



A BETTER WORLD FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Investing in their environment

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What happens on the doorstep and around the house defines the future, welfare and health of young children. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) points out the government's responsibility to realise the rights of the child and to support parents in their parenting role, since child-rearing is a shared responsibility between the private and public spheres. Although parents are responsible for their children's upbringing, society too carries some responsibility. This mainly consists of creating the conditions which allow parents and other legal guardians to perform their responsibilities (Art 18 UNCRC, Belgian Constitution).

Various disciplines and angles emphasise the importance of the broad environment in which children grow up. Developmental psychologists, educationalists, economists and other researchers stress the need to invest in young children. Economists underline the social gains delivered through this investment. Once again, brain research has shown how important the environment is for children's development. Several institutions and authors underscore the significance of investing in young children to combat (child) poverty, and social exclusion in general (European Union, King Baudouin Foundation, Flemish Poverty Research Centre VLAS, Child Poverty Studio, etc.).

The Child and Family Agency plays a prominent role for families with young children and expectant parents in Flanders. Recent developments in the fields of preventative family support and childcare, and the substantial societal efforts these necessitate, require a substantiated legitimacy and vision. The impact which the policy of other actors has on families, (expectant) parents and young children cannot be ignored in this.

Therefore, a broad view is taken which goes beyond the importance/ activities of the Child and Family Agency. In this respect the text is an invitation for cooperation and coordination between the local and supra-local policies, as well as between the different policy areas. This will allow future choices to be made on the basis of broader social support.

The text specifies a number of main lines which can be used to shape the responsibility of society in creating conditions which allow parents and other legal guardians to realise their commitment. The text approaches the issue from the perspective of young children.

The importance of the early childhood

Investing in young children means investing in the early childhood, with focus on the context in which children live and the role they play in this themselves (General Comment 7, 2005).

This is translated in the building blocks of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which represent a holistic approach to children in society. Children cannot realise their rights until facilities are available to support these children in their development, and until they can participate in social life and are protected.

Early childhood is a critical period because during this period young children grow and change rapidly in terms of their maturing bodies and nervous systems, increasing mobility, communication skills and intellectual capacities, and interests and abilities. It is also the period in which young children form strong emotional and safe attachments with their parents or other caregivers, from whom they seek and require nurturance, care, guidance and protection, in ways that are respectful of their individuality and growing capacities (Geenen, 2010).

Therefore, in the interests of the child and because each child has the right to good and optimal development and well-being, it is important to focus on this environment during this early childhood (pregnancy, 0 to 6 years).

Young children grow and develop according to their individual nature, gender, living conditions, family organisation, care arrangements and education systems within their environment. They are also powerfully shaped by cultural beliefs about their needs and proper treatment, and about their active role in family and community.

From the pregnancy and during the early childhood the broad environment in which children live and learn, and the opportunities they get to establish qualitative relationships with other children, adults and caregivers, have an important impact on their overall development. The recognised negative effect of deprivation and social exclusion in which families live on children's general development is very visible in this context.

The development of each child is viewed as a product of the continuous dynamic interactions of the child with its environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Sameroff & MacKenzie, 2003). Positive interactions between a child and its immediate environment have a very powerful function: they act as an important motor for each child's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

The immediate environment does not just consist of people. A positive environment, even from the prenatal period onwards, allows children to fully develop in keeping with their abilities.

Children are social actors whose survival, well-being and development depend and are based on close relationships. Young children are active members of the family, neighbourhood and society, with their own interests, concerns and visions. In addition, young children actively participate in the realisation of their rights.

From the moment they are born, children seek responsive care and attention from the people around them, and communicate. The extent to which children do this differs individually, depending on their own abilities and their environment.

During these interactions children develop important relationships themselves, both with their peers and with younger and older children. Through these relationships they learn to negotiate and coordinate joint activities, solve conflicts, honour agreements and accept responsibility for others. Young children actively give meaning to the physical, social and cultural dimensions of the world they live in and learn in a progressive manner from their activities and interactions with others, both children and adults.

