

# TUSLA

An Ghníomhaireacht um  
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach  
Child and Family Agency

## **Tusla – Child and Family Agency Parenting Support and Parental Participation Research Report Key Findings**

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# Introduction

This document sets out the key findings of research conducted at the request of Tusla – Child and Family Agency by the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre at NUI Galway. This research reviewed the current Parenting Support Strategy and parenting support practices in order to inform and support Tusla in devising a new five-year Parenting Support Strategy.

## Aim and objectives

### Aim

To review the current Parenting Support Strategy and parenting support practices to inform and support the development of a new five-year strategy.

### Objectives

1. To review relevant literature, policies and strategies on Parenting Support and Parental Participation
2. To consult with parents who use parenting support services, and practitioners in Tusla and Tusla-funded parenting support services.
3. To integrate these findings to inform the new Strategy, in conjunction with Tusla's Parenting Lead and Parenting Strategy Working Group.

## Methodology

A mixed methods approach to data collection was conducted. This included one-to-one interviews and an online survey.

### Who took part?

Participant	Number	Method
Parents	33	Interviews
Tusla practitioners	653	Online survey
Practitioners in Tusla-funded organisations	253	Online survey

# Documentary Analysis

A documentary analysis of national and international parenting support policies and strategies was conducted. Countries included:

- ⦿ Ireland
- ⦿ England
- ⦿ Northern Ireland
- ⦿ Scotland
- ⦿ Malta
- ⦿ Australia
- ⦿ New Zealand
- ⦿ Canada

To inform Ireland's new Parenting Support Strategy, this analysis identified key features of, and gaps in, policies and strategies in other countries, focussing on their strengths and weaknesses.

## Research findings

1. Parenting Support **makes a difference** to those who receive it.
2. Supports that respond to the needs of **diverse family** forms are required.
3. **Specialised support** to respond to specific issues is needed.
4. **Increased awareness** among the public and practitioners on the range of supports available and on the family support role of Tusla is needed.
5. **More information** for staff, organisations and parents, delivered through a range of forums, is required.
6. **Collaboration** between agencies at local level and government departments at national level is critical.
7. **Ongoing training** for practitioners to meet the needs of parents is required.

## 1. Parenting support makes a difference

### Parents

- Parents spoke of positive experiences when accessing supports. Many parents felt that interacting with other parents was particularly valuable for making friends, gaining support and reducing isolation.
- Parents spoke positively about staff saying they were always respectful, willing to help and supportive.
- Parents felt involved in decisions being made and that they were listened to.

*'For me, it has changed my life, but that is my personal experience, I had a positive experience and my life is better now from the help and support I received, I am in a better place and that is the God's honest truth.'* (P. 27)

### Tusla practitioners

Most practitioners felt their approach to supporting parents had changed in the last five years and they now concentrated more on parental participation, engagement, involvement, empowerment, decision-making and working in partnership with parents.

*'We work under the principal and practice of community development, creating a safe secure space for children and families in the community. We work in partnership with parents and parents have a voice and are given the opportunity to reach out and be respected and they are listened to. Parents are the primary educators and feel valued.'* (Family Support Worker)

Most practitioners again stated their approach to supporting parents had changed in the last five years and now concentrated more on supporting parents to express their views, ensuring parents are listened to, working in partnership with parents and actively seeking their views.

*'I think they have done great work to pull things together very well. It was very disjointed before, we know where to go, resources and plans are there. Thank you.'* (Adult Literacy Organiser)

## 2. Support for diverse family forms

### Parents

Some parents thought that more needs to be done to support their particular family form, e.g., those parenting in direct provision, lone parents, Traveller parents, homeless parents, kinship carers, fathers and bilingual families.

*'I think in this day and age, men want to be equally involved in the upbringing of their children... For dads and for men, absolutely, everything is geared towards a mother.'* (P. 14)

### Tusla practitioners

For practitioners there is an acknowledgement that generic supports are not for everyone.

