

# WORKING TOWARDS REFLEXIVE PRACTICE FOR FAMILY GUIDANCE

## GUIDELINES FOR PARENTING SUPPORT



ONE.be

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# FOREWORD

Over the last few years, parenting support initiatives have multiplied, following initiatives from several public administrations, particularly the Office of Birth and Childhood (ONE) and Youth services, as well as from the associative network.

Parenting support practices and the theoretical references which underlie them are diverse. Initiatives take many forms and pursue different objectives. The equivocal meaning of the term 'parenting support' generates confusion and thus some difficulty for inter-sector, inter-institution and inter-individual cooperation. Lack of a common understanding means there exist competing or even contradictory positions. However, in the interests of children, consensuses need to emerge in order to better articulate the work between all the professionals who collaborate to support parents and families. This is our goal.

We felt it was essential to provide professionals with a reference document which could lay down common ethical and pedagogical benchmarks. The goal is not only to develop a common language but also to promote professional practices which are respectful of parents and children.

Making practical and conceptual knowledge easily accessible, building common ground and promoting network practices were our priority objectives for this project.

We are convinced of the importance of partnerships, which is why the ONE, the General Direction of Youth Services and the General Delegate for children's rights decided to work together. This document is the fruit of this collaboration. We hope that it will facilitate new partnership building and consolidate existing ones, taking into account the specific missions of each agent.

The concepts developed in this document are the fruit of numerous exchanges between professionals and rely on a strong set of values, which we proudly defend. They translate the ways in which we wish to see parenting support articulated throughout our actions.

The values we defend in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation are:

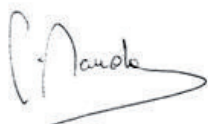
- An ethical framework which respects parents, democratic values and children's rights.
- An educational alliance between parents and professionals, benefiting children, which translates an anti-discrimination and empowerment-driven stance;
- Policy which aims towards better practice and parenting in order to promote the well-being of children.

Parenting support is only meaningful in as much as it contributes to the development and the fulfillment of each and every child.

This toolkit was created following an initiative by the ONE, in collaboration with the General Direction of youth Services and the General Delegate for Children's rights, with support from the Houtman Foundation. It is aimed towards all professionals who work with children in French-speaking Belgium.

If we created this document together, it is because we strongly believe that sharing knowledge and skills on a foundation of common values is the best way to pool our resources and actions.


Parenting support must provide a strong base for all of our practices if we wish to guarantee harmonious development to all children and promote their well-being. In short, our actions are intended to be resolutely in line with the International Convention of Children's Rights.



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# INTRODUCTION

## 1. THE CONTEXT

The Office of Birth and Childhood was given the mission of elaborating, with the support of the Houtman Foundation, a toolkit for parenting support. The elaboration of this document is stipulated to in the note to the Government of June 2006 and aimed at child and youth workers.

Parenting support is not a new idea, but there has been a recent surge in interest in the subject. In this vein, the present document attempts to lay the groundwork for thinking through parenting support for professionals, institutions and policies, at each of their levels.

A second aim of this document is to suggest benchmarks which can be shared between professionals from different fields, institutions and approaches.

We make the assumption that from singular contexts, consensuses can emerge which meaningfully define the field, despite tensions and sometimes contradictory positions. In order to promote dialogue between people and networks, it is useful to build a common language... together.

*“There is no such thing as a baby,  
there is a baby and someone”*  
(Winnicott<sup>1</sup>)

### Why support parenting?

Because we know that a child grows up well if she has “good enough parents”, who fulfill her basic security needs and the functions necessary to the elaboration of a positive perception of the world and of herself.

Supporting parenting is taking into account the context while maintaining as a primary concern the well-being and the superior interest of each child and paying particular attention to her parents, who are the first educators the child encounters.

For professionals, supporting parents or other primary caregivers<sup>2</sup>, means guiding and accompanying them in their parenting practices.

In supporting parenting, our society attempts to provide for each child the conditions of her fulfillment.

