the demand from parents to participate, there is an urgent need for a co-ordinated approach to this area of family support.

In the past, parenting programmes have often been used as a response to parents who are already having quite severe difficulties. While this is a valid use of specialist programmes, it is hugely important

that parenting education programmes are also recognised as a beneficial way for parents to enhance their skills and knowledge in order that they avoid problems arising or prevent situations escalating. This is in keeping with the mounting evidence showing the benefits of preventative work and the positive outcomes this can have for parents and children.

Parenting NI strongly advocates that programmes should be based on a positive parenting approach, which enables children to be brought up in a nurturing environment, with parents who use non-violent methods of discipline. This positive parenting approach can be advanced through the authoritative parenting style. Research demonstrates that children who are raised within the authoritative parenting style have better outcomes than those

children who are not. Therefore Parenting NI would want to see that all programmes incorporate this style into their session plans so that parents can employ these skills at home. Authoritative discipline can be further reinforced if professionals and practitioners use the model in their work.

Parenting education programmes need to be regarded as a key component of support for parents, which should be available to them at the various stages of the child's upbringing. Only when parenting education is promoted as a universal tool to contribute to better outcomes for children, will we remove the stigma, which some parents associate with attending parenting programmes.

With the plethora of parenting programmes available, which can vary in content and delivery, it

is concerning that there is not a standard to which programmes are required to adhere. While there are programmes being delivered which have been rigorously evaluated, there are others being delivered outside any quality control system. Parenting programmes should be based on theory and be quality controlled.

Quality parenting programmes are an investment in parents' personal growth, their child's future and future generations.

What is needed? Policy Calls

- Planners, decision makers and organisations working with families need to embed a systematic strategic approach to parental participation into their practice.
- Parents need to be supported to participate in decision making at all levels.



ParentingNI

Voice of Parents

Involving parents and carers in the planning and developing of services is the best way of creating cost-effective, responsive services for families. There is a growing recognition by planners, of the need to involve parents and carers in the shaping of services to ensure services are relevant and cost-effective.

In the past parental participation has tended to happen in an ad hoc manner, usually as a one-off consultation event around a new service or policy. However, the principle of parental participation is being more widely accepted, and in response there are emerging practices of participation activities by some service providers. We welcome the steps being taken by the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership to integrate parental participation into their planning. This sets the standard

that should be reflected in all Government thinking. Parental participation needs to happen strategically, in order to maximise the 'real' benefits for parents and children.

Participation needs to be a meaningful experience for parents as well as an integral part of organisational practice. Parents should be supported to participate in decision-making at all levels and understand the benefit their contributions make to their children's lives. Models should be in place to ensure that participation is inclusive and that the needs of hard to reach parents are met. Such models would ensure that parents are part of an ongoing process where they are told about the outcomes of their participation and how their views are being considered.

Parental participation in the planning and delivery of services poses many challenges. Yet it is only through working with parents that we understand how to deliver the services they need. Parents observe and experience the system at close quarters and their knowledge and expertise is unique.

Effective parental participation leads to empowered parents, empowered children and relevant services.

Parenting NI believe that all parents should be supported to help their children lead happy, healthy lives and reach their full potential. This Manifesto calls for policy changes in four key themes:



ParentingNI

Valuing Parents

Policy on parenting needs a more co-ordinated approach within and across Government Departments, to ensure that parenting support is integrated into their policies.

Early intervention and prevention services need to be promoted, protected and resourced to ensure the medium and long-term benefits for children.

Supporting Parents

Parents need to be able to access support as a universal right, with targeted interventions for parents who have additional needs.

Effective interagency collaboration needs to be developed, especially in respect of information sharing.

Educating Parents

There is a need for a co-ordinated approach to parenting education programmes.

All parents should have access to universal, quality assured parenting education programmes at all stages throughout their child's life.

Voice of Parents

Planners, decision makers and organisations working with families need to embed a systematic strategic approach to parental participation into their practice.

Parents need to be supported to participate in decision making at all levels.

References

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Parenting NI was established as Parents Advice Centre in 1979, the International Year of the Child. It is now a leading parenting support organisation committed to delivering high quality services. Parenting NI has a regional remit to promote positive parenting by providing support, training and information on family issues and influencing policy, provision and practice at all levels.

 **PARENTS HELPLINE**

Providing support and guidance to parents and families facing difficulties through a free helpline and outreach appointment service.

 **PARENTING EDUCATION**

Providing parenting education programmes and resources to parents and practitioners.

 **PARENTING FORUM**

Lobbying on behalf of parents to influence policy, practice and equality of parenting services.