A positive environment for all young children

The quality of the home environment and the intimate, caring and mutually stimulating interaction is often regarded in the first place as an important predictor in the (young) child's development. Its importance goes without saying. However, in order to be able to conduct a good policy, it is essential to realise that (1) what is understood by a qualitative home environment, and (2) how such a qualitative home environment can be achieved, is to some extent defined by the broader environment. This is concisely reflected by the ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (1979).

In his ecological model, Bronfenbrenner maps the complexity of the environment. He talks about the micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystems. The "microsystem" refers to all the activities, roles, relationships, etc. that come about in direct interaction between a child and its environment. A child's immediate environment consists of different settings (including home, childcare, family, etc.).

These settings are interrelated, influence each other and therefore also - indirectly - have an impact on the child (which is the mesosystem). The “exosystem”, consisting of training and family workplace schedules, housing, environmental factors like pollution, traffic, etc. (and the related policies), seems to be further away from the child, but in essence indisputably has an (indirect) impact on the child, among other things through the effects which this exosystem has on the meso- and microsystems. Finally, the macrosystem encompasses values and customs of the (sub)culture, the country’s prosperity, etc., which also have an indirect impact on the child and its immediate environment.

Scientists and practitioners do not always see eye to eye about which system has the biggest influence on children’s growing-up process. However, what is crucial is the fact that there is great unanimity about the fact that these systems mutually influence each other. In order to allow children to develop to the fullest, a society must therefore support all families with young children in a manner that is based on these different systems and their mutual coherence. It turns out, for instance, that when families have access to books and adjusted playing material, and can offer their children the possibility to gain a diversity of experiences within the broad environment, both within and outside the house (like a library, playground, meeting opportunities with other children, cultural activities), this has a positive impact on the children’s development process (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2006, Unicef-Innocenti, 2008).

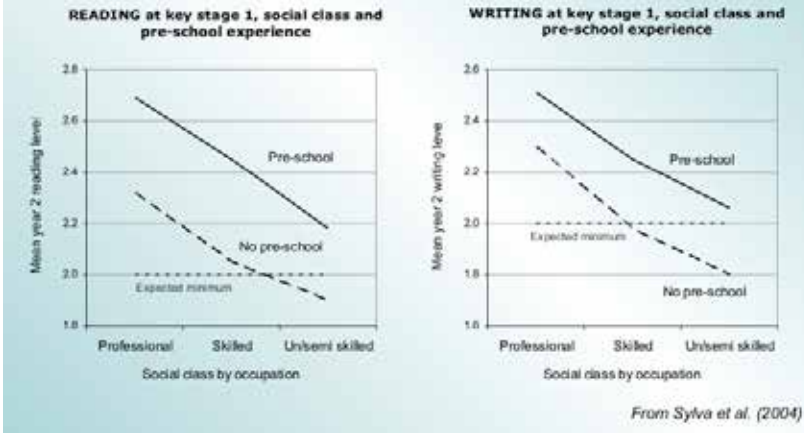
That is why the children’s environment should be attractive and offer sufficient possibilities for participating in it and helping to shape it. This includes sufficient and accessible facilities, opportunities for meeting other children and adults, as well as the public space itself. These are places where it is tried, on the basis of mutual respect, to realise societal resources in order to achieve greater equality in society, for both children and adults (De Visscher, 2012). It is about the role and significance as a societal

resource of childcare, nursery school, libraries, game libraries, playing areas, parks, museums, other places frequented by young children and the spatial environment in which they move around. Apart from that, the notion of child-friendliness offers a number of additional ‘handles’. These are places where children are allowed and able to come, where they can do things which they consider useful, and where they matter (Van Ceulenbroeck, 2012).