## 2. A COLLECTIVE AND PARTICIPATIVE APPROACH

The present document was created in **collaboration** with numerous professionals from the perinatal sector, as well as childhood and youth services professionals who work in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, from both institutional and non-profit backgrounds. Hundreds of profes-

sionals **exchanged and discussed experiences** over the course of five days, between December 2005 and December 2009. Themes which are intimately linked to parenting support<sup>3</sup> were tackled through the use of a largely participative methodology.

<sup>1</sup> D.W. Winnicott, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> We use the term “parent” generically to refer to any adult who does the work of parenting.

<sup>3</sup> Parent-professional partnerships, vulnerable situations, attachment, socialization and children’s activities.



Discussions were structured through the presentation of useful insights on a theme<sup>4</sup>. Next a large part of the day was dedicated to exchanges, in smaller groups of around twenty professionals who presented clinical case studies they had met, in order to facilitate discussions and invite debate.

**The last day was dedicated to summarizing results** and allowed for clarifying the many ideas, values and positions which arose during the workshops. This was an essential step, in that it allowed for ensuring that the conclusions adequately reflected the views of the participants<sup>5</sup>.

Next, **a pluridisciplinary group** delved deeper into the subject matter to enrich, specify and nuance the principles and ideas which had emerged. This group was facilitated by experts, such as Catherine Selle-net (professor at the University of Nantes, author of several books such as “*La Parentalité Décryptée*”).

Lastly, **parents were consulted** via an action-research run by “Synergies and actions” in order to adequately reflect the views of caregivers from different groups and walks of life, particularly concerning their expectations and opinions on parenting support interventions.

The present document is a synthesis of these exchanges and reflections.

### 3. HOW THIS DOCUMENT IS ORGANIZED

Parenting support is a vast subject and the object of constant discussion. Given the complexity of the subject matter, the present document is made up of several parts:

- A core document
- Satellite documents

#### The core document

The present document titled “Working towards reflexive practices for family guidance: a parenting support toolkit” is the core document. It was created with the aim of being an accessible tool for all professionals. It is the result of choices made and ideas broached during the discussion days and outlined by the group of experts.

#### Satellite documents

The aim of the satellites is to further enrich and examine themes which are only cursorily broached in the core document.

Different satellites are intended:

- A glossary which further develops the concepts used here;
- Detailed descriptions of certain concepts;
- Tools for analysis, evaluation and reflection;
- ...

These satellites will be co-constructed, enriched and nuanced over time.

*All documents will be made available to professionals on the website [www.parentalite.cfwb.be](http://www.parentalite.cfwb.be) as soon as they are finalized.*

<sup>4</sup> Presentations were introduced by Philippe Béague, Michel Dechamps, Bruno Hembecq, Willy Lahaye, Gentile Manni, Michel Mercier, Monique Meyfroet, Myriam Sommer.

<sup>5</sup> On this occasion, Cécile Bertrand made some drawings to evoke the various questions raised. Some of them appear on this document.

# A PARENTING SUPPORT TOOLKIT...

## 1. WHY A TOOLKIT ?

Before we go on, it is important to specify what we mean by « toolkit ».

This document is intended as a toolkit for facilitating **reflexivity**<sup>6</sup> for professionals. It contains scientific knowledge, principles for intervention, common values and concrete examples of parenting support. It is in no way meant to be exhaustive or to erect norms, but rather to suggest options which can constitute points of vigilance and of strength in order to situate, analyze and reflect upon one's own practices.

It is aimed towards **professionals**<sup>7</sup> who are in direct or indirect contact with children and (future) parents: whether they work in youth services, for the Office of Birth and Childhood, in education, in the associative sector, in child protection services, in Centers for Mental Health, in Family planning, in psycho-medical-social centers, in hospitals, in children's rights...

### THIS DOCUMENT HAS THE FOLLOWING GOALS:

- Offering a framework and common ground for practice and debate;
- Supporting professionals in reflexive practice;
- Helping professionals to take a step back.

