

Parenting Support

The role of parents as first layer of protection, care and support

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Children’s well-being, education, and development are deeply tied to family environments, especially during the critical early years. In recent years, the International Federation for Family Development has been engaging with the Executive Board of Unicef and various Civil Society stakeholders as Chair of the NGO Committee on UNICEF. As the largest organization focused on parenting support and preventative strategies in the world, IFFD follows up on the Convention of the Rights of the Child to protect, care and support children.

In this regard, the most important United Nations’ Agency for children is UNICEF. It has become a global leader in advocating for children’s rights and recognizes the central role of families and caregivers in fostering child development. In 2023, UNICEF’s efforts focused on supporting parents, scaling up family-friendly policies, and strengthening community-based services to enhance early childhood development (ECD).

This policy paper analyzes parenting initiatives and the broader landscape of family-oriented approaches, identifies gaps, and provides policy recommendations that align with the 2030 Sustainable Development

The first of “three goals that governments can set to ensure that all children enjoy the right to play is to facilitate universal access universal access to evidence based parenting programmes.

These programmes should promote the attachment, responsive care, stimulation needed for children to feel safe so they can explore and can play”.

Catherine Russell, Executive Director of UNICEF at the Inaugural Observance of International Day of Play, June 11, 2024.

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Goals (SDGs).

By focusing on parenting support, mental health, and the integration of family-friendly policies, this paper seeks to outline recommendations for governments and stakeholders to foster holistic child development through family-centered strategies.

Parenting Support and Early Childhood Development

UNICEF's 2023 report highlights its efforts in parenting support, reaching 11.8 million parents and caregivers. Programs such as the Positive Parenting Programme in Cambodia have made significant strides in boosting parenting skills, but the challenge remains vast, with only 55% of children in 78 countries receiving early stimulation and responsive care from their parents.

Effective parenting is crucial, especially in the first 1,000 days of a child's life, which is a critical window for cognitive, emotional, and physical development.

Despite UNICEF's global efforts, there is a need to expand access to early childhood development programs, particularly in underserved regions. Comprehensive parenting programs, integrated into national systems, would ensure a holistic approach to child care and development.

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support for Families

In a recent article, the U.S. Surgeon General emphasizes the significant stress parents face in today's society. He argues that modern life, including financial pressures, lack of childcare, and isolation, has created unsustainable levels of stress for parents. Dr. Murthy calls for systemic changes, such as improved access to mental health support, expanded parental leave, and better community resources.

The article also highlights the importance of fostering a culture that values caregiving, suggesting that stronger family policies could alleviate the stress parents experience, ultimately benefiting children's well-being.

Efforts made globally have addressed the mental health needs of families through mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services. In 2023, 34.7 million

children, parents, and caregivers benefited from services provided by UNICEF. This intervention is particularly vital in conflict zones and for vulnerable populations affected by violence, exploitation, and neglect. At the same time,

The "Parenting for Lifelong Health" (PLH) initiative by WHO offers free, evidence-based parenting programs aimed at preventing violence in low-resource settings. Developed through partnerships with universities and NGOs, these programs focus on improving parent-child relationships, reducing child maltreatment, and enhancing family well-being.

PLH is being scaled up in over 20 low- and middle-income countries and has shown positive outcomes in trials. The goal is to make affordable, culturally relevant parenting support widely accessible to promote long-term health benefits.

Family-Friendly Social Protection Systems

UNICEF's commitment to supporting family-friendly policies, such as cash transfers and flexible work arrangements, has benefited over 106 million households in 2023. Family-friendly policies not only enhance children's development but also address systemic inequalities, particularly for women and caregivers.

While progress has been made, more comprehensive policies are required, especially in countries where family-oriented social protection systems are underdeveloped. These policies should prioritize paid parental leave, flexible work environments, and recognition of unpaid care work.

Leveraging Innovation and Private Sector Collaboration

The UK Early Childhood Development (ECD) Taskforce Report, commissioned by the Centre for Early Childhood, highlights the economic benefits of investing in early childhood programs, estimating a return of £13 for every £1 spent. The report emphasizes the need for businesses to adopt family-friendly policies, such as paid parental leave and on-site childcare, which would benefit both children and the economy. Key findings include:

- **Economic return:** Early childhood

programs result in reduced future costs in health, education, and social services.

- **Workplace support:** Businesses that implement family-friendly policies, such as flexible hours and on-site childcare, benefit from improved employee productivity and work-life balance.
- **Social impact:** Early investments reduce social inequalities and enhance overall societal well-being.

