Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

STRATEGIES TO TACKLE CHALLENGES IN ENGAGING FAMILIES IN ECEC

Challenge 4: Increasing inequity

Growing inequity in economic, social and cultural backgrounds of children in ECEC centres is becoming a challenge in many OECD countries. It is often reported that deprived families, despite the fact that their children need high-quality ECEC the most, often have lower interest, lack of knowledge and lack of time to be engaged in ECEC.

Increasing diversity can also be a challenge for getting parents engaged in ECEC services. Often reported barriers include different cultural needs, views or languages.

Uneven parental engagement with different socio-economic backgrounds can result in greater inequity. It is therefore particularly important that real efforts are made to reach out to the most deprived families. Collaboration with parents is especially important in low income, minority families where differences in socio-economic background and cultural values about child rearing and education are likely to affect the home learning environment.

Prioritising participation of children with an immigrant or low-educational background

- **Flanders (Belgium)** gives priority access to child care to children of single parents and/or parents with a low income (below a certain threshold) and who are unable to care for their children during the day due to their work or study or for whom child care is an important factor facilitating their socio-economic integration and participation. Flanders also gives priority access to children for whom it is believed to be important that they receive out-of-home guidance and care, e.g., children with a risk of learning arrears. This regulation enables parents to learn the Flemish language, to study or work or look for a job, which increases their socio-economic development.

- **Slovenia** gives preference to children from economically disadvantaged families when admitting children to a preschool institution. To be eligible for this, parents and welfare centres have to provide proof of low income.

Providing free ECEC services to families in need

- **Norway** offers free part-time kindergarten to children in areas with a high proportion of migrant families. The measure is universal within these areas to avoid stigma. Participation in kindergarten stimulates the child’s social and language development and helps prevent children-at-risk from falling behind their peers. Kindergartens also hope that this stimulates parents’ interest in ECEC.
• Several child care provisions in the **French Community of Belgium** offer voluntarily free day care or care at a highly reduced cost for families with low incomes (EUR 2.19 per day for the lowest income families). Centres with a large proportion of children from a low-income background are further subsidised by the government to cover all their costs.

**Developing targeted interventions**

• **Australia** has implemented the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters in 50 disadvantaged communities nationally and supports around 3 000 families free of cost for parents. It is a two-year home-based parenting and early childhood enrichment programme that empowers parents and carers to be their child’s first teacher. The programme builds the confidence and skills of parents and carers to create a positive learning environment to prepare their child for school. Home tutors are available to help disadvantaged families implement the programme at home, and role-play activities are organised to demonstrate to parents how they should implement the programme activities.

• In 1994, five Head Start programmes in the **United States** developed model substance abuse prevention projects with a goal to strengthen families and neighbourhoods of economically disadvantaged preschool children. The initiative, named Free to Grow, targeted families and neighbourhoods of Head Start children in an effort to protect them from substance abuse and its associated problems. It included a strong focus on community-based strategies in the form of coalitions, implementation of “safe space” task forces that ensured safe and substance abuse-free spaces for young children and training in substance abuse prevention. Different community services were included in the implementation, e.g., local police forces, youth organisations, churches and numerous grassroots organisations. Outcomes included increased parental involvement in ECEC, cleaner and safer schools and neighbourhoods, improved relationships among residents and between ECEC practitioners, parents and community members, and stronger community norms against drug and alcohol use.

• The **French Community of Belgium** uses the “baby bus” in areas where there is a shortage of child care provisions. The bus is run by two nursery professionals and contains age-appropriate pedagogical materials and care materials for young children. These children are brought to temporary child care facilities in, for example, sport halls, and costs are EUR 7 per day per child. A budget of EUR 1.5 million has been dedicated by the region of Wallonia, the province and local partners for the extension of this network with 10 extra baby buses by 2015. Additionally, for migrant children, “bridging classes” have been created. Upon arrival in the French Community, children can attend these classes for up to six months to learn the French language and get used to the Belgian educational system before attending regular ECEC or education services.