## 2. PARENTING AND PARENTING SUPPORT: CONCEPTS WHICH NEED CLARIFYING

The concepts of parenting and parenting support are relatively recent. They emerged in several fields of social work and there as many definitions as there are uses.

### PARENTING

The French term "*parentalité*", which translates as "parenting", appeared in the 70's, following important transformations of the idea of the family.

- **Children's place within the family** has shifted: the family begins with a child<sup>8</sup>.

As Irène Théry<sup>9</sup> points out, contemporary family dynamics involve the weakening of the institution of the couple and an increase in the importance of filiation. Relationships between children and their parents are now preserved beyond separation.

<sup>6</sup> « Reflexivity means a personal process of adhering to the idea of questioning your practice, your functioning,, values, representations... » (Bernard Debacker, 2008, trad. Eleanor Miller).

<sup>7</sup> Daycare workers, social workers, educators, nurses, teachers, psychologists, youth workers, doctors...

<sup>8</sup> Authors such as François De Singly or Pierre Grelley develop this idea.

<sup>9</sup> Irène Théry, 1998.





- **Increasing diversity of family configurations**  
Claude Martin<sup>10</sup> points out that the term “parenting” refers to a great variety of situations. Single parenting, separations, blending all lead to situations in which biological parents are not necessarily fulfilling parental functions (be they social, biological or educational); these tasks are often divided among several adults close to the child (parents and step-parents).
- **Shifting of the public-private boundaries.** Socialization, education and care given to a child cross the public-private divide and are also carried out by adults outside the home (in daycare and schools...). The responsibility for a child’s education is not only that of the parents, who delegate parts of their role to professional third parties.

- **The evolution of gender roles**  
The concept of parenting is gender neutral and includes fathers<sup>11</sup>, mothers and whoever fills a parental role; relationships between parents and children are also increasingly individualized.
- **Parental dynamics.** Becoming a parent is now considered to be a process, breaking with the tradition of thinking in terms of maternal and paternal “instinct”. We are not born parents, we become parents. The process can thus vary between children of the same parents.



**From the action-research “Parenting support: the points of view of parents”<sup>11</sup> :** “Parenting is usually the result of a plan. Most parents interviewed decided when to stop using contraception. Living as a couple is no longer synonymous with having children. Children are a specific project which is distinct from that of communal living. From what parents expressed to us, we hear that becoming parents was viewed as a plan on top of that of living as a couple, without taking into account to what extent the arrival of a child would change and shake up the couple, requiring adaptation. Becoming parents is the beginning of something rather than its end. Most parents speak of this transition as that from a sort of prolonged adolescence (hobbies, friends, freedom, few responsibilities...) to one to which they adapt little by little. It’s as if the arrival of a child forces the process of becoming an adult, rather than becoming an adult being a reason to have children. Sometimes this transition is difficult.”

Parenting is a two-level process, both **individual** and **societal**. The concept was thus initially developed:

- On the one hand, in psychoanalytic circles, which look at parenting as a psychical process;
- On the other hand, in socio-anthropological circles, which look at parenting in how it integrates society, beyond the parent-child relationship;

Several authors have attempted to articulate these different approaches. Didier Houzel<sup>13</sup>, for instance, defines parenting as having three parts:

- **Exercising parenting** refers to the **legal and symbolic** aspects of parental functions, such as rights and obligations vis à vis one’s child and social norms.

- **Experiencing parenting** involves the **subjective and psychological dimensions** of parenting (experience, emotions, representations, psychological transformations which parents go through).

- **Practicing parenting** refers to the concrete daily acts of parenting, the **“effective tasks”** which are objectively observable and which fall to each parent<sup>14</sup>: care, interactions, educational practices...

These three components are intimately connected. For instance, the intersection between practice and experience shows that it’s interactions between children and parents which build attachment, one of the foundations of parenting.

