



Eurochild Policy Position on Evidence and Evaluation Methodologies for Family and Parenting Support Policies and Practice¹

Eurochild, January 2015

Eurochild is a network of over 170 organisations and individuals working in and across Europe to promote the rights and well-being of children and young people. Eurochild is one of the largest advocacy organisations on children's issues at EU level whose work is underpinned by the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

We envisage a Europe where every child grows up happy, healthy and confident, and respected as individuals in their own right. We work:

- to promote wide recognition of children as individual rights holders;
- to convince policy and decision makers to put the best interest of the child in every decision affecting them;
- to encourage all those working with and for children and their families to take a child-centred approach;
- to give children and young people in Europe a voice by promoting participatory methods in child and family services, raising children's awareness of their rights and supporting child and youth led organisations.

We focus particularly on those children at risk of poverty, social exclusion and marginalisation. Our members are working directly with children and families or are campaigning on their behalf. Eurochild's thematic working groups provide a forum for members to exchange knowledge and practice in specific areas, including early years' education and care, children in alternative care, and family and parenting support.

Eurochild believes that all work with children and families should always be underpinned by the best available evidence.

This policy position originates from the work of Eurochild thematic working group on family and parenting support. Building on exchange of knowledge and mutual learning, members wanted to explore in more detail the issue of evidence-base and concerns regarding commissioning and evaluation of services. Whilst the topic has grown out of Eurochild's work in the field of family and parenting support, it is relevant for all child and family services including early years' education and care and child protection.

In this policy position Eurochild advocates for a pluralist approach to evidence, for a shift from evidence-based practice to practice-based evidence, from *what* works to *how* it works and *why*, *for whom*, and in *what contexts*.

The paper starts by recalling the principles that according to Eurochild should underpin all policies and services aimed at family and parenting support. It briefly frames our understanding of the political direction of the EU, explains our concerns around the rhetoric of evidence-base and outlines our proposals for a new perspective in evaluation evidence.

¹ UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre offered to support Eurochild in its thinking and reflection on these issues. This policy position - which was drafted by Agata D'Addato, Eurochild Senior Policy Coordinator – Policy, Practice and Research - builds on their work and on a paper that they presented on 20 May 2014, at the Eurochild thematic working group meeting: Fives A., Canavan J. and Dolan P., Evaluation Study Design – A Pluralist Approach to Evidence. UNESCO Child and Family research Centre, National University of Ireland, Galway, 2014.

PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING POLICIES AND SERVICES FOR FAMILY AND PARENTING SUPPORT²

According to Eurochild, all policies and services aimed at family and parenting support must be underpinned by the following principles:

1) Frame family policies within a children's rights approach as defined by the UNCRC

Children and young people are recognised as citizens in their own right, as well as being part of a family, who, as they develop, have increasing control over their lives and influence over the policies and decisions that affect them. A child-rights approach is embodied in the notion of 'positive parenting' as defined by the Council of Europe.

2) Create the right conditions for positive parenting to take place and avoid risk to children's well-being becoming a reality

This includes resourcing parenting – in terms of skills, information, material, psychological and social support – and removing the barriers which exist, for example measures to promote a better reconciliation of family and working life.

3) Invest in early support and in services for families that prevent harm to children's well-being

To support children's growth and development and to guarantee equality of opportunities, it is crucial that families and parents are given the necessary help *before* problems escalate and children's well-being and mental health is at risk. There is a need to put preventive measures in place to strengthen parental responsibility and to target families at risk. Investment in services to support parents, help them develop enhanced coping strategies and realise the importance and value of good parenting must be reinforced.

4) Support parents' empowerment, involvement and participation

Policies and practices designed to support parents in their parenting roles should work in partnership with them to build on existing strengths in a manner that empowers parents, allowing them to make confident informed choices based on the best interests of the child. There is also a need to consult with parents in the decision-making about changes to policies and practices, which influence service provision. Authorities must ensure that the voice of parents is included and reflected in the development of policies and practices.

