A Wide-Angle Approach to Improving Family life and Parenting in Ireland: A Family Life Education Framework

Colm O'Doherty
Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest, colm.odoherty@tus.ie

Ashling Jackson
Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest, ashling.jackson@tus.ie

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Dr Ashling Jackson, Technological University of the Shannon

ajackson@tus.ie

Dr Colm O'Doherty, Technological University of the Shannon

codoherty@tus.ie

Abstract

This article explores the contemporary challenges of parenting, particularly those grounded in social stress, and those stemming from wider cultural sources and modernity. Current family and parenting support provision in Ireland are reviewed. A case is made for the development and implementation of a new integrated model of service delivery: A Family Life Education (FLE) framework. Key Family Life Education practice skills grounded in foundational principles are outlined and a 5-stage model to creating and implementing a Family Life Education framework in Ireland is proposed. As a policy option following a period of heightened social stress and economic duress due to the pandemic, this new approach to service provision, will enable and empower parents in their parenting roles, to socialise children to gain pro-social personhood, thereby promoting generalised civility and well-being.

Key words: Parenting, family, family life education.

Introduction

> "The character of parents towards their children, **and** that of our culture towards parenting, is relevant to the ever-pressing interest with how we are to live in an increasingly challenging globalised universe" (Hendrick, 2016, p. 12).

Globalised narcissistic tendencies are fuelling strong sentiments and actions, such as climate change and a runaway unregulated form of capitalism has led to a problematic level of inequality. Narcissism involving "a projection of the self onto the world, rather than an engagement in worldly experience beyond one's control" (Sennet, 2002, p.27) has been channelled into the culture of self-optimisation which promotes a personhood (what states want from their citizens) lacking empathy and reciprocity. Narcissism becomes compulsory in a competitive world where standing out from the crowd and becoming a winner is the measure of a person's worth (Brinkman 2019; Cederstrom, 2018). To become a winner, a person must demonstrate that they are achieving more, experiencing more and enjoying more all the time. Reputational capital is created through self-optimisation in work, career, social and family (Cederstrom, 2018). An entrepreneurial-self is required to raise our game and outdo others. Status insecurity must be kept at bay through self-promotion, relentless competition and individualism. Inequality penetrates family life and increases status anxiety among adults, reduces solidarity and agreeableness and leads to a greater tendency to 'self-enhancement', i.e. claiming that you are better than others. "Compulsory narcissists are required to believe in the myth of meritocracy and think of themselves as winners" (Cederstrom, 2018). Children detect all of these, become aware of status differences in wider society and so become affected by the unequal context in which they grow up (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2018).

Family life and the parenting which it encompasses is inextricably bound up with the development of citizens versed in the importance of morality, community and equality. Character informed citizenship can provide a cultural bulwark against this rampant competitive development culture with no brakes, nothing holding it back. While it is not hard to get people to acknowledge the importance of family life and parenting in general, there are different understandings of the relationship between citizenship and parenting practices.

In addition to the core responsibilities of parenting, such as safeguarding a child's well-being, ensuring that a child meets all of their developmental milestones and achieves positive life outcomes, developing prosocial personhood in children (voluntary, desirable actions aimed to help others) is highly beneficial for children's adjustment (Baxley, 2021; Pastorelli et al., 2016). In this way, parenting can make a significant contribution to ensuring a civic-minded next generation. Civility, a decent way to deal with others, is a crucial attribute of prosocial personhood. Civility is the quality mark of a society. It sets the standard for what most people see as an even-handed way to deal with others. It allows us to share public spaces and trust strangers. Civility promotes well-being – it makes us feel better about ourselves and our environment. It is manifested in our day-to-day interactions at home, at work and in public. Civility is fundamental for a human future. It is not simply a form of social box ticking or tokenistic nods in the direction of a tolerant society. Living in changing societies requires that we do more than passively keep strangers at a safe distance. Civility requires us to mindfully identify with each other's needs and to adapt our behaviour in the light of these needs. The benefit of civility for well-being is substantial. Civil behaviour makes us feel better about

ourselves and allows us to develop trust with others. Trust in the comforting safety of others is distilled from the multitude of minute civil contacts that occur daily. Active civility, in the form of kindness and reaching out a helping hand, is personally rewarding. It allays anxiety and boosts self- esteem. The spontaneous and ubiquitous nature of civility supports the argument of biologists studying theories of evolution that our brains are hardwired to sociability. Parenting, shorthand for a model of adult-child relations within families, is premised on the idea that family is a primary agent of socialisation. "At the core of adult-child power relations is civility, which governs human behaviour and speech in daily life in terms of good conduct between citizens" (Powell and Scanlon, 2015, p.6). Parenting is about socialising children to gain personhood and become well-functioning and accepted members of society.

This article will begin by establishing some critical contemporary challenges of parenting, particularly those grounded in social stress, and those stemming from wider cultural sources and modernity. Current family and parenting support provisions intended to assist parents in Ireland in meeting these challenges are then critically reviewed. Finally, a case is put forward for the development and implementation of a new standardized underpinning structure for service delivery: A Family Life Education (FLE) Framework which will enable and empower parents, in their parenting roles, to socialise children to gain personhood, thereby making a significant contribution to the betterment of human society.