<sup>10</sup> Claude Martin, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> A recurring theme throughout the workshops was the role of the father.

<sup>12</sup> From the action research « Parenting Support : the points of view of parents », carried out by Synergies et Actions for the current project.

<sup>13</sup> and <sup>14</sup> Didier Houzel, 1999.



**A father** says: « *The moments I spend with my daughter, those little special times, like bath time and bedtime, where I'm really there for her and only for her, are bliss. It helps to build a strong relationship between us.* »

Catherine Sellenet<sup>15</sup> insists that these three components which make up parenting are largely influenced by the affective, familial, social, economic, legal and institutional **contexts** in which parenting takes place.

These three components are in constant dynamic interaction, and a change in one impacts all three.

Among the authors who discuss parenting, Catherine Sellenet offers a definition of parenting which

seems to us to be particularly pertinent in that it integrates the various components and makes no distinction between types of families: ***“Parenting is all the rights and obligations, psychical and affective adaptations, practices of care and education, exercised by a parent, by law or elected, for a child, whatever their chosen family configuration”.***<sup>15</sup>

We would however add that the term “chosen” is not always appropriate; for instance, being a single parent is not necessarily a choice.

## PARENTING SUPPORT

### Supporting parenting?

**Society’s attitude towards parenting** is ambivalent. Parents are considered to be essential for children’s development, on the one hand, and on the other, they are accused of being at the root of the many difficulties children face, such as mental health issues, behavioral problems, delinquency and so on.

Political initiatives surrounding parenting support often emerge in a context of questioning parental functions and roles.

The idea that parents delegate more and more responsibility to educational institutions is a common one and feeds the notion of the abdication of responsibility by parents. In this context, parenting “support” takes the form of a call to order, reminding parents of their responsibilities in the face of the breakdown of the family, which is viewed as a threat to public order<sup>16</sup>.

However, **attributing too much responsibility to parents contributes to rendering invisible the many social causes of these problems**<sup>17</sup>.

For instance,

- The social circumstances within which parenting takes place are more complex today than ever before;
- Families have increasingly fragile socio-economic situations;
- Increased isolation of some parents;

- Parents face new issues and difficulties, such as the internet and access to media;
- Frequent exposure to contradictory messages: it is not that we live in a society without norms, but these are diverse and sometimes contradictory; parents, faced with this barrage of information, need to make choices about what to believe.
- Increased expectations from society, such as social pressure to succeed for each member of the family;
- Changes in how we build and make families and redefinition of parental roles.

These issues have repercussions on how parents care for their children.

This is why, according to Claude Martin<sup>18</sup> *“policies of parental support need to start by taking parents seriously and questioning how they view their roles as parents, rather than detailing what they should and should not do”.*

In fact, **parenting support initiatives from the field** often focus on emancipation and attempt to break the isolation in which some families live, rebuilding solidarity and citizenship.

<sup>15</sup> Catherine Sellenet, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Claude Martin, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Vandebroek, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Claude Martin, 2003.

Bernard Terrisse<sup>19</sup> defines parenting support as the “set of interventions, from social networks and social organizations, community and educational organizations, which aim to help parents in realizing

their educational intentions; in particular, it aims to help them handle themselves, organize resources and make necessary services available”.

## Support or accompaniment ?

“Parenting support” is the most commonly used term among professionals, politicians, journals, researchers and media alike. However, it is a contentious expression...

Some argue that support is an adequate term because becoming a parent is an inherently fragile process which requires reinforcement. Others respond that even if becoming a parent can destabilize some, it is a normal part of life and doesn't necessarily require systematic or specific support.

In this case, “accompaniment” is the preferred term, because unlike “support”, it carries no assumption of fragility.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines to accompany as to “go somewhere with someone”. Professionals thus need to adjust to parents, to occupy the same space as them, the same time and rhythm.