5) Recognise and respect diversity in relation to family patterns, family composition and size, cultural and gender differences, in keeping with the best interest of the child.

6) Ensure adequate, secure and universal family benefits

Universal child benefits are an important expression of intergenerational solidarity. Universal access is less bureaucratic and has more effective take-up. It provides a platform of equity supports from which a package of targeted interventions and benefits can be tailored to those families and children most in need. Coverage across Europe is patchy and rarely provides an income sufficient to lift families out of poverty. Benefits should be received automatically, cover children's basic needs and be adjusted according to the child's age and the number of children in a family.

7) Respect children's right to be heard and ensure that the voice, views and experiences of children are taken into account in the development of services and policies that affect them.

8) Enable effectiveness and efficiency of outcomes in parenting and family services

To respect these values and achieve the underlying objectives, stakeholders at all levels need to work together to put in place the necessary strategies, policy measures, quality standards and monitoring, and to advocate, communicate and promote policy that is coherent and comprehensive.

² See Eurochild policy position on family policies, November 2010. Available at: http://nmd.bg/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Eurochild-policy-position-on-family-policies-FINALadopted_on_3_November_01.pdf.

SETTING THE CONTEXT

Support to families and parents – particularly but not only to those struggling and at the margins of society – is not a luxury for times of plenty. Investment in all families, complemented by tailored support for the most vulnerable families at risk of exclusion, is key to building resilient communities and cohesive societies. Interventions such as parent support, learning and development, strengthening family and community networks and peer support can help construct parents' self-esteem and competences, improve parents' long-term employability, and enhance children's well-being, development and quality of life. In order to achieve that we need to think critically, we need to examine what works, how it works, how we can keep on doing more of it, replicate our successes and ensure policy makers get best value for money.

We can build on the clear policy guidance and direction provided by the EU. However, with the change of leadership in the EU institutions, there is a concern that we slip back into a framework focused solely on growth and employment. The **Social Investment Package** (SIP) adopted by the European Commission in 2013, acknowledges the importance of investing throughout the life course. It recognises the capacity and contribution of individuals regardless of whether they are active on the labour market or not. It represented an important paradigm shift which must not be lost in the current reorientation of the EU's priorities.

The “**Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage**” **Recommendation**, which was adopted as part of the SIP, promotes a comprehensive strategy based on three interconnected pillars: access to adequate resources for children and their families, access to affordable, quality services and children's participation. It recognises children as individual rights holders. It takes onboard an integrated approach – labour market integration to be balanced with care responsibilities; focus on early childhood education and care (ECEC) combined with “supporting parents as main educators of their children”; developing parenting skills in a non-stigmatising way; strengthening links between schools and parents. Despite the austerity measures in place in many countries, the Recommendation urges EU member states to step up their investment in children and to spend more on preventative services. This is helping us leverage policy reform and investment (particularly through the Structural Funds) at member state level.

The Investing in Children Recommendation complements the 2006 **Council of Europe Recommendation on policy to support positive parenting**. This Recommendation recognises the importance of parental responsibilities and the need to provide parents with sufficient support in bringing up their children. Council of Europe members states are recommended to take all appropriate legislative, administrative and financial measures to create the best possible conditions for positive parenting. Other recommendations set legal standards on coherent and integrated family policies, family mediation, child day care, and children's participation in family and social life.

There exists a broad political consensus on the importance of investing in children and their families in the EU. However, given the **increased emphasis at EU level towards social innovation and social policy experimentation**, a particular concern we have is the **narrow interpretation of what is considered to be 'evidence-based practice'**. Alongside the framework of the Investing in Children Recommendation, the European Commission set up an online Platform for Investing in Children (**EPIC**), which is a kind-of 'knowledge bank' for the collection and evaluation of good practices. This is helpful but the categorisation of practice currently used by EPIC – emergent, promising and best – is potentially misleading as only those examples that have been subject to randomised controlled trials (RCTs) are considered 'best practice'. We believe that best practice and evidence-based practice draws on a broader range of research and evaluation methodologies than just RCTs.

