

Contribution to the public consultation on the planned Child Guarantee

The **European Parents' Association** together with **Make Mothers Matter** welcome the initiative of a Child Guarantee to tackle the increasing problem of child poverty in Europe.

The organizations regret however to notice that parents and families are not recognized sufficiently in their role as primary educators and caregivers and supported in a way that allows them to fulfil their task in the best possible manner. Putting children in the focus of attention without adequately addressing their family/parental surrounding will therefore not achieve the desired effect as there are NO POOR CHILDREN IN WELL-TO-DO FAMILIES. This is also highlighted in the statement¹ by the Alliance for investing in children.

The categorization of children in need of support in four target groups holds the danger in our opinion that children not belonging to any of these groups or not being classified as belonging to one of the groups might well find themselves out of focus and will not be reached (nor their families) by the planned measures. This is especially problematic as with the COVID-19 pandemic we can already see more and more families being affected by the devastating economic and mental-health consequences in a number of countries which are not covered by the current "grid" of precariousness, e.g. self-employed single mothers who have coped very well up to the crisis and have difficulties to see themselves as a group at risk now. In fact single parents are especially vulnerable compared to the general EU population. Almost half (48 %) of singles mothers and a third (32 %) of single fathers are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Women in particular are affected as they make up almost 85 % of all one-parent families in the EU (according to EIGE). Single mothers are particularly vulnerable in that they tend to earn less than men: the current gender pay gap in the EU suggests that women's gross hourly earnings were 16 per cent below those of men on average.

Apart from suggesting a more inclusive approach taking the well-being of each individual child into account we would like to draw the attention to the fact that a child's well-being, happiness and development doesn't depend necessarily on the economic situation of the family and the existence of material goods but essentially on the time, love and care that the surrounding provides for the child. Research in neuroscience demonstrate² that the early years of a child's life are crucial in establishing good mental health, to develop the cognitive capacities and to build emotional skills. All parents need to be active part in this period. If we want a society that is inclusive and where nobody is left behind, we need to work with and accompany parents. How a child is parented provides a legacy that transcends their genes (epigenetics) and can directly affect the development of the child's brain, their cognitive and socioemotional skills³.

The idea of a good start into life as promoted by UNICEF in their campaign on "The First 1000 Days" necessarily includes the parents (especially the mother when it comes to breastfeeding) as being essential for the child's future self-confidence and self-esteem through the bonding that takes place during that time and provides the base for the development of a positive relation with the outside world. Adequate measures should therefore be taken to ensure that they are able to foster their child's development as efficiently as possible. One of these measures would certainly be to guarantee a **long enough and adequately paid parental leave**. Mothers have fought for many years to be able to spend time with their children at home before returning to work and only recently it

¹ <http://www.alliance4investinginchildren.eu/contribution-of-the-eu-alliance-for-investing-in-children-to-the-european-commission-public-consultation-on-the-child-guarantee/>

² ECPC (Early Childhood Peace Consortium) and its members <https://ecdpeace.org/epigenetics-significance-gene-environment-interface-brain-development-0> and <https://ecdpeace.org/work-content/biological-evidence-peace>

³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0140673616313897>

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has become possible for fathers to benefit from parental leave as well in a number of countries. These achievements must not be jeopardized by fostering the establishment of **early childhood and care settings from birth** as they're described in many documents as this might be used immediately by big players in the economy (The OECD is an ambiguous partner in this issue as the "E" in its name stands for economic and not for education.) to deprive parents of their right to parental leave or take influence on politicians to reverse the hard-won agreements in this sector. EU policies should rather foster flexible solutions that allow parents the choice of who wants to stay home, when and for how long between one and three years. We advocate for measures that support parents in their free choices during their lifetime. Parents, specially mothers, who will see their career development at risk if they choose to devote some time to take care of their children, or whose skills are not recognised when trying to re-enter the labour market (after career breaks) or whose pension gap is going to increase exponentially if they take time to care for their children, are not been allowed to make real free choices (for mothers this is the so called motherhood penalty).

Families as a whole need to be given the possibility of get out of the transgenerational trap of poverty.

We therefore suggest that the budget foreseen for measures under the Child Guarantee be not only used for increasing the number and the quality of formal settings (even though we welcome every improvement in terms of quality, access and affordability) but be invested in **adequate family programs** with trained personnel for regular home visits (not only in cases of emergency as in some countries) and the **transformation of schools into community learning centres** where families can also come together for training (e.g. parenting, digital competences, language courses for migrant parents, health care, etc.), exchange of practices (e.g. parents with children with special needs) and using sports, arts or music facilities among adults or with their children. A Home-school-liaison-officer, usually a teacher designated specifically to this task without any other teaching obligations, can also be of great help once children start going to school (e.g. the DEIS schools in Ireland or the Oakland School in the UK).