However, professional accompaniment is not to be confused with complacent complicity. Parents and professionals are in an asymmetrical relationship, because they have very different roles and positions. Professionals need to maintain a certain dis-

tance and an objective stance on the situation in order to offer an accompaniment which is appropriate and thought-out and one that gels with the ethical, social and citizenship values which reinforce and/or coexist with the values of the parent. Parents need to be reinforced according to their own rhythm, but it is **the child who is at the center of parenting support**.

The present document lies at the intersection of these two approaches: professionals have the task of **offering reinforcement of parenting practices**, and otherwise **support parents through whatever difficulties** they face in the context of changes brought about by the arrival of a child.

Some professionals have parenting support as their primary mission, while for others it is a secondary and indirect role.

Parenting support is not limited to the relationship between parents and professionals around a child. Public policy which surrounds parenting, such as child support measures, parental leave and so on, also heavily impact parenting and are therefore part of parenting support.



**Workers in a daycare** explain how they take part in accompanying parents whose children they care for: *“Upon request, we regularly organize group discussions with parents. This allows for discussions of educational principles, both familial and professional; we tackle subjects which concern parents, such as potty training, school, nutrition, transitional objects... Everyone is free to express their beliefs, parents ask questions and exchange points of view... Sharing is important, because parents need to know that there are many ways of doing things and everyone has these questions.”*

19 Bernard Terrisse, 1998.

Parenting support” is made up of **two inextricable dimensions**:

- **The first is social, political and economic**, and is the concern of public policies which “support” parenting (parental leave, maternal and infant protection, daycare policy...). It also covers subjects on which public action does not act: consumerism (the impact of advertising), lack of taking into account parenting in issues of household indebtedness and housing policies, to name but a few.
- **The second concerns the practical guidance of parenting**, and is implemented by actors who are in direct or indirect contact with families. We mainly discuss this second dimension in the present document.



- NO!
- No what, Mum? You will have to learn to justify these radical stances.

### 3. PARENTING SUPPORT IN THE WALLONIA-BRUSSELS FEDERATION

Parenting support concerns all levels of public authority.

- The Wallonia-Brussels Federation is tasked with matters of childhood, youth, education and health promotion;
- The Region of Wallonia and the COCOF (note) make decisions in matters of health, mental health, handicap and social cohesion (family planning, family assistance...)
- The Federal state is competent in issues of civil law, labor regulations, parental leave, health-care,...

All these matters connect to family life, so any action in these domains can help or hinder parenting support.

Questions of parenting are thus integrated into a normative framework structured by many legislations and regulations.

#### The International Convention on the Rights of the Child

The ICRC stipulates a series of obligations that States must fulfill in order to render effective the rights of children. The Convention is founded on four general principles, i.e. non-discrimination, superior interest of the child, child participation and the right to development. It recognizes a series of rights, civic, political, economic, cultural and social which can be separated into three categories: those which detail services to which the child has a right (the right to an education, the right to health...), those which confer specific protection (from torture, exploitation, particular vigilance for children who are removed from their homes...), and those which speak to their rights to participate in decisions which concern them and those which concern society in general (freedom of speech, freedom of association...).

Several articles of the Convention insist upon the **fundamental role parents play in ensuring that children's rights are respected** and on the obligations States have towards parents:

- States must respect the responsibilities, rights and obligations of parents to guide their children towards taking up their rights (article 5).

- The responsibility of raising a child and ensuring her proper development falls first to her parents. To promote the respect of the rights stipulated in the Convention, States must provide appropriate help to parents in exercising these responsibilities (article 18)
- States recognize children's right to the best possible state of health and to have access to medical services. States must thus take appropriate measures, especially in ensuring that all groups of society, especially parents and children, receive information on health and nutrition and have adequate help to put this information into effect (article 24).
- States recognize that all children have the right to a socio-economic level sufficient to their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. This is parents' responsibility first and foremost, and States must adopt appropriate measures to help parents execute this right and if need be offer material assistance and support programs (article 28).

#### Conjoined parental authority

Since 1995, Belgium recognizes **conjoined parental authority**, which means that both parents have authority, even when separated. They have the same rights and obligations towards their child once filiation is established.