*'Some more targeted advice for different parent groups – disability, homeless, domestic violence. Generic isn't for everyone.'* (Senior CFSN Coordinator)

### Practitioners in Tusla-funded organisations

*'Centres like the local FRC should have a dedicated parent inclusion worker to work specifically on the ground with the seldom heard parents. As the FRCs are seen as universal Centres, there is a greater opportunity to reduce the barriers to availing of parenting supports - there is no stigma to entering the FRCs, the majority of services are free, there is a warm welcome - it is used by parents from all walks of life.'* (FRC Worker)

### 3. Specialised support

#### Parents

Child, teenage and parental mental health, as well as pre-natal and post-partum care for mothers, were identified as areas lacking basic support.

*'I just think that unless you have the money to go private, like families are literally waiting if not months then almost a year to get supports. I just think if there was anything Tusla could do to help that, maybe fund counsellors in schools or I am not sure but something for children to access counselling supports.'* (P.18)

#### Tusla practitioners

Practitioners identified the need for more specific, targeted supports to be included in the new Parenting Support Strategy.

*'Parents are often referred from services where their children are going through an assessment or are involved in their service. I find it difficult to offer advice to parents who are experiencing behaviours associated with ASD or ADHD. They need a lot of time and other parents who attend are often frightened by what they hear from these parents' difficulties.'* (Social Care Leader)

#### Practitioners in Tusla-funded organisations

*'I would like to see a focus on mental health supports for young people and parents in particular supporting the provision of full-time counsellors in FRCs. The demand is getting greater all the time and many services don't have the resources to fund this service in a full-time capacity currently.'* (FRC)

#### Documentary analysis

- ◉ Other jurisdictions have supplementary or standalone guidance documents, which may be an area for future development in the Irish context. In particular, Australia, England, New Zealand and Scotland have produced documents that target practice with families with specific needs.
- ◉ Other jurisdictions also have more diverse provision, with countries recognising that parenting support should take different forms and appeal to different kinds of families.
- ◉ There is an acknowledgement that threats to the provision of supports can include inadequate rural services and inadequate resources (Ireland, 2019; Govt. of Malta, 2016; Dept E. & Dept H, 2012).

### 4. Increased awareness

#### Parents

- ◉ Some parents had little or no knowledge of services available other than by word of mouth, and want to be more informed.
- ◉ Some parents were concerned about being judged and felt fearful of being involved with services associated with the Tusla name and this prevented them seeking help.

*'Mortifying, and there are a lot of parents out there that are struggling and could do with supports from Tusla but they really see them as people that are going to take your child away if you look for support. So it is better to keep things a secret. I think people don't have enough information on what Tusla actually do.'* (P. 53)

## Practitioners in Tusla and Tusla-funded organisations

- Practitioners have good awareness of and make good use of the resources that were developed to aid Tusla's parenting support programme.
- The majority of participants were aware of Tusla's Parenting Strategy, Parenting 24seven, the Parent Support Champions, the Parenting Conferences, the 50 Key Messages and the Parental Participation Toolkit.
- This research shows that 64% of Tusla staff respondents and 69% of Tusla-funded respondents utilise these resources.

## Documentary analysis

- Accessing targeted services may increase stigma, e.g. problem parents, problem children, and may result in poor uptake of support.
- Targeting particular groups of parents is more likely to increase perceived stigma and problematise certain parents, e.g. migrant families and socially marginalised groups, and force them to adapt to 'middleclass norms and ideals of "good parenting"' (Sundsbo, 2018).
- The identity of the provider of targeted support can have an impact. For example, research from Croatia found that when non-statutory Family Centres fell under the authority of the statutory provider (the new Ministry of Social Policy and Youth), the centres lost some of their universal appeal and were perceived to be for families experiencing social problems and/or compelled to avail of the support services (Pecnik, 2014).

## 5. Information

### Parents

Parents spoke of the need for accessible, available information and suggested advertising and distribution of information through GPs and PHNs.

*'I literally done what they told me to do in the County Council and then I went to the social welfare when I was told to do, I was just going around, that is why I felt that I didn't know, which I didn't, I didn't know what to know to do, where to go, I had nobody who knew my story. I had no support worker, I had nobody, and I was literally on my own ... like we will be two years here now in housing and my daughter is still going through it.'* (P. 05)

### Practitioners in Tusla and Tusla-funded organisations

Many participants mentioned the need for more information, suggesting increased information be made available in communities and on websites for both parents and staff.