Early childhood education and care (ECEC¹) provide a large range of care and learning opportunities within the environment of young children as well as the related advantages, such as greater well-being in children and a reduced impact of disadvantage on the child’s development. The tables below show the effects of ECEC on the reading and writing skills of 7-year-olds. They reveal that the effects are the same for all children, irrespective of the socio-economic status (SES) in which they grow up. Children from a lower SES are enabled by these effects to remain just above the threshold of what is required to cope in the (British) school system (Sylva et al., 2004).

¹ UNESCO (2007) adopts a holistic approach to ‘early childhood education and care’ (ECEC): ECEC supports children’s survival, growth, development and learning - including health, nutrition and hygiene, and cognitive, social, physical and emotional development - from birth to entry into primary school in formal, informal and non-formal settings. Possible arrangements include parenting programmes, community-based childcare, centre-based provision and formal pre-primary education. Therefore, ECEC in Flanders pertains to childcare and nursery school, as well as to parenting support (Groenez & Vandebroek, 2013).

The effect of social class and pre-school attendance on literacy at age 7



The condition is that these services are of a high quality (depending on staff-child ratio, group size, staff qualification levels, parental and community involvement and turnover rate) and the offer is sufficient (OECD, 2012). Facilities for young children must promote the individual skills of each child. As stipulated by Article 29 of the UNCRC, education shall be directed to 'the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential'. From this point of view early childhood education and care should form a seamless and coordinated whole.

The quality of relationships has the biggest impact on children's well-being. Learning mainly takes place through interactions with other people (family, peers, child mentors, teachers and other adults). The quality of these relationships has a great and lasting influence on children's emotional, social and cognitive development. Children not only learn from their own relationships with others, but also by observing

their surroundings. To children, adults are role models and therefore have a responsibility to build relationships on the basis of respect, mutual trust and cooperation.

Therefore, low quality ECEC may even have lifelong adverse effects on the child's development (OECD, 2012). For instance, at high-quality childcare facilities children learn how to live together in diversity and pluralism and both children and parents are given every opportunity to experience autonomy, as well as mutual dependency and solidarity (Vandenbroeck, 2013). Low-quality facilities, on the other hand, rather have a negative impact, especially on the youngest children (babies and toddlers). One of the reasons for this is that, in case of a low quality, children are exposed to high concentrations of cortisol (a stress hormone) for a long period of time (Groeneveld et al., 2010).

Equal opportunities from the start

Although children have the right to develop to the fullest, not every child receives the same chances and opportunities to do so. As implied by the ecological model of Bronfenbrenner, amongst others (see earlier), research has shown on several occasions that children and their families do not have equal opportunities from the start. This is owing to social and economic differences and differences in general living conditions, such as housing conditions, the properties of the neighbourhood in which a family lives and the accessibility and availability of support services like ECEC (Engle et al., 2011; Morabito, Vandenbroeck, & Roose, 2013).

Research has also revealed that when the broader context is less favourable (such as deprived neighbourhood or low socio-economic status, as a result of which families do not have access to work, decent income or education), the (compensating) influence which the immediate environment may have grows more important (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Engle et al., 2011). It is, however, precisely these broader context factors that make it more difficult sometimes to create a favourable immediate environment (Walker et al., 2011). Studies show, for instance, that the effect of parental sensitivity and responsiveness in children within families with a low socio-economic status (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) has a greater impact on the children's development than the effect of parental sensitivity and responsiveness in children within families with a high SES. A low socio-economic status is connected to factors (like concerns about debts, more depression, poor housing, few playing areas in the neighbourhood) which make it more difficult for parents to deal with their children in a sensitive and responsive manner.

Parents in more advantaged contexts often have had more opportunities during their development to acquire skills and knowledge which they also would like their children to acquire. Furthermore, they often have more access to resources and services outside their family context, which may allow children to gain valuable experiences and which in addition give the environment more tools to positively influence a child's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Therefore, the extent to which children's daily and immediate environment can be regarded as positive and stimulating and the degree to which resources are available for children's development reveals itself as a social

inequality. This inequality is interrelated with the socio-economic status of the families in which these children grow up: the extent of available resources increases as the socio-economic position of the family improves.