The consequences of filiation cannot be broken by separation or divorce. This constitutes a considerable evolution from the previous notion of paternal power or parental authority going to the parent who lodges the child<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> The 13th April 1995 relative to the conjoined exercise of parental authority. Currently, parliamentary debates are discussing the possibility of instaurating a "social parenting" which would confer parental authority to a step-parent (only in certain conditions, especially in the case of death of the legal parent).

## The Office of Birth and Childhood

In the Francophone community of Belgium, the first policy explicitly targeting parenting support dates back to the early 2000's.

The Office of Birth and Childhood's missions were revised in 2002, and on this occasion, parenting support was defined as one of the Office's transversal missions. The July 17 2002 decree which reforms the Office stipulates that, in addition to its two public service missions (accompanying children in and in relation to her family and social environments<sup>21</sup>, and the care of children outside of their families<sup>22</sup>, **the Office of Birth and Childhood includes parenting support as a general mandate**. The ONE's management plan for 2003-2005 promises:

- The creation of a "paternity booklet" (later replaced with a "parental booklet")
- Providing guidance for child-parent meeting spaces;
- Informing parents through the use of media and annual thematic campaigns.

## Specialized youth outreach

The 4<sup>th</sup> March 1991 decree on youth outreach organizes how the French Community manages specialized youth outreach, following the transfer of this matter from the federal to community levels in 1980 and 1988. The choice of the term "youth outreach", as opposed to "youth protection", gives the tone.

Youth outreach is a right<sup>23</sup> Young people and their parents are considered competent and aware of their own difficulties, as well as capable of asking for help when they need it. The idea is to work from their strengths, rather than point out their weak points. De facto, parenting support is an important part of the 1991 decree: priority is given to helping young people and children in their own environment, and removal from home must be an exception. If it is necessary to house a child outside of her home, workers must work with the family in order to allow for the return of the child, as soon as possible.

The principle of non-judicial diversions means that help offered to children and young people with difficulties or in danger is situated within the socio-educational field, rather than the legal field.

In 2006, a political orientation note from the Government of the Francophone community clarified the role of the ONE and specified the role it would play in the elaboration of this toolkit.

The 2008-2012 ONE management plan aims to meet the needs of children, future parents and parents, in order to realize the rights recognized to children by the Convention.

In this vein, the ONE planned to develop, in the interest of children, parenting support. This support consists in encouraging parents, starting from their skills and facilitation expression and reflection on their role and their practices, in order to meet children's essential needs.

Judiciary power intervenes only if it is necessary to impose help when a child is in grave danger and her parents refuse the suggested help or fail to implement recommendations. The written consent of the child or young person is required if she is over 14 years old, except in the above mentioned case (of grave danger and failure to cooperate).

Lastly, parenting support is an essential aspect of prevention, which is run by the local councils for youth outreach (Conseils d'Arrondissements de l'Aide à la Jeunesse, or CAAJ), by general prevention and by detached youth work programs (AMO). Recurrent difficulties families struggle with are analyzed and preventative interventions are developed. Particular attention is paid to the forms of symbolic violence which target youth and families; fighting the invisible forms of violence which victimize children and families is indeed an important part of parenting support.

Furthermore, the counselor for youth outreach has the role of calling out any individual or **service** which does not provide adequate help to families.

21 Text of the French-Speaking Community Government reforming consultations for children, dated the 9/06/2004 : this text stipulates that the missions of structures and of sanitary mobile consultations, in the context of preventative medicine, promotes, follows and preserves health of children between 0 and 6 years of age. They also organize support activities and medico-social prevention in partnership with other social services who act locally.

22 Decision of the French-speaking Community Government concerning the code of quality for daycare, dated the 17/12/2003 : this text specifies that the Community must guarantee optimal daycare conditions to all children.