*'I wonder should we provide more information – we focus mostly on engagement and relationship. Perhaps we should give out more information on the agency – procedures, complaints policy, etc. We work in a community setting and try to deliver services without too much formality but perhaps we need to formalise how parents are informed'* (Project Leader)

## Documentary analysis

- Many parents may not be aware of the support available (Shulruf et al., 2013).
- There is a need to map current service provision and gaps as well as to provide information on available support (Eurochild, 2011).
- Raising awareness of available services may increase uptake and remove stigma.

## 6. Collaboration

### Parents and practitioners in Tusla and Tusla-funded organisations

The need to work in partnership with schools was highlighted by many participants, as was the need to provide more school counselling services and work with healthcare professionals.

*'I think schools should have counsellors attached to them. I think secondary schools, I have spoken with teachers over the years and they said anxiety, eating disorders, all those things have a massive impact on children's outcomes and they would prefer to lose one teacher and get a counsellor in.'* (P. 49)

### Documentary analysis

- Parenting strategies need to have a common vision across agencies (Law et al., 2009).
- Many of the parenting support strategies reviewed for this research involve more than one government department to deliver more co-ordinated 'joined-up' support.

## 7. Ongoing and refresher training

### Parents

Parents highlighted the need for ongoing support and training on diverse family forms and on families who are parenting with particular challenges.

*'Yeah, not come out with the big long words and try and break it down to the way, like I said if they knew the family, like I am a Traveller, and their fear is, look we are not taking away your child, we are not going to keep him or anything, we are just here to help you if you want any help ... them kind of approaching the wrong way because I won't lie, I would be afraid, anything that was said to me, like my mother-in-law said, said it to the child, don't open your mouth if they come.'* (P. 51)

### Practitioners in Tusla and Tusla-funded organisations

Practitioners suggested a need for training in general on the supports available to parents.

*'In-house training for staff on support offered by Tusla – as a duty intake social worker the only support service I'm aware of is Meitheal and Tusla Family Resource Centres – I usually refer families to Barnardo's for parenting support'* (Social Worker)

### Documentary analysis

The documentary analysis highlighted that other jurisdictions ensure that a range of child and family service staff are trained in child development and skills necessary to support parents. Utilising a range of staff such as the community nurse, day care staff or teachers, for example, ensures the provision of consistent parenting support.

# Recommendations

Combining the findings from the documentary analysis, interviews with parents, and Tusla and Tusla-funded organisation staff surveys, we make the following recommendations for the new Tusla Parenting Support Strategy.

## Parenting support makes a difference

Provide a consistent accessible message to all parents and family members that support is available and that if availed of this support can make a positive difference to them and to their children.

## Increase general awareness on the role and function of Tusla – Child and Family Agency

Deliver ongoing public awareness campaigns at local, regional, and national level to provide knowledge and understanding of the services and supports provided by Tusla and partner agencies.

## Provide accessible information on services available for parents

Provide accessible information to parents and family members on the type and range of supports available and on how and when to access them.

Provide information to practitioners working with parents, children, young people and families on the supports available and on how and when to access them.

Encourage practitioners to support parents to access services.

## Specialised support for diverse family forms and for issue-based challenges is required.

Provide a range of locally based universal and specialist supports for parents and family members which reflect diverse family forms and identified needs.

Map service provision across range and type of support highlighting and responding to identified gaps.

Continued provision of virtual parenting supports.

Respond to structural inequalities impacting on children, young people and parents.

## Interagency collaboration and coordination is necessary

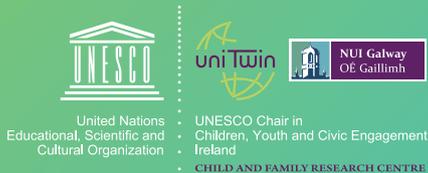
Ongoing systematic coordination and collaboration between departments, agencies and services is required.

Organisational culture needs to support such collaboration and coordination throughout organisation levels, and across sectors.

## Staff training and development

All practitioners require adequate knowledge, understanding and resources to ensure they can respond to the needs of all parents and family forms. Continuous upskilling and professional development is required in this regard. This includes specialist training and resources.





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