We would like to encourage a broader understanding of how evidence is understood and supported in social policy experimentation, social innovation and social entrepreneurship initiatives.

TOWARDS A NEW PERSPECTIVE IN EVALUATION EVIDENCE

At a time when resources are limited, Eurochild acknowledges that all services and interventions need to demonstrate their effectiveness in addressing social challenges. It is important that policies and practice that tackle poverty and social exclusion and promote children's well-being build on what works and on what has proven effectiveness, and that investment decisions and public spending choices are 'evidence-based'. In the strive for effectiveness, however, the tendency to adopt programmed or 'manualised' interventions proven in specific contexts has the potential to **devalue the important role of practice wisdom and expertise in meeting the needs of families**. We are

convinced of the need for more and better monitoring and evaluation, but also believe that encouraging *reflective practice*³ in practitioners will contribute significantly to our understanding of what works.

There is a significant controversy over **what counts as evidence in the evaluation of social interventions**. We believe there is a need to broaden our understanding of what is meant by 'evidence-based' practice and explore some of the risks and consequences that arise from too narrow a definition of what counts. **Evidence of effectiveness in early intervention and prevention in family support can come from a range of sources.**

Eurochild has specific concerns regarding the primary endorsement and **over reliance on a hierarchical approach to understanding evidence in evaluation**, which places experimental studies at its apex and qualitative and survey based approaches at the bottom. We **advocate for greater pluralism in evaluation evidence by thinking more broadly about evidence** in relation to specific circumstances; the wider contexts of specific interventions; and to the specific and more nuanced types of questions to which policy makers require answers.

An alternative approach to sort evidence types into a hierarchical classification is to categorize evidence in an evaluation matrix or typology (see annex). A matrix draws attention to the varied study designs appropriate to answering them. It includes research questions posed in explanatory, implementation, and outcomes studies, and also a variety of experimental and non-experimental study designs. As the matrix shows, many of the same questions asked about the effectiveness of an intervention can be addressed by a range of study designs. Also, the range of possible research questions is broader than those concerned with effectiveness and outcomes. Some implementation questions and explanatory questions are better answered through documentary analysis, qualitative studies, and survey-based approaches for example.

The best method is not better than any other per se but is better for the specific purpose. A balanced approach which integrates both qualitative and quantitative approaches is needed to ensure that decision making is well-informed by the best available evidence as is appropriate and possible given the programme/service/approach as well as staff and financial resources available.

In a policy and evaluation discourse dominated by an agenda focusing on outcomes and the question of 'what works', decisions about interventions replication, adaptation or termination require that more explicit and robust evaluation attention is paid to the *why* or *why not* questions, *for whom* and in *what contexts*. **Experimental evidence on 'what works' should be complemented by the practice-based evidence paradigm**, which examines interventions as they are in routine practice. It is crucial to inform and improve practice through the knowledge that has emerged and evolved primarily on the basis of practical and community experience, including professional wisdom, and through the engagement of clients.

Evidence-based programmes must be adapted when they are implemented because client characteristics, needs and contexts will not be the same everywhere and over time. **We need to identify the components of interventions that have positive benefit for children and their families.**

EUROCHILD RECOMMENDATIONS

1) PROMOTE AN EVALUATION CULTURE

We are convinced of the need for more and better monitoring and evaluation for improving *reflective practice*, for using public resources more effectively and more efficiently and for demonstrating impact of interventions.

Eurochild, in raising objections to the hierarchical approach to evaluation does not reject the overall need for 'evidence-based' practice, but **advocates for the implementation of a range of evaluation methodologies that are**

³ Reflective practice is based on a mixture of description and questioning informed by action leading to change – for the individual and in social contexts (Dolan P., Canavan, J. and Pinkerton J., Family Support as Reflective Practice, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2006).

deemed appropriate to the specific circumstances. This is a much broader way of viewing evaluation, which encourages a more in depth reflection around the rhetoric of evidence-base.