Proportional universalism

However, social inequalities are not limited to the contrast between the poorest and the others, although this dichotomy approach is often used. Social inequalities are rather caused by a socially layered division of the population, which is also referred to as the social gradient. This gradient is the result of an unequal distribution of material and immaterial opportunities and power within society (Van Oyen et al., 2011). As this gradient cuts across all population groups, action needs to be directed at the whole population and not just at the most disadvantaged groups (Stegeman et al., 2012). This means that basic facilities or basic services should realise to things at the same time. It is about being equally accessible to everyone up to a certain level, preferably as efficiently and easily as possible, and about concentrating more on those who start with fewer opportunities or live in less favourable circumstances (Mortier, 2012).

A proportional universal basic service provision is one (of the) answer(s) to remedy the existence of social inequalities or to help create equal opportunities. This basic service provision will have a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the level of disadvantage or social inequalities (Marmot Review, 2010). Although the notion of proportional universalism is relatively new, inspiring practices are already in place today. Investing in the immediate and everyday environment of young children could also take shape on the basis of this principle.

Proportional universalism

Examples of proportional universalism can be found in the development of communication media, the design of a local health policy, educational practices, etc.

One of the communication media provided by the Child and Family Agency is Kind in Beeld. Kind in Beeld uses a minimum of language to make messages accessible for those conversations in which language is a barrier. This publication supports the conversation between the parent and the service provider. Research confirms the value of the material and the usefulness of continuing to focus on the development of the content and form (Van Praet, 2013).

The Ghent Health Council opts for a health policy that is based on proportional universalism: a universal approach with community-oriented interventions which, if necessary, pays additional attention to specific groups.

On the basis of data it is established that a number of risk factors are more prevalent in some neighbourhoods (more people on subsistence-level income, lower incomes, more unemployment, etc.) than in others. The social disadvantage in the neighbourhoods of the 19th century belt is remarkably higher than the average in Ghent. As a result, the chances of a long and healthy life are much lower in these neighbourhoods. An integrated community-oriented approach to health deprivation requires an intersectoral approach, more knowledge of health and health promotion in these neighbourhoods and the involvement of the care facilities (general practitioners, pharmacists, etc.) that are available in the neighbourhood.

To allow pupils with a disability or with learning and educational difficulties to attend lessons at a mainstream school, they can apply for GON-assistance. GON stands for 'geïntegreerd onderwijs' or, in English, integrated education. The GON-assistance is provided by a staff member of a special education school. This assistance can be offered in several ways, for instance by helping the child itself or giving assistance to the teacher(s), by making appropriate materials available, etc.

Supported parents

The well-being of parents results in greater well-being in their children and consequently also has an impact on the health of the family members (Belsky, 1984; McKeown, 2013). What parents regard as support in the development of their parenting role may vary greatly and be both material and immaterial in nature (Roets, 2013).

An important basic principle is the participation or involvement of parents in the development of this support. Its importance can be explained from different points of view. For instance, this participation is important as a fundamental right. However, it can also be given meaning in view of the promotion of quality, social cohesion, increased social capital (relationships and networks), social learning, empowerment and activation (Ouders als onderzoekers, 2011).

A whole range of material and immaterial resources

Parents continue to be the main actor and carry the main responsibility as far as their children are concerned. In addition, they act as a bridge and buffer between the child and the wider influences. However, it is these wider influences which also determine to what extent opportunities are available to take up responsibility and have an intimate, caring and loving interaction with their children (McKeown, 2013). Today, parents can call in support to help shape their parenting role. Some of the material and immaterial resources that (may) support parents in their parenting role and may foster a positive and supportive environment are attention to the health, nutrition and mental health of expectant mothers, a child-friendly and inviting social environment, opportunities to meet other parents, types of ECEC, early intervention, support

for parents who have a child with special needs, expert professionals, financial support and parenting support.