Challenges of parenting

Parenting is fundamentally centred on parent-child interactions and entails rights and duties for the child's development and fulfilment. It is a fundamental human activity, with numerous social and psychological benefits for both parents and children. Paradoxically, it is also a very complex human activity, fraught with ongoing challenges in the very fluid world, in which we live. The psychological and social benefits of parenting for parents have been well documented. Halpenny et al. (2010, p. 48), in their report on "*Parents' and Children's Perspectives on Parenting Styles and Discipline in Ireland*" identified the following as aspects of parenting which parents most enjoyed: parental fulfilment and sense of achievement; sharing time and activities with children; nurturance and guidance of children; affection and affirmation in child–parent relationships; friendship, companionship and family interaction; positive child outcomes – health and happiness. However, many parents face day-to-day challenges, which can affect their parenting experience and how they parent. Broadly speaking, these challenges which make it hard to be a confident parent can be divided into two categories: challenges which are grounded in social stress arising from specific adverse circumstances and challenges which stem from wider cultural sources. Challenges grounded in social stress, such as poverty, unemployment, housing instability/homelessness, domestic violence and limited access to childcare will be outlined below. In addition, challenges stemming from wider cultural sources and modernity such as technology and social media, over-parenting, competitiveness/status competition, cultural narcissism, increased work pressure and declining social capital/community will also be discussed.

Challenges grounded in social stress

According to the Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2020, 661,518 people in Ireland are at risk of poverty in Ireland, of which 210,363 are children (Social Justice Ireland, 2021a). In monetary terms, the at risk of poverty threshold means that a single person is living on less than €286.48 pw, an adult and 2 children are living on less than €475.56 pw and 2 adults and 2 children are living on less than €664.63 pw (Social Justice Ireland, 2021b). One in four children are living in households experiencing deprivation of two or more basic necessities (Social Justice Ireland, 2019). Consistent poverty occurs when people are both at risk of poverty and experiencing enforced deprivation (going without essentials on a regular basis). The consistent poverty rate in 2020 in Ireland was 5% (Central Statistics Office, 2021). Individuals living in households where there was one adult and one or more children aged under 18 had the highest consistent poverty rate at 21.6%, indicating that one parent families are more likely to experience consistent poverty in Ireland (Central Statistics Office, 2021).

While the unemployment rate, before the COVID-19 pandemic, was 4.8% (February 2020) (Central Statistics Office 2020), the pandemic has affected the unemployment rate in Ireland. According to the Central Statistics Office (2022, p.1):

> "While the standard measure of Monthly Unemployment was 5.1% in December 2021, the COVID-19 Adjusted Measure of Unemployment could indicate a rate of 7.5% if all claimants of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) [government payment introduced at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak in Ireland to mitigate sudden unemployment] were classified as unemployed. This alternative measure is up from a rate of 6.9% in November 2021 and down from 21.7% in December 2020".

The Nevin Economic Research Institute Report '*Trends in the Irish Labour market – Special Focus: The Impact of the Coronavirus (so far)*' highlights that since the start of the pandemic, young people, especially young women, young married women, those with lower levels of education, those working in occupations with low skills requirements and those working in sectors such as hospitality and retail, which closed during lockdowns and/or are continuing to work on reduced hours, due to public health restrictions, have been the most adversely affected employment-wise (Nugent, 2021).

While there have been reductions in poverty and deprivation rates in recent years (Social Justice Ireland, 2021b), increasing economic growth (European Commission, 2021), even during the pandemic, has not eliminated poverty. Austerity policies, introduced in the first instance as temporary measures in response to the economic crash of 2008 have been embedded in the Irish political system. Despite obvious improvements in the economy, lack of investment in social infrastructure (health, housing, education, transport, childcare) has negatively impacted on families.

> "Adequate housing is essential to the quality of life of individuals and families. Housing provides safety and shelter and underpins people's ability to hold employment, participate in education, and otherwise engage with civil society" (Russell et al., 2021, p. ix).

Housing supply, housing affordability and spiralling rent costs in Ireland have increasingly made having one's own home a challenge for many individuals and families. In 2020, there

were 61,880 households on the waiting list for social housing and in 2019, there were over 91,600 people in receipt of government benefits to cover housing costs (HAP, Rent Supplement or RAS) (Russell et al, 2021). In November 2021, 1108 families were recorded as being homeless in Ireland with 2548 children homeless within these families (Focus Ireland, 2021). This compares to 1,726 families with 3,848 children living in emergency accommodation across Ireland in 2019 (Hoey and Sheridan, 2019). While this decrease is very welcome and is partly explained by a range of Government measures, including a moratorium on all evictions and a rent freeze to prevent people becoming homeless during the pandemic (27 March to the 31st July 2020), family homelessness is again increasing (Focus Ireland, 2021).

Domestic and/or sexual violence - the threat or use of physical, emotional, psychological and sexual abuse in close adult relationships is a serious issue in Irish society. Women's Aid, a national voluntary agency, recorded 24,893 disclosures of domestic abuse against women in 2020 (Women's Aid, 2020), an increase from 16,994 in 2018 (Womens's Aid, 2018), while Men's Aid Ireland reveals that 1 in 7 men in Ireland experience domestic abuse (Men's Aid Ireland, 2021). This may be non-visible abuse such as coercive control and/or parental alienation. Research shows that crises, such as natural disasters and recession, often increase risk factors for domestic violence (Schneider, 2016; Doyle, 2020). Several of the risk factors for domestic violence: unemployment, poverty, relationship conflict, alcohol use/abuse, family history of violence, social isolation, inadequate victim care and lack of information (Heise, 2011) were compounded by national government counter measures to reduce COVID-19 transmission and suppress the virus, namely social-distancing, stay-at-home orders and restricted travel. Bradbury-Jones and Isham (2020) point to the paradoxical effects of a pandemic in this context – the home, a supposed haven of safety and security in a lockdown, is actually not that for many men, women and children.

