

## **PARENTAL CHILDCARE AND EMPLOYMENT POLICY**

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**Round table: panel discussion with NGO representatives**

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**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY!**

Good afternoon.

Could I begin by thanking the Czech Presidency most warmly for their invitation to participate in this important and highly relevant conference on parental childcare and employment policy. I am delighted to be able to contribute to the debate and to bring the specific perspective of Eurochild's members who are working to promote the rights and welfare of children in Europe.

The title of the conference: parental childcare and employment policy "collision or complementarity", assumes there are just two sides to the debate. I would argue that the issue is far more complex. There is no right or wrong answer. What I believe is more helpful is to try to separate out what are the different, sometimes competing interests, and then see how can they best be reconciled.

It is not time to turn our back on progress towards gender equality in the labour market. Indeed, there is still a long-way to go in this

regard. Women still earn 15% less than men on average in the EU, with figures of 20% or more in 6 EU member states. According to last year's report on the Barcelona targets, *'more than 1.5 million women in the EU are forced into not working or working part-time because of the lack of childcare facilities – or their cost'*. The call for more and better childcare is a legitimate demand. Many women want to work outside the home. Work can be a route to greater self-confidence and fulfilment, as well as, of course, financial independence.

On the other hand, working outside the home is increasingly an economic necessity for women. The number of children growing up in single-parent households – predominantly female-lead - is increasing (currently around 13% of children in the EU). Almost one in three children of these children live at risk of poverty. Income support and other benefits are often not enough to keep the family above the poverty line.

Even in two parent households, one income is often not enough to pay the bills and women are often financially obliged to go back to work immediately after paid maternity leave – which in some countries can be as short as 15 weeks.

Having children clearly poses greater financial burden on adults. Whereas 16% of the whole EU population is estimated to live at-risk of poverty – this rises to 19% among households with children.

Helping parents back into the labour market is one of the main policy responses to the challenge of child poverty. Measures that make work pay, whilst adequately supporting income, are key components of the Member States social inclusion strategies. Of course provision of accessible and affordable childcare services is a key part of the equation.

So here we can see two very clear policy drivers for increasing child care provision – gender equality and tackling child poverty by boosting family income. However, what is missing here - & what we argue is in fact *the* most important perspective in any debate on child care – is the best interest of the child.

All EU Member States are signatory to the UNCRC, which places a clear duty on governments to implement children's rights. An underlying principle of the UNCRC is that all actions concerning children must give primary consideration to the best interest of the child. However, until now, it has been precisely this point of view that has been most neglected.

In December last year the Unicef Innocenti research centre launched its latest Report Card on the child care transition. What is so important about this report is that for the first time it puts children's interest first – combining what we know about the importance of the children's first years in life, with the economic and social reality of today's society. To quote:-

*“It is the child’s early interactions with others, and particularly with family and caregivers, that establishes the patterns of neural connections and chemical balances which profoundly influence what we will become, what we will be capable of, and how we will respond to the world around us.”*

We know more and more about child development. This challenges the traditional notion that children’s interests can be addressed under the umbrella of family policy or women’s policy. In fact the needs of parents can sometimes obscure the interests of children; nor should the needs of children always be perceived as the same as those of women.

### **First let us look at the issue of parental childcare**

Few would doubt the critical importance of one-to-one care from a loving parent in a child’s first months of life. Extended and paid maternity and parental leave must be part of any policy package that respects children’s rights. Eurochild argues for a minimum of 6 months paid maternity leave. This will support mothers to exclusively breast feed during the first 6 months after birth. Paid paternity leave is also crucial to ensure proper take up by men after the birth of a child.

We also support a minimum of 6 months paid parental leave that can be taken by both men and women up a child’s 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. We need to challenge the assumption that childcare is primarily a

woman's role, by ensuring there is non-transferable and paid parental leave for men.

But I believe we need to look beyond just the question of leave and reconciliation measures, if we really want ensure the best possible start in life for children.