The significance of these resources is most certainly not to be underestimated. This is underscored by recent insights into the way in which scarcity defines behaviour. A lack of resources and support for parents, such as time and money, will be detrimental to the attention they devote to their children and their health.

In this context focus must also be placed on the impact of the broader and unequal living conditions and opportunities of parents on their parenting role and their children: their income, employment, housing, training and mobility. Not only structural measures are required to achieve a more equal distribution of these opportunities. In the pursuit of an integrated approach connections must undoubtedly also be made between these areas and the (local) actors that are active here, and the principle of proportional universalism should be applied here as well.

An extensive social network

Families differ strongly in what they regard as parenting support, except for the fact that they are unanimous about the important supporting role of an extensive social network (Buysse, 2008). Both close relationships with family or friends and meetings with other parents where they can share experiences are considered to be support.

Social support provides a protective role with respect to parenting and the functioning of the family. It is a buffer against the harmful risks of factors like stress, depression, etc. (Ozbay et al, 2007; Nederlands Jeugd Instituut, NICHD, 2006; Huyghen & de Meere, 2008).

The importance of social support is linked to the prevention of problems, often in at-risk groups (see overview with Geens &

Vandenbroeck, 2012). However, the added value of social support not only lies in the prevention of problems: an extensive social network is experienced by all parents and children as an important resource, emotionally and practically. Both demonstrate the significance of the focus on the extensive network to the child's well-being.

Therefore, social isolation poses a threat to the development of an extensive social and support network. Social isolation may result in an impoverishment of informal contacts and networks: a lack of social contacts with neighbours, friends and family. Single parents have remarkably fewer social contacts, as well as fewer qualitative contacts (VRIND, 2013).

Social isolation is also about a lack of opportunities for social participation, which normally offers chances of social contacts and meetings. Low-income groups clearly participate less in culture, practise less sport, take less active part in social life and make less use of the Internet.

Employment as well can be seen as an indicator of social participation and as a possible source of social contacts. The lack of employment is therefore a potential indicator of an increased risk of social isolation (Steensens et al., 2009).

The individualisation process during which social relationships are regarded as a free choice no doubt reinforces social isolation (Komter, 2000). However, the risk of social isolation also goes hand in hand with different factors, such as age, level of education, income, employment and type of family. In this way, social isolation acquires the character of a social inequality (Stegeman, 2012): the lower the social status, the higher the risk of social isolation. McKeown et al. (2008) points out, for instance, that parenting is difficult for single parents and parents with a weaker support network. Vandenbroeck and his colleagues (2010) also conclude that the use of informal and

Inspiring practice

A playing and meeting place for families with young children is neither directed at problems nor at target groups: all young children who are accompanied by a parent or other legal guardian are welcome. Parents are given the time and opportunity to take a break and to establish contacts with other parents. Babies and toddlers can go explore by themselves, in complete safety and in the presence of the person they trust. At the same time, they meet other children and learn to play together, which will prepare them for the nursery, kindergarten or nursery school. Here, parents can also enter into contact with each other.

Making contact is easy, as they all have something in common to talk about, i.e. the young children they are taking care of.

One of the mothers testifies:

I have been in Belgium for three years now. Without my family it was very hard here for me in the beginning. I did not go out often and had little contact with others. My world changed completely when I got to know the meeting place. Together with the staff, other children, mothers and fathers, we are one big family.

One of the staff testifies:

Info sessions called 'School in Zicht' are organised at De Sloep. The aim of these sessions is to allow several parents who have already chosen a (different) school to talk about their experiences. The mother I talked to said that she did not yet have a large social network in the neighbourhood (she has an extensive social network, but because she had only lived in the neighbourhood for two years, her network of local parents with young children was not that big yet), but that she considered the experiences of parents very important in her choice of a school for her children. Therefore, the sessions helped her to choose a school for her daughter, because they give parents, who would otherwise not meet each other, a platform to exchange ideas about making a school choice. And ever since her daughter goes to school here, her (local) social network has been extended, thanks to the contacts at the school gates and the meeting opportunities that are frequently organised by the school in the mornings (and which she could attend because she is still on maternity leave for her youngest child).

formal support is unequally divided. Other research stresses the significance of social support and a qualitative home environment as a buffer against stress, a co-decisive factor in the (mental) health of the parents and the parenting climate.