The 'best' method – often the most expensive as in the case of fully RCTs – is not always better than other evaluative methods. Whatever the methodology is, we need to ensure that evaluation of impact has as its primary focus the impact on the well-being of children and their families.

2) CONSIDER THE ROLE OF PRACTICE-BASED EVIDENCE

'Evidence-based practice' and 'practice-based evidence', which examines interventions in the routine practice, are complementary concepts and ought to be given equal consideration. A shift from *what works* to *why it work, for whom and in what contexts* is the essence of the practice-based evidence paradigm vs the evidence-based practice paradigm.

We are concerned that the promotion of experimental studies is being carried out at the expense of any 'subjective' or 'practice' evidence and of any engagement with the clients. **We therefore recommend the use of the best available research and practice knowledge to guide programmes design and implementation.** This informed practice allows for innovation while incorporating the lessons learned from the existing research literature and ideally, should be responsive to families' cultural backgrounds, community values, and individual preferences.

3) TAKE A PLURALIST APPROACH TO EVIDENCE

If we consider that we have a plurality between design and methodological choices, we might understand that we might use different methodological tools depending on specific circumstances and on the question we are asking.

When the wider social, political, economic, cultural contexts are considered, the need for plurality becomes evident. How children's basic needs are met; the impact of existing policy instruments; the degree to which analysis of evidence is embedded in the various policy making processes; and the funding environment will all have direct implications on the most appropriate methodological choice.

An evaluation evidence matrix (or typology) represents a pluralist approach to evidence and has the value of providing an orientation to any decision about the appropriate study design / evidence types for specific research questions (see annex).

Eurochild fully endorses the use of rigorous methodologies that are valid, robust, *fit for purpose*, and of value to practitioners. In doing so, **we recommend the use of the suggested evaluation typology as opposed to a hierarchical approach.** The proposed typology of evaluation for use in social sciences provides an easy to use framework whereby different types of evidence are given equal status and weighting, and more importantly, is dependent on the questions being asked.



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For more information see: http://bit.ly/progress_programme

Annex - An Evaluation Evidence Matrix: A pluralist guide to appropriate study designs/evidence types.

Research questions	Study Design (Evidence Type)	Meta-analyses of RCTs	RCTs	Repeated case studies (n=1)	QESs	Case-control studies	Cohort studies	Theory of change studies	Norm referenced studies	Benchmark studies	Documentary studies	Qualitative studies	Surveys	Expert knowledge studies	Reflective practice
Exploratory Studies															
Are needs being met by existing services?						X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Are practitioners satisfied with services?												X	X		X
Are users satisfied with services?												X	X		
Is the current service cost-effective?										X	X			X	
What alternative would be appropriate?	X													X	X
Does the workforce have necessary skills to implement alternative service?											X	X	X	X	X
Are financial & other resources available to implement alternative service?											X	X	X	X	X
Will users take up alternative service?											X	X	X	X	X
How does proposed alternative fit with policy / service priorities?											X	X	X	X	X
Implementation and Outcomes Studies															
Does X work more than Y?	X	X	X	X											
Does X do more good than harm?	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X					
Does a proven programme work here?				X	X		X	X	X	X					
How does X work?			X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X		X
Is it meeting its target group?	X	X	X	X				X	X	X					
Are users satisfied & will they take up?												X	X		
Are practitioners satisfied?												X	X		X
Was it implemented with fidelity?											X	X	X		X
Is it cost-effective?											X			X	
Is it socially valuable?	X													X	X

Note: RCT = Randomized Controlled Trial; QES = Quasi Experimental Study.

Source: Fives A., Canavan J. and Dolan P., Evaluation Study Design – A Pluralist Approach to Evidence. UNESCO Child and Family research Centre, National University of Ireland, Galway, 2014.