• **British Columbia (Canada)** offers the Parent-Child Mother Goose programmes, which are available across the province to families with infants and toddlers. The programme provides a secure environment in which interactive singing and storytelling between parent and child strengthens the family bond, while simultaneously supporting language and pre-literacy development. The programme also focuses on enhancing confidence and self-esteem and developing social skills in children.
The Manukau Family Literacy Programme (MFLP) in New Zealand offers learning opportunities to parents of children in ECEC. The MFLP is targeted at low-decile communities. Enrolment is sought from family members in the child’s household who have low or no educational qualifications. The programme is delivered over the regular early childhood centre week using an integrated approach consisting of 20 hours per week for the parent. It has four components: 1) an adult education component designed to extend basic education skills of participants and help them acquire successful interpersonal skills; 2) children’s education to promote growth and development of young children and engage parents in their child’s learning; 3) exercising Parent and Child Together Time involving shared learning experiences between child and parent; and 4) parent learning of parenting skills and other family and parenting issues. Currently, 80 families are taking part in this programme.

England (United Kingdom) has contracted the National Academy of Parenting Research on a five year contract until March 2012 to conduct a programme of parenting and family research, examining and evaluating innovative parenting interventions that work with vulnerable families. Part of this includes a project on the Commissioning Toolkit, which describes many of the parenting programmes offered in England and highlights the programmes which are most effective.

Providing home visits

For children with learning arrears, the Netherlands and Slovak Republic have implemented home-based early childhood education programmes, which require great parental involvement and include regular home visits by early education professionals. The programmes also focus on improving the home learning environment.

The Parent-Child Home Programme in the United States is an early childhood literacy, parenting and school readiness programme. The programme uses trained professionals to work with families with a low-educational background and aims to strengthen families and child development through home visits. Home Visitors help parents realise their role as their children’s first and most important teacher, generating enthusiasm for learning and verbal interaction through the use of engaging books and stimulating toys during regular visits of half-an-hour, twice per week. Families participate in the two-year programme when their children are two and three years old, completing the programme as they turn four and transition into pre-kindergarten or Head Start. A child can, however, enter the programme as young as 16 months, and some sites serve families with children up through four years of age if there are no other preschool services available in the community.

In Baden-Württemberg and Berlin (Germany) there exist so-called “family visitors” or “welcome visitors”. These people either work on a full-time or voluntary basis and are well trained and informed about all local social services, including ECEC services, available for families and children. The family or welcome visitors visit families at home and inform them about the services available in their neighbourhood. When needed, they provide information in a non-German language. Their goal is to motivate parents to use these services, such as child care, for the benefit of the family and stimulate them to become highly interested and aware of the development of their child.
• **Prince Edward Island (Canada)** provides a home-visiting programme called Best Start to support families and assist high-risk parents with information on parenting, child growth and child development.

• For children in low-income families, **Korea** has implemented home visit programmes. These programmes aim at educating and informing parents about child development, parenting, community and social services. The home visit is carried out by a welfare co-ordinator and a kindergarten teacher. It helps practitioners increase their awareness and knowledge about the family environment of children in their class and improves parental knowledge about their children’s development.

**Assisting parents to provide qualitative home learning environments**

• In **Brazil**, ECEC centres organise workshops for disadvantaged mothers. The workshops consist of demonstrations of best practices that improve interactions with children and home learning through play. In each workshop, a maximum of eight mothers participate to maximise learning.

• In **New Zealand**, the Early Reading Together initiative has been implemented. It is a programme which helps parents of young children (babies to six-year-olds) to support their children’s language and literacy development at home and is specifically designed to support children and parents from diverse language/literacy, cultural, educational and socio-economic backgrounds. It is implemented on a voluntary basis by junior school teachers, early childhood educators and librarians, and includes three workshops of one hour and fifteen minutes each, spread over three weeks. Therefore, the time commitment is low. Its results include increased competence of parents on assisting their children at home with reading.