There is an assumption that parents know-best and just the fact of them being a parent will ensure they put the best interest of their child first. In fact the family itself may very well comprise differing, and possibly conflicting, interests. Parenting is not something that necessarily comes naturally. We believe that governments have a responsibility to provide support and education services to enable them to build positive parent-child relationships, and ensure parents take on the responsibility to optimise their child's potential development.

In 2006 the Council of Europe adopted a Recommendation on Positive Parenting, which recognises the importance for children of growing up in a positive family environment. It emphasises the responsibility of the state in providing the right conditions by ensuring parents have access to the appropriate material, psychological, social and cultural resources. Positive parenting is defined as:-

*“parental behaviour, based on the best interests of the child, that is nurturing, empowering, non-violent, and provides recognition and guidance which involves setting of boundaries to enable the full development of the child”*

For Eurochild, extended leave periods of up to 3 years after a child's birth is not therefore the panacea for promoting their child's rights. Indeed, further distancing parents from the labour market may work against their children, particularly those of parents with low levels of education, from a migrant background, or at risk of social exclusion. Inclusive early childhood education and care services, coupled with support and education for parents, and employment policies that reconcile work and family life, would therefore be the best way to ensure that all children can develop to their full potential.

### **Early childhood services are an investment**

Eurochild is therefore a strong advocate for universally available, high-quality early childhood education and care services in the European Union. We believe that *all* children should be able to access pre-school services from the age of one, with additional support for children from low-income and disadvantaged families. We believe that whilst this represents considerable investment from government, the long-term benefits to society far out-weigh the costs in terms of better outcomes for children in education, health, civic responsibility and participation, and eventually employability.

To give a specific example. Research shows that children attending at least 2 years of pre-school are much more likely to achieve at school and continue secondary education. This is particularly true for children from deprived families and neighbourhoods.

Member states are taking very different approaches to fund and deliver the growing demand for early childhood care services. At one extreme, child care is left to the private sector driven by market demand. Our concern is that, far from realising the real potential social benefits of early years services, this kind of provision will exacerbate social inequalities as informed, affluent parents seek out the best care for their children. And targeting resources at particular geographic areas or socio-economic groups is not necessarily the answer. Evaluations of the Sure Start programme in England indicate that they are only reaching half to a third of the intended groups.

Early childhood services, properly conceived, can have an important role in promoting citizenship and democratic attitudes. They help to initiate young children into learning to live together. Services that encompass diversity – in terms of socio-economic backgrounds of the children but also disability or ethnic diversity, can help promote understanding and break down traditional social barriers.

A key priority for governments in helping to deliver high quality services must be investment in staff training and career development. In many countries, child care professionals stand at the bottom of the wages ladder and have little job security or opportunities for career progression. This may also explain the almost complete absence of men in the profession. We need to raise the status of the profession through better academic qualifications, salary levels, and on-going training. This is particularly relevant when it comes to the

complexities of working with at-risk children – where investment in high-quality early years care and education is likely to reap the greatest rewards.

There is other clearly other key quality criteria that must be addressed in early childhood services, such as the staff/child ratio. The Innocenti report card establishes 10 benchmarks that can help to build a series of standards for high quality care. In fact the EU has already done its own work in this regard. In 1996 the European Commission Network on Childcare came up with proposals for a 10 year action programme including 40 quality targets for services for children. We call on the EU to revive this work, emphasising the crucial role of early years services in child well-being and educational outcomes.

**To conclude:**

The child care debate has all too often been framed by the demands of parents and the labour market. In fact the starting point for discussions must be children's best interest. There is ever accumulating evidence of the critical importance of the earliest years in a child's cognitive, emotional and social development. The quality of the relationships a child experiences under the age of 3 will largely determine their own self-confidence and their ability to trust and empathise with others. Poor quality adult care that is not responsive to a child's needs, can, by contrast, do irreparable damage to a child's self-esteem and emotional intelligence.



We cannot leave these early years to chance. Promoting parental childcare alone is not the answer. Indeed such an approach may well exacerbate existing social inequalities. We need to ensure that every child has the opportunity to be everything he or she can be. We believe governments must invest in universal early childhood services, coupled with additional resources and support for families from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is the best way to ensure a sustainable economic, social and political future for Europe.