According to the Eurydice 2019 report on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019), childcare fees for children under three in Ireland, are among the most expensive in Europe. In 2020, the average weekly fee reported was €186.12 per child for a full day place, €110.75 per child for a part-time place and €73.90 for sessional care (Department of Children and Youth Affairs/Pobal, 2021). The number of children on waiting lists saw a 41% increase over the period 2018-2019 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs/Pobal, 2019). Accessing affordable childcare in Ireland for parents is a persistent challenge.

Overall, external stressors such as poverty and unemployment, homelessness, domestic violence and inadequate childcare services can tax families' resilience and undermine their parenting resolve. "Stressed parents are both harsher and less attentive parents. Economic stress, in particular, disrupts family relations, fosters withdrawn and inconsistent parenting and directly increases chronic stress among children" (Putnam, 2015, p.130).

Challenges from wider cultural sources and modernity

The modernisation of society has involved complex social processes. Fundamental changes to Irish society and the impact of these changes are making parenting harder and more problematic. Digital communication through social media platforms, on-line commerce and automated decision-making processes, as typified by algorithms, is depleting our attentional

resources. The burgeoning attention economy as described by Citton (2017) has created an overabundance of cultural goods and communication possibilities.

> "For the (increasingly modest) price of a computer or even a simple mobile phone and an internet connection, billions of humans will soon have millions of books, images, songs, films and TV series at their disposal flor a marginal cost of zero" (Citton, 2017, p. 3).

Consequently, family members are giving less and less attention to each other. Rising inequality and social media have combined to increase the social evaluative threat, how we are seen and judged by others, is felt by many parents (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2018). The rise of social media has also unsettled the parent-child relationship. Children are now global citizens having access to worlds outside their family. The access and availability that children now have to cyberspace, both regulated and unregulated, encroaches on parent-child face-to-face time. Children's online activities are influencing and shaping their development and personhood opportunities to such an extent that they are re-framing generational relations. A new dispensation is, as yet, finely balanced between "an all-embracing positive or negative approach to children's use of digital technology" (Wyness, 2018, p.231).

Globally, thinking about best practice in parenting has been swayed over the past sixty years by the evolving views of developmental psychologists. Post-World War 2, Dr Benjamin Spock, a paediatrician who wrote a bestselling book for parents, *"The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care",* advised parents to adopt a laissez faire approach to their children. The instruction was to let children develop at their own pace rather than press them to fit in with the routines and rules of adult life. Parents were given expert-led permission to relax and enjoy their children. Commencing in the 1990s and gathering pace in the 1990s, this orthodoxy was increasingly supplanted by a new model of 'intensive parenting'. This new approach to parenting took its cues from two sources: developmental psychology and neoliberalism. Evidence from developmental psychologists and neuroscientists identified that brain-based skills are acquired in early childhood and that healthy brain development is dependent on regular contact with caring, consistent adults. The central truth of this new model was that cognitive stimulation by parents is an essential ingredient in successful development.

Unlike the more relaxed 'childrearing' approach advocated by Spock, this model was drawing a line between positive and negative parental behaviours. It emphasised the importance of childrearing as an investment in the 'doing' of parenting and it suggested parents pro-actively foster their children's cognitive, social, and cultural development by learning the skills necessary to become an effective parent. The dual objectives of this approach were to produce confident, knowledgeable and empowered parents and children well suited to the evolving social and economic order of neoliberalism. Sometimes referred to as intensive parenting, this new cultural imperative requires parents to attain a level of dynamism in their interactions, with and on behalf of their children. Parents (principally mothers) are required "to become expert-led in all aspects of childrearing, child-centred, able to predict and avoid risk and oriented towards optimising their child's development in line with discourses and markers of normality" (Jensen, 2018, p.103). Intensive parenting is manifested and popularised as 'helicopter parenting' – parents constantly hovering over their children, stimulating their development through artistic, social and sporting events and opportunities. Intensive parenting and its

helicopter modality are associated with the global ascendancy of neoliberal economic systems and the unequal societies they have spawned since the 1980s. Doepke and Zilibotti (2019, p.14) argue that "changing fashions and parenting practices like the permissive wave of the 1960s and 1970s and the spread of helicopter parenting in more recent times can be explained by the increase of inequality". Starting in the 1980s, economic inequality has increased sharply accompanied by a 'winner takes all' culture. In this changing world, parents have become increasingly worried that their children might be left behind. Hence, they push them from a tender age to achieve and succeed. An increasing parenting gap means that while parents at all levels are drawn to intensive parenting repertoires, those with less education and affluence are less able to put these ideas into practice. Faced with an expanding social evaluation threat, stemming from greater inequality, parents are compelled to become compulsory narcissists, where narcissism is to be understood as a set of culturally contingent parenting behaviours that they are forced to display rather than a personality trait. The mind-set that intensive parenting encourages is a direct consequence of the cultural shift away from co-operation towards elaborately competitive practices.

