



Quality Child and Family Support Services

EUROPEAN POLICY GUIDELINES

QA[4]EuroFam (ref. IG18123)

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1. CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

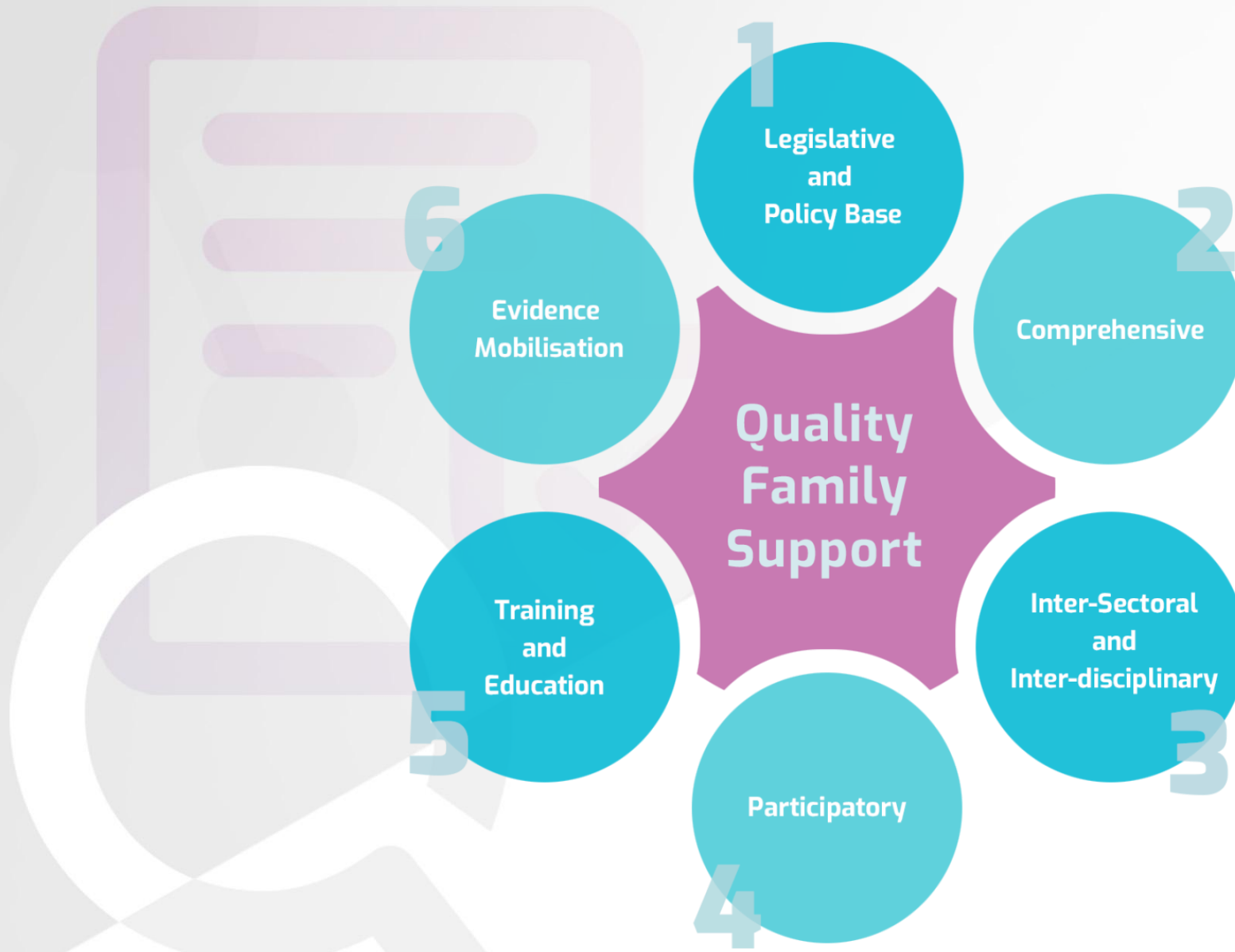
The European Policy Guidelines are one of the products of the project 'A quality assurance implementation protocol for family support services in Europe. An evidence-based and culturally informed model for professional practice' (ref. IG18123) (QA(4)EuroFam) (<https://www.cost.eu/actions/IG18123/>). This project was carried out within the framework of a Cost Innovators Grant under the EU's COST (European Cooperation in Science & Technology) programme and had a duration of one year (from 1 November 2023 to 31 October 2024).