Parents should be able to freely choose **between formal or informal** ECEC. Instead of putting the focus only on improving formal care settings it would be far more beneficial to establish a supporting infrastructure for parents and families in the form of **home visiting programs** as we know them for example from Ireland and the US⁴, UK, Germany, Lithuania, Australia⁵, etc where parents receive help in their homes through the visit (once or several times a week depending on the need) of specially trained persons providing them with specific educational materials (books, toys, games, songs, etc) and the according examples on how to use them, answering their questions around child rearing, helping them to structure their different tasks, but also to cope with administrative issues, health, financial and economic and other worries.

There are many examples in Europe and worldwide of effective community-based ECEC where not only educators but also parents, social workers, health professionals, e.g come together to support children and their parents during these first years, and are recognised as an effective way of working and improving the precarious situation of many families at risk. These types of offers serve also as a way of prevention, inclusion and a sustainable intervention across generations. Families that are empowered and are given the right parenting skills will play a multiplier effect in the family at large and in society. Additionally if a child perceives that her/his family is part of the community and plays a role within, it feels more secure and can further develop his/her skills and potential.

⁴ <https://www.preparingforlife.ie/>, <https://www.parentchildplus.org/>

⁵ <https://www.winwinparenting.com/>

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These initiatives can be coordinated by public or private local actors. They go from home visits as described before to the "rent a grandmother" or Grosselterndienst systems where grandparents that do not have their family close by decide to help (in the majority of cases free of charge), young parents who as well do not have any family support near by and where the experience shows the real benefits for all actors (the "Leihomas" become part of the families for life!).

It is important to consider families as a source of social cohesion and as a resource for the entire society and to value and respect their role and their choices. Policy measures have to ensure that also vulnerable families make an informed choice. When a family is informed and accompanied, also the access to services such as health, housing, job opportunities, training, and other resources becomes easier for them. Additionally, they can then use the resources, infrastructures, and knowledge to better help all the family members to step out of the precarity. If we want to talk about costs, investing in families has a strong economic return!

The city of Leeds in the UK (as many other cities that are investing in families) has as slogan: **Children live in families, families create communities, communities make cities!**

It strikes us as extremely contradictory to the overall goal of deinstitutionalisation that the Child Guarantee only foresees the improvement of formal settings in terms of availability as well as quality and accessibility. This has also proven to be an extremely problematic approach during the lockdown due to the pandemic as most schools, kindergartens and other formal settings had to close to avoid the further spreading of the SARS-CoV-2 (Coronavirus). Already under "regular" conditions children between birth and the age of 18 years only spend 20% of their overall lifetime in formal settings (taking into account days and nights, weekends, holidays, etc) which means that relying exclusively on these institutions to provide a warm meal per day or protect children against domestic violence or enhance their learning already deprives many children of the access to these possibilities during the other 80% of the time and does not solve the core problems to which they are exposed.

Current societal changes have social consequences, such as unemployment, income inequalities, imbalances between work and family life, lifestyle changes linked to urbanization. These changes also have consequences on health with new risks of illness, an aggravation of drug addiction, psychological difficulties linked to daily stress. In addition, technology has consequences on human relationships and behaviour, especially within families. Therefore, concerted efforts are needed to help parents play their role. As the UNESCO publication on the State of the Early Childhood Care and Education states, global trends indicate that more than half of young children are at risk of being deprived of parental guidance. Social and family policies play a decisive role in parenting and family functioning, but more needs to be done by providing parents with access to education and structured intervention support programs. Some good EU national legal measures that support informal care are for example the Belgian Career Breaks and the Time Credit system; the recognition of time spent on caregiving in pension calculation, in Germany; or the Flexible care allowance, in Finland that is intended for the father, mother or other carer of a child under three years of age.

Whatever that decision is, it needs to be respected and parents supported and empowered in their role that will start with pregnancy but will remain throughout their lives even if the official responsibility ends with the child's coming of age. It's a crucial role, maybe the biggest and most important in their lives and unlike any other big task no training or advice is provided automatically – that would be the **biggest task for a Child Guarantee to make sure that all parents get adequate preparation and are empowered to be able to raise and support their children** throughout their life.

Supported by the Learning for Well-Being Foundation