Work-life balance is about the "relationship between use of time, pressure of commuting, working and other aspects of life including caring and personal well-being. There is a need to incorporate non-market work and caring more explicitly in policy discussions" (NESF-report, No. 28, 2003). As mentioned previously, the majority of working parents in Ireland have difficulty in accessing affordable childcare services. Working parents in the US and the UK also report that there is a not a balanced fit between family life and work. Data from the Modern Family Index (Working Families/Bright Horizons, 2020) shows that working parents in the US feel that "they are still unable to be honest and open at work out of fear that their family responsibilities will hold them back from career success". In the UK, despite some progress having been made in creating a positive work/life balance, having a family-friendly workplace and access to flexible working can be a lottery for working parents (Working Families/Bright Horizons, 2020). One of the few silver linings to the COVID-19, is that it has brought into focus how reliant people in Ireland are on low-paid workers. As 23% of the workforce earns less than two thirds of the median gross income, Ireland has one of the highest rates of low pay in the EU (Sweeney, 2020). Were it not for the many retail workers who continued to go out to work in supermarkets across the country, the distribution of food would have ceased. Were it not for the carers who continued to wash, bathe and care for society's most vulnerable, their plight would have been catastrophic.

Ireland has a vibrant civic society. The community, voluntary and charity sector makes a very substantial contribution to society in general. There are almost 10,000 registered charities and over 20,000 other organisations in Ireland's wider non-profit sector. The sector generates considerable economic value of €14.5bn, employs over 190,000 staff, benefits from the voluntary work of over 50,000 volunteer board members/directors and the work of over half a million "operational" volunteers, (valued by the Central Statistics Office at around €2bn per year). People in Ireland have a healthy involvement as active citizens in their local community, in neighbourhood life and in voluntary activity. A 2018 Carnegie UK Trust/Ipsos MORI poll found (The Wheel/Carnegie UK Trust, 2019)

• 97% report that people living in their area are generally kind;
• 85% make time to speak to their neighbours;

• 82% have helped someone who needed it in the last 12 months;
• 88% feel there is someone they could turn to if they needed help or advice; and
• 71% felt that emotional support would be available locally.

While these statistics attest to the positive social capital generated through neighbourliness and community activity, participants in the research conducted by the Carnegie Trust expressed their concern about trends in Irish society which may, if unchecked, reduce the overall level of social capital in society. In trends that are replicated in other countries, it is becoming increasingly difficult for people to find the time and space to interact with their neighbours. The global trend towards social systems holding individuals responsible for their health, education, housing and economic welfare, while at the same time promoting a culture of self-optimisation has had an impact on Irish society. Participants felt that trust between people is being undermined.

Family and parenting support – what it is and why it matters

> "Family support is a set of (service and other) activities oriented to improving family functioning and grounding child-rearing and other familial activities in a system of supportive relationships and resources (both formal and informal)", while "parenting support is a set of (service and other) activities oriented to improving how parents' approach and execute their role as parents and to increasing parents' childrearing resources (including information, knowledge, skills and social support) and competencies" (Daly, 2015, p. 12).

In Ireland, family and parenting support services are provided by a mixed economy of community, voluntary and statutory agencies. Tusla, referred to above, as the Irish state's Child and Family agency, has a responsibility for the provision of support services which improve outcomes for all children and their parents. Parenting support is central to this.

Family and Community Support Services is an umbrella term covering a broad range of interventions provided to children and families usually in their own homes and communities. The primary focus is on early intervention and prevention. The services provided vary along a number of dimensions according to their target group (such as mothers, fathers, toddlers, teenagers, etc.), professional background of service provider (e.g. family worker, social worker, childcare worker, youth and community worker, public health nurses, psychologist, etc.), orientation of service provider (e.g. therapeutic, child development, community development, youth work, etc.), problem addressed (e.g. parenting problems, family conflict, child neglect, educational underachievement, etc.), programme of activities (e.g. home visits, pre-school facility, youth club, parenting course, etc.) and service setting (e.g. home-based, clinic based or community-based). In addition to services provided directly by Tusla, a wide range of private and voluntary agencies are commissioned and funded by Tusla to provide services on its behalf on a local, regional and national basis. (Tusla, 2019).

Effective parents strive to meet their children's biological, cognitive and emotional needs, and to nurture and stimulate their children so that they develop into skilled, self-reliant and empathetic individuals who can relate well to others (Volmert et al., 2016). In doing so, skills and capacities are required on the part of parents to guide children and scaffold children's

activities, to respond to children's individual and changing needs and to set predictable and secure boundaries on, and expectations for children's behaviour (Volmert et al., 2016). Support for parents in their parenting role is crucial to the development of active, engaged citizens with a pro-social outlook. Parenting support refers to practice approaches, services and interventions that:

- Empower parents by developing parenting confidence and competence;
- Enable parents to foster optimal child well-being and development outcomes through knowledge of children's development and of parenting skills/competencies;
- Increased enjoyment and satisfaction of parenting (The Parenting Network, 2019).

A child's interaction with a caring responsive parent or parents is an essential ingredient in successful development affecting identity, life-long behaviour and overall well-being. Studies show that parental warmth and support have been positively associated with children's prosocial behaviour (Bagán et al., 2019; Fatima at al., 2020). In contrast, lack of parental control or authoritarian parenting practices can lead to aggressive and anti-social behaviour (Goncy et al., 2020; Lorence et al., 2019). Utting (2009) identified seven parent(s)/child relationship arenas that influence critical outcomes for children and young people.