Formal family support interventions to meet children's rights have been implemented across Europe, but with great variability in the nature and quality of provision of such support, both within and between countries. QA(4)EuroFam responded to the need to develop a sustainable approach to achieving quality in frontline practice, service provision, and evidence mobilization, in order to reduce the risk of inequalities in child and family support provided within individual countries and across Europe. The quality assurance protocol for child and family support services was implemented as a self-assessment tool with the support of National Working Groups made up of representatives from academic, policy, and practice stakeholders in 19 countries across Europe (Jiménez et al, 2024). The project resulted in a snapshot of the status of family support within and across these countries, identifying strengths and challenges in the provision of child and family support services, and good practices and recommendations for quality improvement.

Building on the results obtained from each country, we have created a set of European Guidelines for Quality Family Support, which will constitute a roadmap to guide European policies, which in turn will reinforce national policies in this area. These guidelines offer a general model to assess the quality of family support across practice, services, evidence and policy recommendations, and to direct its ongoing development, ultimately contributing to the optimisation of the provision of support services to children and families, especially the most vulnerable in our societies.

Both the development of the protocol and the present guidelines are a product of a EuroFamNet: The European Family Support Network (<https://eurofamnet.eu/>), an European (interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral) family support network composed of 173 members from 35 countries and 13 European organisations). This network aims to empirically analyse family support policies and practices with the purpose of improving them and ensuring children's (and families') rights and their adequate development.

2. RECOMMENDED GUIDELINES



1

Legislative and Policy Base

The fundamental rationale for supporting the family in Europe is that, to realize the rights of the child, it is necessary to support the family unit in a broad sense. There are good examples in European countries of efforts to strengthen legislation and policy towards the dual goal of children's rights and family well-being. The next step is to consolidate this progress at national and European levels, and critically, to provide the resources necessary for quality implementation. Family support must move away from a precarious option to a sustainable commitment of governments and the EU. Alongside an adequate resource base is the need for an optimal fit between policy design and the delivery system, thus validating family support work within frontline services. QA4Eurofam participants stressed the need to prioritise prevention and early intervention in the policy-making menu, increasing the chances of more effective and efficient interventions.

2

Comprehensive

Family support provision should recognise and respond to diversity in family structures, cultures and needs, reflecting for example, the needs of children growing up in one parent families, divorced and separated families, families from minority ethnic, cultural and racial backgrounds, LGBT+ families, foster and adoptive families, families living with a disability, and families enduring chronic illness. Family support must be available on a universal and targeted basis – recognising that all children and families need support, but some have additional needs. For it to be meaningful, people need to be able to access family support in their own communities – in some situations, for some children and families, NGOs are more attractive than statutory services. The best test of the quality of support provision is the extent to which highly excluded children and families facing particularly severe adversity, e.g., unaccompanied migrants, children of parents with addictions and children from homeless families, can access and use these services without any sign of stigmatization.