Similarly, UNICEF's Global Innovation Board has been pivotal in mobilizing the private sector to implement family-friendly workplace practices. However, consistent advocacy and a standardized approach across sectors are needed to ensure widespread adoption of these policies.

A Strategic Blueprint for Universal Parenting Policy

WHO and the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence Against Children and UNICEF's Universal Parenting Policy Note emphasizes that effective parenting support is essential for child nutrition, early learning, mental health, and protection from violence. The policy advocates for integrating parenting programs into broader health, education, and child protection systems, underscoring the need for:

- **Responsive caregiving:** Encouraging parents to provide nurturing care and early stimulation for brain development.
- **Integrated services:** Offering parenting support through health and education systems to reach more families.
- **Work-family balance:** Promoting family-friendly workplace policies to give parents the flexibility to provide quality care while maintaining financial stability.

The note calls for systemic policy changes, increased social protection, and family-friendly legislation to improve parenting practices and child outcomes.

Global Initiative to Support Parents (GISP)

The "Parenting Inter-Agency Vision" document presents a collaborative global vision for supporting parents and caregivers in nurturing child development. It emphasizes

the need for multisectoral policies that integrate parenting support into existing health, education, and social protection systems. Key priorities include promoting positive parenting practices, improving mental health support, and creating inclusive environments for caregiving.

The vision outlines how coordinated efforts between governments, organizations, and communities can enhance child well-being and drive long-term societal benefits.

During the United Nations General Assembly High Level Week, the coalition launched the publication "Country Visions for Parenting and Caregiving Support". It emphasizes the importance of creating supportive environments for parents and caregivers as a means to enhance child well-being.

It showcases initiatives from various countries, including Bangladesh, Botswana, Brazil, India, and others, illustrating diverse strategies to empower caregivers with resources and education.

By investing in these supportive measures, the publication argues, societies can strengthen families and communities, ultimately contributing to the development of human capital and a brighter future.

The Philippines Parent Effectiveness Service Program Act

The Department of Social Welfare and Development of The Philippines (DSWD), led the signing of the Parent Effectiveness Service (PES) Program Act on June 15, 2024.

The PES will ensure that there will be necessary programs and services for the parents and other parent-substitutes to expand their knowledge and skills in proper parenting.

Likewise, they will be able to respond more effectively to their parental duties and responsibilities, especially in the areas of early childhood development, behavior management of younger and older children, husband-wife relationships, prevention of child abuse, health care, and other challenges of parenting.

The Parent Effectiveness Service (PES) Program Act aims to assist Filipino parents and caregivers in enhancing their knowledge and skills related to parental duties and

responsibilities. It focuses on promoting children's rights, fostering positive early childhood development, and advancing educational progress. Additionally, the law seeks to increase parents' awareness of their roles, enhancing their values, attitudes, and behaviors. This growth enables them to fulfill their responsibilities towards their children, families, and communities more effectively.

The policy signifies a collective commitment to our dedication to ensuring its effective implementation for the betterment of our society.

Conclusion

In various scenarios and interventions delivered by an array of stakeholders, a family-centered approach has yielded significant progress, but gaps remain in parenting support, social protection, and mental health services.

By scaling up multi-sectoral integration, strengthening family-friendly policies, and promoting public-private partnerships, governments and international organizations can create an environment where every child has the opportunity to thrive.

This policy paper outlines key recommendations that build on different achievements and future goals. These strategies will empower families and caregivers, enhancing child development and

driving long-term social and economic benefits worldwide.

Recommendations

Governments should prioritize ECD by integrating parenting support into national health, education, and social protection systems. Expanding these services within the first 1,000 days of life is critical. Collaboration among UN Agencies, Civil Society, Academia and Private Sector is essential.

Policymakers must scale up mental health services for families by integrating MHPSS into social protection systems. Community-based mental health services should be expanded, and local professionals trained to offer psychosocial support.

Governments should develop comprehensive family-friendly policies, including paid parental leave, flexible work arrangements, and the recognition of unpaid care work.

Governments, with support of Civil Society, UN Agencies, Academia and Private Sector should develop a policy framework to incentivize businesses to adopt family-friendly workplace practices. Incentives such as tax breaks, public recognition, and corporate social responsibility programs can drive private sector engagement. Public-private partnerships should be expanded to promote sustainable investments in family well-being.

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