- Learning and educational attainment;
- Social skills;
- Self-efficacy and self-worth;
- "Externalised" behaviour problems and criminality;
- "Internalised" problems including depression;
- Risky health behaviours and poor physical health;
- Adolescent brain development.
  (See O'Doherty, 2015 for details)

Social, economic and health outcomes at individual and societal levels are influenced by parenting behaviour. Poor parenting contributes to child abuse and neglect (Munro, 2012; Skehill, 2008; Halpenny, 2012). "The association between parental problems such as poor mental health, domestic violence and substance abuse, and abuse and neglect are well established" (Munro, 2012, p.131). Communitarians (Etzioni, 1994) and social capital theorists (Putnam, 2015) present a strong case for the decline in community being linked to a parenting deficit. From a utilitarian perspective, parenting is associated with the production of human capital and parenthood effects on well-being are displaced by a happiness gap. Using capitalist thinking means parenting becomes an imagined perfect project with utilitarian ends (O'Doherty, 2015). According to Gilligan (2008, p.5) "parenting, in itself, is neither demanding nor stressful - it is the myriad other demands on a parent's time and energy that cause the difficulties". Research investigating the relationship between parenthood and subjective well-being across 100 countries indicated that the relationship between parenthood and life satisfaction is generally negative throughout the world (Stanca, 2016). While the importance and value of parenting in Ireland has been demonstrated by successive governments in policy strategies, legislative developments and service frameworks, there remains much work to be done in harnessing the broad spectrum of resources now available for parenting support, so as to achieve greater consistency and universality throughout the country. The more streamlined that family and parenting support service provision is then, the more likely it is that parents will

be more empowered in their parenting roles and enabled to socialise children to gain personhood. The Irish Government's new parenting support initiative **-** *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services* (2022) - is focused on promoting parental wellbeing and sustainable family life for traditional and new emerging parent groups. It will do this through working in partnership with parents, voluntary and community groups and co-producing information and services aimed at strengthening parents' knowledge, confidence and skills to assist them in achieving beneficial outcomes for children and families. Support will be made available to meet different levels of need so that parents can engage in positive parenting activities which offer meaningful experiences and promote social cohesion and solidarity. Because there is a significant overlap between parenting supports, many of which have been developed by community and voluntary groups, and wider health, education and welfare services the Model proposes a whole-of Government approach to improving supports for parenting and helping parents to feel more confident, informed and able. It is envisaged that this whole-of -Government approach will also result in a better distribution of services across the country. This new policy initiative for family and parenting support acknowledges that while *many parenting support services are provided in a consistent manner across the country some services are distributed or made available in a less consistent manner* (Dept of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, p.42). The new *Tusla Parenting Support Strategy 2022-2027-* informed by research undertaken by *The Unesco Child and Family Research Centre NUI Galway* (Devaney, Crosse, O'Connor and Jackson, 2022) – refers to the need for continuing and steady support for families through standardized service provision capable of delivering targeted and specialist services that are available for particular family situations. A culturally sensitive Family Life Education Programme can serve as a standardized underpinning framework for implementation of both of these progressively aligned policy strategies.


Family Life Education: An integrated approach to family and parenting support

Family Life Education incorporates a preventative, educational and collaborative approach to empower families and individuals to address and resolve family issues (Darling, Cassidy and Powell, 2014). The goal of Family Life Education is to teach these skills and knowledge areas to family members across the lifespan and foster positive individual and family development so that families can function optimally. Specifically, Family Life Education professionals consider societal issues — economics, education, work-family issues, parenting, sexuality, gender, and more — within the context of the family. They believe that societal problems like substance abuse, domestic violence, unemployment, debt, and child abuse can be more effectively addressed from a perspective that considers individuals and families as part of larger systems. (National Council on Family Relations, 2019, p.1). Family Life Education practitioners develop and implement a range of Family Life Education programmes from capacity building approaches in response to family issues to direct instruction, providing knowledge and insight in relation to a family's situation.

The field of Family Life Education is well established in the US. However, apart from the US, there has been uneven development of Family Life Education as a professional activity with a unifying policy and practice approach (Robila and Taylor, 2018). This may be because, "Family Life Education is not widely understood, and therefore its full value to communities may not be wholly realised" (Darling et al., 2020, p. 427). Darling presents "an organising framework"

(Darling et al., 2020, p.439) to represent the foundational principles of Family Life Education, as well as the integrated elements of a Family Life Education way of working.

