



Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

LESSONS LEARNED FROM IMPROVING FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

This section summarises country experiences as “lessons learned”. It aims to be a quick read about challenges and risks to consider when implementing policy initiatives.

Lesson 1: Overcome administrative boundaries and recognise that family and community engagement concerns both social policy and education policy

The **Flemish** and **French Communities of Belgium**, **British Columbia (Canada)**, **Japan**, **Korea**, **Mexico**, the **Netherlands**, **Norway** and **Slovenia** recognise that fostering good relationships and facilitating open communication with other services (e.g. social or health services) is important. The main reason for this is that it increases early detection of learning arrears; but it also improves awareness of parents whose children are not participating in ECEC about possibilities for participation. Japan learnt that by working with relevant social and development agencies, child-rearing can be carried out by society as a whole; and nursery centres learnt from other services how to improve the learning environment of young children. Korea learnt through its *Dream Start* project for disadvantaged children and families that multi-sectoral collaboration is essential to providing comprehensive services, including health, nutrition, care and education. They found that sectors can contract people from other sectors to help integrate contents (e.g., the education sector can contract a person from the medical sector to incorporate health-related information into family support programmes and vice versa).

New Zealand learnt that parental engagement can be integrated not only into ECEC policies but also into social policies for families, which was found to support development of a stable home environment and children’s early development at the same time. Services in New Zealand either add parental development activities into a pre-existing early childhood education centre or blend early childhood education into a suite of services delivered by a social service agency. Either way, parents are largely involved in the activities and implementation of the programme. These initiatives are most often implemented in areas with a large number of disadvantaged families.

The Early Head Start programme in the **United States** integrates early education policies and social policies into their approach. It is clear that the integration of different policies and co-operation with social services better meets the needs of families, and families are more engaged and interested in the education of their children. Early Head Start helps families access necessary services either directly or through referrals to community resources. The services help families with emergency or crisis assistance such as food, housing, clothing and transportation; nutrition education; mental health education; family literacy services; and prenatal and postpartum care and health education for pregnant women in Early Head Start programmes.

Lesson 2: Clarify the purpose of family and community engagement, and make sure that governments, ECEC managers and staff know how to communicate with and engage families and communities

Australia, the **Flemish** and **French Communities of Belgium**, **Finland**, **Mexico**, the **Netherlands**, **Norway**, **Japan**, **Slovenia**, **Sweden** and **Turkey** find that systems of informing parents and community members of the possibilities for engagement should be in place at both the centre and policy levels. Countries have learnt that continuous, honest and open two-way communication with educators assists families to feel connected with their children's experience in education and care and helps them develop trust and confidence in the service. Regarding this, it was found useful to make information on different participation possibilities publicly available, for example, through the internet. Countries also pointed out that explaining the aims and goals of parental and community involvement to the public contributes to achieving widespread awareness of the goals of each type of involvement.

British Columbia (Canada), the **Netherlands**, **Norway**, **Portugal**, **Slovak Republic**, **Sweden** and **Turkey** agree that stimulation and encouragement to implement involvement activities from management level to practitioner level is crucial. When support is lacking at the management level, countries found that there is less family and community involvement in centres.

In **Japan**, kindergarten teachers and child care workers proactively talk to parents on a daily basis when they are picking up their children from the centre. This has been found to stimulate parental interest in their child's development as well as in the work of the centre. **Finland** and **Slovenia** stated that there needs to be a good understanding of parent-practitioner relationships where all stakeholders are considered equally important for a child's development. The objective of these relationships should be early child welfare, since this is the ultimate goal of the relationships. **Norway** also indicated that these engagement relationships should suit a multi-cultural society since families often have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Lesson 3: Diversify communication channels and methods according to different family backgrounds and needs (e.g. language, time schedule and message delivery means)

Norway learnt that having parents with different backgrounds, including minority or low-educated parents, participate in Norway's parental advisory board for kindergartens promotes co-operation between kindergartens and the children's homes. The co-operation contributes to levelling social inequalities. To get parents engaged, linguistic and cultural diversity needs to be taken into account. The **Netherlands** points to the importance of providing clear and easy-to-read written guidance in multiple languages about the possibilities for involvement. This stimulates interest in involvement activities from lower socio-economic families as well as ethnic minority families. **Korea** strives to develop multiple ways to communicate with multicultural families, as children aged zero to five years made up almost 60% of under-18-year-olds in multicultural families in 2010. Various information materials are developed based on the findings from interviews and a translated questionnaire survey for multicultural families regarding their knowledge level of the daily routines and programmes of ECEC institutions, the information needed most in child-rearing, etc. Additionally, a parent guidebook has been translated into eight languages; helpers have been dispatched to support child-rearing at home; translation services and a counselling hotline were made available; etc.

Australia indicated that the Home Interaction Programme for Parents and Youngsters was very useful in engaging minority and socially disadvantaged families through home visits. Parents reported that the programme had a positive effect on their relationship with their child and their

child's achievements at school, and it heightened their interest in early intervention programmes. Both the child and parent were found to have improved their sense of identity and self esteem. For some parents, their participation in the programme also opened opportunities to undertake further education and/or employment. The country learnt that continuous, open, two-way communication makes parents feel connected with the centre or programme and helps parents in developing trust and confidence in the service and educators.

Ireland finds that the proactive provision of information to parents and community members is highly important and stimulates engagement. Although internet is widely used in Ireland, eligible households received physical letters regarding the introduction of universal preschool provision. The distribution of these letters was seen to increase the number of families that registered their children for ECEC.

Korea learnt that meeting parental needs regarding opening hours of ECEC facilities greatly contributes to parental satisfaction levels of service provision. Since the availability of late-night care services in kindergartens, parental satisfaction level on full-day kindergartens increased from 58% in 2009 to 97% in 2010, while the effects of longer care services on child development are unclear. It is expected that higher parental satisfaction will lead to boosting female employment.

Flanders (Belgium), British Columbia (Canada), Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Sweden find it effective to offer opportunities for working parents to get involved outside of normal working hours (*i.e.* not only during daytime when most people work). This increases parental involvement, especially in meetings about children's development.

Lesson 4: Make a case for long-term outcomes, and show that early engagement begets later engagement in children's learning

In **British Columbia (Canada)**, with respect to the StrongStart BC early learning programmes, evaluations have shown that parents highly value their involvement and see a significant effect on their children and an increase in their own sense of ability to support their children's development and learning. British Columbia learnt that parents who are engaged in the ECEC programme are more likely to remain engaged in their children's learning in later stages of schooling, which positively influences their success in school.