Therefore, giving parents opportunities for meeting other parents and exchanging views with them and helping them to establish informal networks poses an important challenge, which is currently already embedded in the Flemish Parliament Act on the organisation of preventative family support. This should result in the parents' social environment being organised in such a way that the provided services are more accessible, more available and of a higher quality and that social cohesion is promoted and the social resources are increased for all families, in whatever diversity they present themselves.

Social mixture

A lot of different views exist on the importance of the social mixture within the networks of parents. When reasoning that parents learn from their confrontation with other parents who have different ideas and customs, it can be stated that the greater the social diversity, the more easily this free confrontation can take place. For this reason, it is important to achieve the greatest possible social mixture.

That is why workable elements and inspiring practices must continue to be looked for to promote this. A great deal of scientific research has shown that the social mixture is about more than just bringing together

people from different social classes or ethnic groups. In the pursuit of a social mixture, issues such as locations, the method of guidance and the importance of quality will arise. There are no ready-made answers, but the dialogue with and the involvement of the local communities which these services are aimed at will no doubt be a prerequisite for success.

This supports the idea that the social mixture is not created just like that, but that efforts are to be made to achieve it. When it is achieved and bridges are thus formed across socio-economic and ethnic-cultural boundaries (bridging), these relationships as well will have a positive effect and be an investment in social capital. Putman (2007) stipulates that both bonding (more intense ties between families who are alike in some way) and bridging (less intense ties between families who are unlike each other in some way) have their added value, because both forms of social capital are important and may support parents in the upbringing of their children (Geens, 2010).

A number of benchmark criteria for initiatives for young children

Make sure that you do not work out of the context for each initiative, but that you take the different life spheres of young children into account from the very start onwards.

Invest in a very local embedding, where the different life spheres of young children are attuned to one another.

Allow young children to actually be young children and invest, above all, in an inviting, participatory environment for young children.

Use an equal offer for each child, whenever possible, but invest more, if necessary.

Check whether you contribute to a proportional universal basic service provision.

Conclusions

Society is responsible for creating the conditions which allow young children to grow up and develop to the fullest and which enable parents and other legal guardians to realise the commitment they have made towards young children.

First of all one must keep in mind at all times that young children are not only in contact with and influenced by their parents, but also by the social context in which they live and grow up. The impact of this context on their chances and opportunities, both directly and indirectly, shows the need to always critically examine, from a social point of view, what may be the consequences of social choices for young children and families. This requires a comprehensive view on and approach to what young children and their families need. Therefore, not only the participation by children and families is required, but also far-reaching cooperation and coordination between the different policy areas, both locally and supralocally, in order to create the ideal environment for young children and the families they grow up in.

Investing in the environment of young children, (expectant) parents and families indeed implies that this environment offers sufficient opportunities and resources for each and every one of them. For young children this environment should at least be inviting, participatory, qualitative, child-friendly, and have a focus on relationships. For parents, this environment is characterised by a whole range of material and immaterial resources in several areas of life and by opportunities for shaping their own social support network.

Today, parents and children already have many opportunities and resources at their disposal. It goes without saying that further investments continue to be necessary in order to ensure that the offer is sufficient and of a high quality. However, due to social inequalities young children and their families do not have equal access to the necessary opportunities and resources. This means that basic facilities or basic services should realise two things at the same time. It is about being equally accessible to everyone up to a certain point, preferably as efficiently and easily as possible, and about concentrating more on those who start with fewer opportunities or live in less favourable circumstances.

A proportional universal basic service provision and basic facilities constitute an important societal response to remedy social inequalities or to help create equal opportunities. In this case, the basic service provision will have a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the level of disadvantage or social inequalities.

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