Figure 1: Foundations of Family Life Education
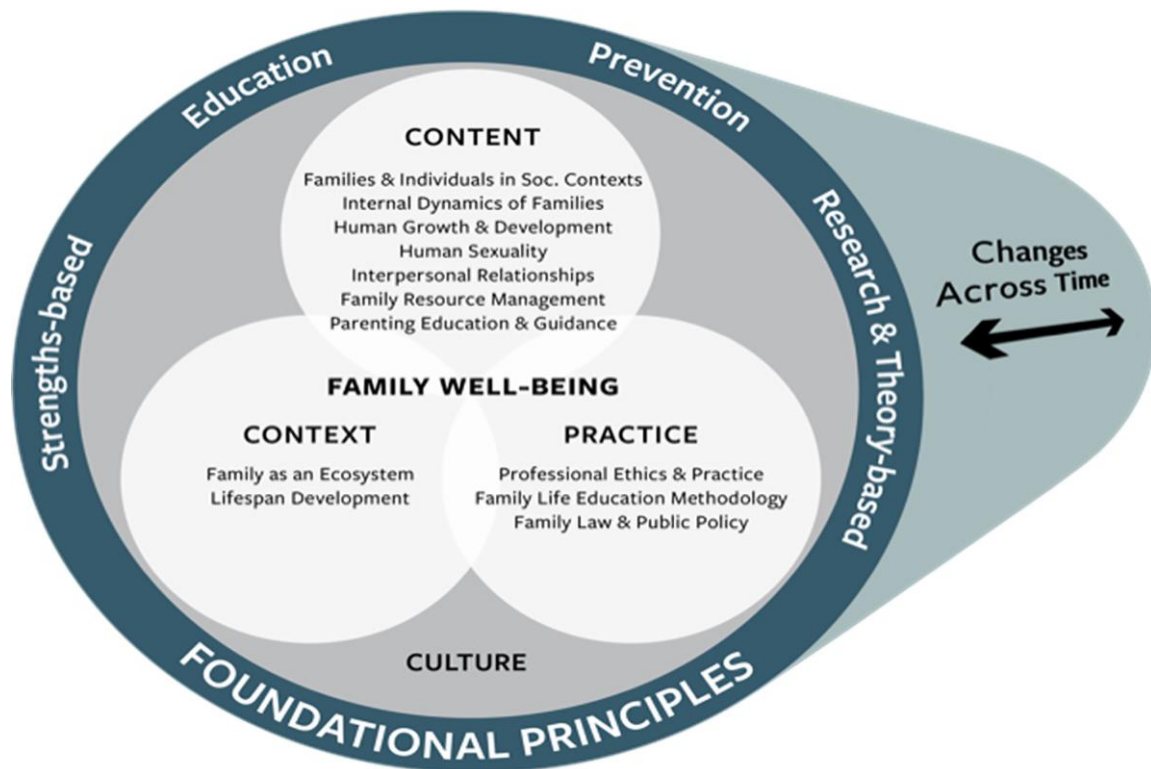
Source: Darling et al. 2020, p. 428

The above figure shows that ways of working with families i.e. types of content used in programmes, the context and situation of the family, as well as key Family Life Education practice skills are grounded in the following foundational principles:

- Education: This involves the inclusion of techniques and approaches that teach knowledge and build skills so that individuals/families can function at their optimal level. It may include a range of approaches from a capacity building participatory approaches to direct instruction methods;

- Prevention: Family Life Education uses both a reactive and proactive approach i.e. programme provision to prevent an issue and/or programme provision to respond to/impede a situation from worsening.
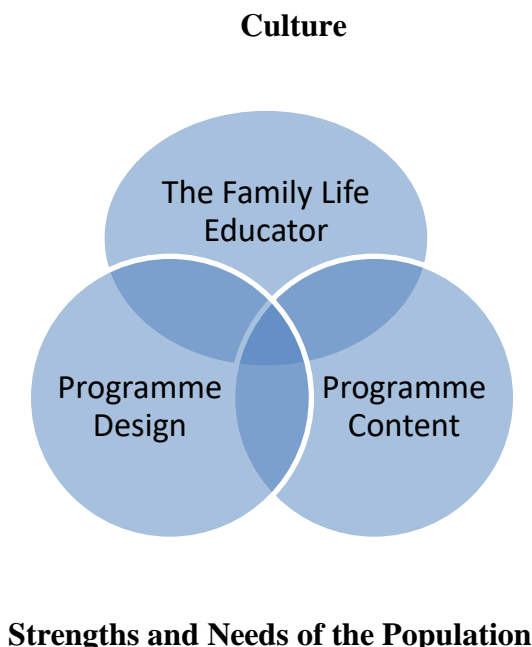
- Strengths-based: Family Life Education practice methodologies centre on facilitation, partnership and collaboration **with** families, rather than **for** families. Central to Family Life Education is "*empowering individuals to take actions in a way that is meaningful within their distinctive situations*" (Darling et al., 2020, p. 435). In this approach, we can see how the co-production of knowledge and appropriate solutions are an organic part of the work of a Family Life Education practitioner.

- Research and theory based: Family Life Education is based on an integration of a wide range of theoretical perspectives relevant to individual and family functioning (e.g. family systems, family development, parenting, relationship skills) and theories relevant to learning, program planning, and implementation (e.g. behaviourism multiple intelligences, adult learning) (Darling et al., 2020). This indicates a move away from discipline-specific theories enabling Family Life Education Practitioners to use a wide-range of theoretical perspectives in their work. Process and outcome evaluation are key to effective Family Life Education work, so that Family Life Education approaches can be assessed for appropriateness and effectiveness. Importantly, this also ensures on-going learning and an appropriate regeneration of best practice knowledge.

Overall, the distinguishing features of Family Life Education are its:

- Expansive multi-disciplinary knowledge base;
- Multi-professional practice remit;
- Educational approach to strengthening family wellbeing and parenting practices
- Evolving ways of working to reflect changes over time, both at a societal and familial level.

As Family Life Education is an all-encompassing approach to improving family well-being, it can be used as an umbrella framework to draw together family and parenting support services, typically provided by statutory and voluntary organisations in Ireland. At a time of rapid social change, such as that being experienced by all societies due to the COVID-19 crisis, cohesive service delivery, responsive to emerging family and parenting situations has become critical. Ballard and Taylor (2012) developed a framework for best practice in Family Life Education.