• In **Australia**, the national project **Engaging Families in the Early Childhood Development Story** has developed a set of key messages for parents about the importance of early learning and development, based on neuroscience research. The project hopes to establish a parenting tool kit, which will assist in the delivery of parenting programmes.

**Providing training for parents**

• **Norway** combines Norwegian language training for immigrant parents with open access to kindergartens. Parents can take up language training while their children are being taken care of in kindergartens. The objective is to stimulate immigrant parents to learn the language and stimulate participation of immigrant children in ECEC. When immigrant parents learn the native language, there is also a chance that their involvement and interest in the early education of their children increases.

• ECEC centres in **Flanders (Belgium)** give Dutch language courses to parents of immigrant children in nursery education. Community-based centres also provide official training to immigrant and low-educated parents on ECEC. The training results in an official qualification and stimulates their labour market participation.

• In **Baden-Württemberg (Germany)**, the programme **STÄRKE** (POWER) has been implemented in 2008. It aims at empowering parents to care properly for their children by giving them professional advice and ideas to organise family life. All families received a voucher/gift certificate valuing EUR 40 to pay for selected training courses for parents.
during the first year of their child’s life. Families that experience difficulties in child care, such as single, very young or immigrant parents, can receive another kind of support through this programme: the initiative provides training to parents at home and advice on how parents can deal with their specific situation. The aim is to prevent disregard of the children’s interests in terms of care and education.

- In Bayern and North-Rhine Westphalia (Germany), training courses are offered to parents of young children (ages zero to three). The aim of this training is to strengthen the knowledge of parents regarding child rearing and deepen the relationships between parents and their children. During the course, it is also explained how children develop and how parents can stimulate the development of their babies and infants.

- In Rheinland-Pfalz (Germany), the parenting skills programme “In the beginning, it matters! – A course for young parents” aims to strengthen parental skills regarding partnership, parenting and financial management. The programme targets all young families and parents and, particularly, low-income families. The programme received funding for a minimum of five years and is a popular programme among families in Rheinland-Pfalz with many families wishing to participate.

- In Mexico, the Ministry of Education requested that the Centre of Investigations and Top Studies in Social Anthropology (CIESAS) evaluate an ECEC programme that offers initial education to parents and childminders in rural and indigenous areas. This ECEC programme requires families and childminders to attend a meeting to reflect on and improve their nurturing practices. The results of the evaluation show that parents who participated in the programme have improved their nurturing skills compared to the control group. The main difference is improvement in autonomy, communication and social development. Parents indicated that initial education, as well as self-diagnosis and its strategies, are beneficial to develop their nurturing skills.

Providing support in different languages

- The Netherlands, Norway and Sweden have developed informational material in multiple languages about how to stimulate early development in the home environment, available ECEC services, the importance of ECEC, and how parents can be involved in the education of their young children. For example, Norway has developed a booklet focusing on resources in language stimulation for minority speaking children. The booklets can be used by professionals with parents or handed out to parents for individual use.

- Language translation services are available for families in British Columbia (Canada) seeking to apply for ECEC services or child care subsidies.

- Regional governments in Spain provide translation and interpretation services to immigrant families when having meetings in schools.

- Korea published a guidebook for parents about early childhood education, What every mother and father should know, and has translated it into eight different languages. The guidebook intends to raise awareness of the importance of early childhood education and current relevant policies and informs parents of their role in promoting child development and learning (e.g., brain development, literacy, creativity, peer
relationships, artistic appreciations, and health and nutrition) and how to select and engage in a kindergarten.

- In many Länder in Germany, all new parents receive several information sheets in different languages about how to educate and raise young children, and how to stimulate their development. They also receive information in different languages about the associations or boards they can be involved in as parents, such as school boards of preschools.