3

Inter-sectoral and Inter-disciplinary

The complex and intersectional nature of children's and families' needs demands a holistic, inter-sectoral and inter-disciplinary approach, replacing fragmented, inefficient service responses. Thus, family support often requires a combination of coordinated actions from several delivery systems, e.g., child protection, mental health, education, justice, etc. Robust and effective family support delivery systems should avoid redundancy (service duplication) and ensure comprehensiveness (fill gaps), increasing the likelihood that children and families receive the 'right' service or services mix. In turn, this requires close attention to and support for the task of collaborative working, across sectors and disciplines, ensuring consistent and coherent actions and messages from services. To be most effective, collaborative practice requires explicit support in policy, in the form of regulations and guidelines, mandated where appropriate, and supported by adequate financial support, structures, mechanisms and protocols. The payoff for European governments is the possibility of more effective and efficient interventions.

4

Participatory

Participatory practice embodies the notion of parents and children as rights-holders subjects, not mere recipients of intervention. Meaningful participation by children and parents should be routine across practice, service provision and evidence systems. When services and practice support meaningful participation, children and parents are more likely to express their needs and to have them met. Participatory practice can access strengths and capabilities in families, as resources for intervention and as protective factors against risk. In turn, when children and parents have meaningful opportunities to participate, it increases the chances of effective intervention and longer-term empowerment of children and parents, and their autonomous functioning.

5

Training and Education

Workforce competence in family support requires high quality education and training provided at university level, in the form of individual modules or full programmes, as part of initial training or continuing professional development. Education and training in family support will be most effective when delivered on an inter-disciplinary and inter-sectoral basis. This will support mutual recognition and understanding among professionals, build relationships, and support on-the-ground integrated family support practice. Family support education and training should incorporate exposure to edge-cutting knowledge on working with families, and support practitioners to implement evidence-based programmes and practices. Likewise, it should emphasise the development of practitioners who are capable of ongoing reflection on their practice towards its improvement, based on technical knowledge, the views and experiences of children and parents, and their own professional experiences. Given the non-sector specific and non-discipline specific nature of family support education and training, service providing organisations will need mandates and resources to recognize efforts and support the participation of their staff.

6

Evidence mobilisation

Evidence production, analysis and translation as models of professional practice is at the core of family support. This means adopting and implementing programmes and practices underpinned by solid evidence. It means building new evidence obtained in community-based settings to validate promising programmes and practices. Evidence is required for ongoing quality assurance and monitoring activities that lead to continuous improvement in services experienced by children and parents. It encourages accountability and transparency in the support process, fostering trust among families and professionals, refining, adjusting and enhancing family support systems over time. 'Expert' academics may lead evidence-creation processes in Family Support, but ideally, they should be co-produced with professionals' shared knowledge and children and parents' participation, resulting in better and more ethical evidence that reflects the rights of those for whom it is relevant. As they are emergent, family support evidence systems need early career researchers to be supported to become involved in their development. Likewise, as demonstrated in the operation of EuroFamNet, formal links between university and practice and the provision system for which models exist can support longer-term sustainable evidence-creation processes.

3. METHOD

The quality assurance protocol for family support protocol was developed through a dynamic and interactive methodological process that culminated in a two-cycle Delphi methodology. Once finalised, the protocol was implemented in the 19 countries listed below:

Albania Croatia Cyprus Ireland Israel Lithuania Moldova Montenegro
 North Macedonia Norway Poland Portugal Romania Serbia Slovenia
 Spain The Netherlands Turkey United Kindom

This involved assembling a group of family support experts in each country who used the protocol to undertake a national self-assessment exercise. The national groups were cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary in nature. The data generated were analysed, resulting in the production of:

Q A National Strengths and Recommendations report, which, in addition to its name, assessed the quality assurance of family support services in each State.

Q A National Policy Brief structured around:

- A. Conceptualisation and Characterisation of Family Support in the country.
- B. Key Messages from the National Strengths and Recommendations Report.
- C. Insights and Lessons on the Quality of Family Support.

With the support of policy and practice stakeholders, a team of academics then analysed the content of the National Policy Briefs, synthesized them into this set of policy guidelines following a qualitative data analysis process. More information on the project is available at <https://eurofamnet.eu/content/qa4eurofam>

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