Figure 2: Framework for Best Practices in Family Life Education

Culture

The Family Life Educator

Programme Design

Programme Content

Strengths and Needs of the Population

Source: Ballard and Taylor (2012).

The Framework for Best Practices in Family Life Education has the three components (programme content, design, and family life educator) embedded within the culture and the strength and needs of the population. In Ireland, from a cultural perspective, the implementation of a Family Life Education programme approach requires a policy transfer dynamic. "Policy transfer" and "lesson-drawing" is a dynamic whereby knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements or institutions is used across time or space in the development of policies, administrative arrangements and institutions elsewhere (Millar, 2019). However, Millar (2019) suggests that policy transfer in this sense is rare. Cultural competency and awareness of the needs and strengths of families in Ireland is an essential requirement for programme success. Furthermore "implementation must involve a process of interaction between organisations, the members of which may have different values, perspectives and priorities from one another and from those advocating the policy" (Millar, 2019). Notwithstanding these caveats, there is a panoply of family/parenting support services operating in Ireland. Many of these services are already delivering preventative, educational and collaborative Family Life Education programme content through outreach programmes rather than through the mainstream education system. Programme design is varied and while there are no accredited family life educators, there are practitioners engaged in the promotion of family well-being and parenting support who are competent in outreach Family Life Education work. Table 2 details the educational pathways, practice repertoires and professional commonalities of some of the key practitioners engaged in outreach Family Life Education in Ireland.

Table 2 Educational/training pathways, practice repertoires, location and practice focus of some of the key practitioners engaged in outreach Family Life Education in Ireland.

| Title	Professional Education/Training	Practice Repertoire	Location	Practice Focus
Social Worker	Three to five years bachelor and masters levels, University programmes.	Case management. Group work. Advocacy. Facilitation. Collaboration	Tusla Health Service Executive (HSE) Disability Services Private care providers.	Child protection. Family preservation Children in residential and foster care.
Social Care Worker	Three to four years bachelor level programmes in Technological Universities/ Institutes of Technology.	Case management. Community practice. Residential care. Facilitation. Collaboration	Tusla Health Service Executive (HSE) Disability Services Family Resource Centres Private care providers.	Direct work with children, adults and families.
Family Support Worker	Three to four years bachelor level programmes in Institutes of Technological Universities/Institutes of Technology	Advocacy. Education. Networking. Facilitation. Collaboration	Tusla Health Service Executive Family Resource Centres.	Promotion of family wellbeing through social growth and development.
Community Worker	Three to four years bachelor level programmes in Technological Universities/ Institutes of Technology	Groupwork Advocacy Education Networking. Facilitation. Collaboration	Tusla Health Service Executive Family Resource Centres. Community development organisations.	Promotion of social justice and empowerment for marginalized and excluded individuals/ groups.
Counsellor/ Therapist	One, two, three, four and five years, certificate, diploma bachelor and masters Levels fulltime and part-time programmes in Universities, Technological Universities /Institutes of Technology and private training/education providers.	Casework. Groupwork.	Tusla Health Service Executive (HSE) Family Resource Centres Private providers.	Information Advice Guidance Support Mediation Conciliation

Source: O'Doherty, 2018.

Because the delivery of parenting and family support in Ireland has traditionally been non-integrated and provided by a range of different agencies, statutory, voluntary and community, serving a range of different population groups (Connolly, Devaney and Crosse, 2017), a greater focus on an integrated service delivery model is required for the development of a systemic approach which is nationally consistent and coherent. The challenges to parenting outlined earlier are occurring "in a context where families seem more fragile and less likely to endure" (Daly, 2015).

Development and implementation of a Family Life Education framework in Ireland.

A 5-stage model to creating and implementing a Family Life Education framework in Ireland is proposed here as follows:

Figure 3: 5-stage model for the development and implementation of a Family Life Education framework in Ireland.
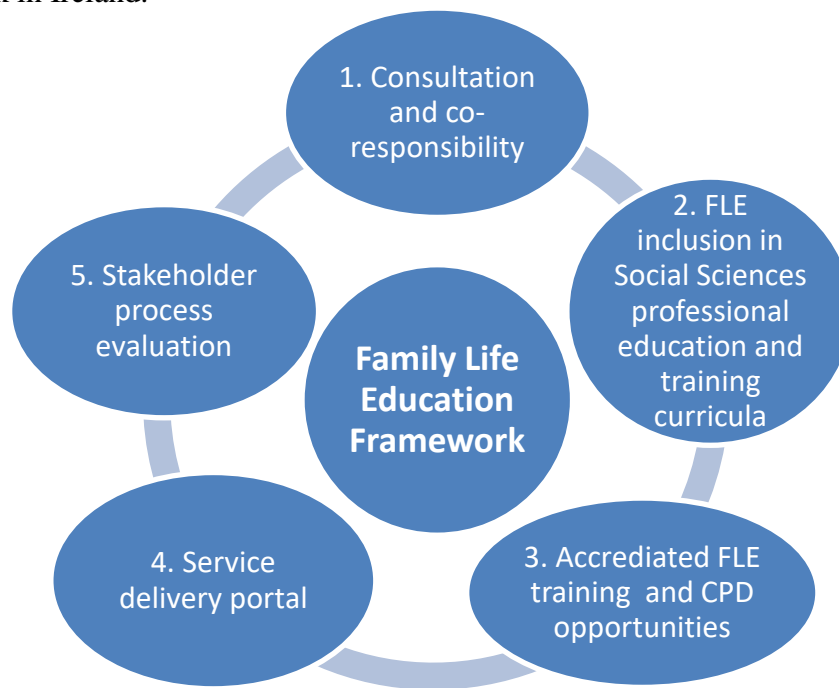
1. **Consultation and co-responsibility in policy design and implementation.**

