

PORTUGAL NATIONAL POLICY BRIEF



The objective of this policy brief is to present the current situation and progress made in family support on behalf of the children's rights in Portugal towards achieving quality standards using the quality assurance protocol for family support services developed by the 19 countries participating in COST Innovators Grant QA[4]EuroFam (CIG18123). The purpose is to provide key messages on current strengths, as well as recommendations to target audiences, bringing relevant views and appraisals from the group of interdisciplinary experts, representatives of various sectors in the field at the national level.

National Working Group

The National Working Group (NWG) is comprised of 29 members, including researchers and coordinators of social services and institutions at the national, regional, and local levels in the social, educational, health, and community sectors. Based on the evaluation of the Quality Assurance Protocol indicators conducted by the NWG, the degree of consensus was calculated, which served as a framework for substantiating strengths and recommendations for the development of quality standards in family support services in Portugal.

1. Contextualization and characterization of family support in Portugal



Q Definition and understanding of family support: The definition of family support has known notable formulations in the last decades. The array of initiatives and resources made available for supporting the diversity of family contexts entails any intervention for parents and caregivers aimed at reducing risks and promoting protective factors of individual family members', as well as the family as a whole. A common goal is to achieve better outcomes for children and, in some instances families, by providing services that offer psychosocial and educational support programs.

Q Family support services in context: Amidst the wide variety of interventions designed to support families, parenting support implemented varies according to the conceptual background, the degree of structuring, the objectives and target audience, and the delivery modalities. From the indicated or treatment-oriented interventions targeting high-risk families, and mostly characterized by an individual approach, the provision has diversified to a range of family support practices across the social, education, health and justice sectors through an assortment of programs at community-based services, with an emphasis on intervention and on strengthening the capacities of families and developing communities.

Q Political perspective on family support: Portuguese policies for family support have traditionally involved a strong partnership with third-sector organizations (those that are neither public nor private). Local private non-profit organizations, in addition to publicly subsidized institutions, assume a significant portion of family support delivery. Nonetheless, the breakthrough towards a progressive universalism in the delivery of services has been achieved partly due to public policies shaping a better coordination of the services and resources in the community, not ruling out the responsibility of public regional and local/municipal agencies and private and volunteer sector organizations. The multiagency coordination and multidisciplinary integrative working paired with the expansion of services and increase in funding dedicated to family policies have been critical factors for the improvement of routine care practices, professional development and implementation of child protection measures in context.

2. Key messages from the national strengths and recommendations report



Families and Children

STRENGTHS

1. Every family and child are legally conceded support in community-based services tailored according to their needs and characteristics.
2. It is socially and legally recognized that family support provision for families and children not only acknowledges but also contributes to the promotion of children's rights. Furthermore, the services respect families' confidentiality, ensuring that families are aware and understand the reasons which may preclude information confidentiality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Despite the family support services being available across the country, the family and children's voices and active roles throughout the support received often lag behind. Families should actively seek to participate since the evaluation process and ensure children have a meaningful participation.
2. Families' and children's participation should be promoted not only for their empowerment and capacity-building but also as a critical contribution to the evaluation of the quality of the services they receive.



Professionals

STRENGTHS

1. Most professionals resort to contents and strategies detailed in intervention manuals when delivering family support as part of their routine care practice.
2. Most professionals have their intervention delivery supported by an intervention plan, which is appropriate and feasible according to the resources available in the services they work at.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The need to increase the effectiveness of the family support delivered calls for a culture of evidence-based practice, namely through a rigorous evaluation of the families' needs (moving beyond the socio-economic ones), the quality of the interventions' implementation, and the interventions' impact at the level of the child, parents and family.
2. The need for the development of professionals' skills and increased qualifications within the teams providing family support demands having available training, accreditation and supervision in evidence-based interventions. These should integrate a variety of interventions targeting multiple families' needs and characteristics, available in multiple sites across the country and in Portuguese.



Policymakers

STRENGTHS

1. The regulation of national legislation is crucial to expand the virtues and benefits of the prevention and protection systems across delivery sectors. Family support services provision is stated in the law with the purpose of identifying the families' needs, preventing and repairing situations of psychosocial risk in families, as well as promoting positive parenting and family wellbeing, considering the social reality that families face.
2. Family support provision incorporates the respect for and awareness of diverse cultures and ethnic backgrounds as established in national policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The need to provide an effective family support service calls for improved collaboration between services within and across sectors. The justice sector acts mostly in terms of decision-making, mandating families and children to attend interventions that are usually delivered in community-based services integrated in the health, education and social sectors.
2. Increase the opportunities for collaboration with researchers to promote and ensure the quality of family support; and incorporate best practices guidelines based on scientific evidence that are consensual and shared between professionals.



Academics

STRENGTHS

1. Over the last decades, researchers working in universities have developed, adapted, and validated family support evidence-based interventions. Researchers are available to strengthen collaborations with professionals working in community-based services, supporting them in the implementation and evaluation of the interventions.
2. Different research teams across the country have developed applied research through which they monitored and evaluated the implementation of interventions. The majority of these interventions were evaluated in the context of the research developed, and fewer, more recently, in the context of routine care practice implemented in community-based services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To increase the knowledge on the effects of the interventions when delivered in real-world settings, researchers should increase their work with community-based services. This requires a greater investment in preparing applications for competitive funding – ideally, with professionals working in different areas of family support – to have the resources to implement translational research projects with greater societal impact.
2. Research should move beyond the focus on the evaluation of the intervention outcomes and also address the implementation processes (facilitators and barriers), the costs of the interventions along with its benefits, utilities and effects, and also identify who and under which circumstances children and their families benefit the most from the interventions.

3. Insights and lessons learned regarding the quality of family support

1 Some variability in the quality assurance indicators for the different systems was identified across the country, meaning that some areas of the country have family support services delivered with more indicators of quality than others.

2 The social sector seems to be better rated in terms of the family support quality assurance of than the other sectors, which is not surprising as most of the family support is delivered in the services of the social sector.

3 The provision of family support often relies on the professionals' training and best knowledge. Nonetheless, an evidence-based practice requires evaluation protocols properly addressing every family's needs, an evaluation of the quality of the interventions' implementation, and also of the interventions' impact at the level of the child, parents and family.

1 The family support delivered is mostly done at an indicated level of prevention, addressing identified problems or the presence of risk factors, and less at a preventive universal level.

1 Across sectors, it is possible to identify that the quality assurance indicators for the different systems exist and are considered, however, its implementation is neither monitored or evaluated.

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