Table 1 makes it clear that quite a degree of convergence can be identified in the domains and boundaries of the social professions active across the Family Life Education field in Ireland. These professions incorporate preventative, educational and collaborative approaches to:

- Empower families and individuals wrestling with the challenges which undermine family life/ parenting;
- Deal with the consequences of social stress;
- Support parents in everyday life, promote family solidarity and help in keeping society stable.

Social workers and social care workers intervene in family life to protect children from neglect and abuse associated with structural problems such as poverty, discrimination and inequality, which compromise parenting ability and personal problems linked to, for example, poor mental health, domestic violence and substance abuse. Family support workers and community workers engage with marginalised and socially excluded families struggling to find a home - a private space for personal expression, a place to escape from a hazardous world and a place that ensures their well-being – and the rising costs of education.

Counsellors and therapists provide individuals and families with safe, confidential spaces where they can give healing attention to traumas resulting in substance abuse, homelessness, poverty, domestic violence and digital alienation. There is a great deal of overlap between these professional activities and scope under the policy umbrella of Family Life Education for a closer alignment of strategies, techniques and programmatic approaches to parenting and family support. A Family Life Education integrated service delivery system can be co-created through processes of consultation and co-responsibility in policy design and implementation.

The European Commission is supporting this approach:

> Public service providers and their clients often see more clearly than policy officials the situation 'on the ground', what is needed, what has worked in the past or not, and why. They can spot potential obstacles and pitfalls, and steer officials away from expensive and embarrassing errors in policy implementation at a later stage. (European Commission, 2017)

Parents and teachers are the main source of Family Life Education in many countries (Robila and Taylor, 2018) and alongside other key parenting/family support stakeholders must be consulted if there is to be real buy-in to the policy intervention being proposed. "The challenge of developing effective policy for policymakers is a complex process and consultation with all stakeholders, both those tasked with service delivery and the wider public is a central component of policy development" (The Parenting Network, 2020).

A national consultation process with all stakeholders, including parent representative groups, on the development of a Family Life Education integrated service delivery system is an important starting point to ensure transparency, openness and achieve buy-in from all

stakeholders. Important here also, is the establishment of a national steering group to co-ordinate and oversee the development of an Irish Family Life Education Framework.

2. Through consultation with education providers and accrediting bodies, such as CORU (National Health and Social Services Council) and the PSI (Psychological Society of Ireland), the design and incorporation of Family Life Education approaches into existing Social Sciences professional education and training programmes can be encouraged. Thus, it will shape the professional mind-set from which future practitioners will operate from the outset of their professional journey.

3. Opportunities for the development and provision of professionally accredited Family Life Education training and CPD opportunities for practitioners already working in the field is crucial. As mentioned previously, Family Life Education is not currently an accredited professional activity in Ireland.

4. The design and implementation of a service delivery portal through which families can access the range of services they need is an essential component of a systemic approach to parenting support. The Family Life Education model, grounded in research and theory, has the potential to provide a unifying framework ensuring that a wide range of access points for parents and a diverse range of supports required to meet the varying needs of a diverse range of parents are readily available across Ireland. Co-creation embraces co-production – citizens playing an active role in producing public goods and services of consequence to them. The new Family Life Education integrated service delivery platform will incorporate the six principles of co-production:

- seeing people as assets;
- building on their capabilities;
- developing mutuality and reciprocity;
- investing in networks;
- blurring distinctions between producers and consumers;
- facilitating rather than delivering services (Stephens, 2020).

5. Periodic stakeholder process and outcome evaluation of the adoption and implementation of a Family Life Education framework in Ireland will be important. This will be used to determine the effectiveness of it as a cohesive approach to parenting and family support service provision in Ireland. It will also allow for timely modification, nationally, regionally and locally, so that service provision reflects current and emerging family and parenting needs.

Conclusion

Parents everywhere are operating under multiple stresses. It is now clear that COVID-19 expanded existing inequalities, increased social stress and fragmentation in society with direct effects on children and parents. COVID-19 has compelled people to rely on the government to organise a societal response to the threat to health that it poses. Now that the coronavirus has brought the state back in a big way, this is the right time to make the case for change in how family and parenting support provision is organised and delivered.

As society begins a process of recovery, we believe that there is a collective responsibility to positively adapt to the new economic and social realities and not just to repair the immediate damage, but to also consider how to make our parenting and family support services fit for the future. The introduction of an integrated Family Life Education Programme underpinning the new service delivery mechanisms proposed in the *National Model of Parenting Support Services* and the *Tusla Parenting Support Strategy* will serve to rationalise and upgrade the existing service delivery landscape. In this new landscape, parents will be empowered in their parenting roles, thereby enabling them to socialise children to gain personhood. In so doing, individual parents and parents collectively can make a significant contribution to the betterment of human society.

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