23 Article 3 of the Decree on Youth Outreach.

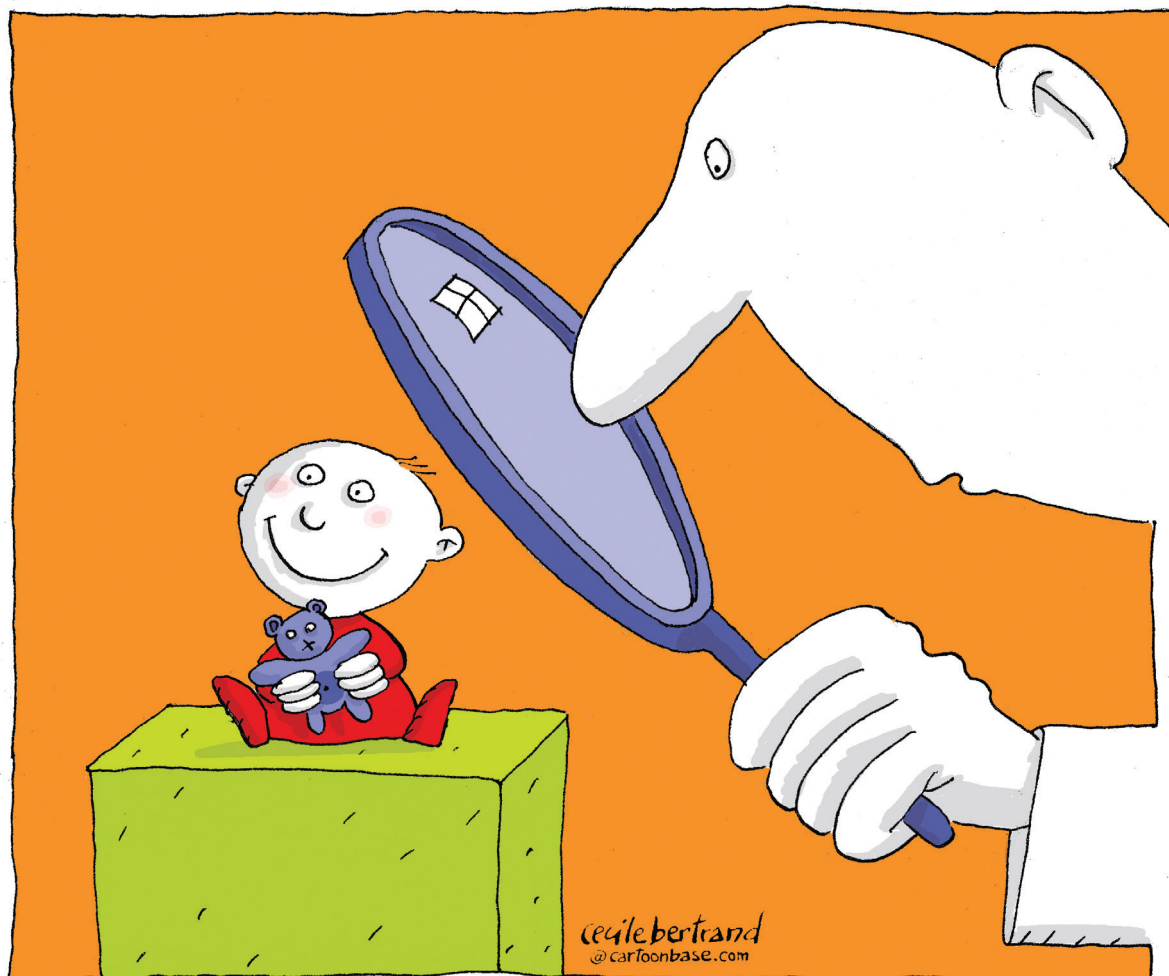
## Helping children who are victims of maltreatment

In the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, the 1998 decree defining help to children who are victims of maltreatment, as well as its 2004 amendments<sup>24</sup>, describe the missions of SOS Children, including help and care to children who are victims of maltreatment or at risk of maltreatment. The decree also founds the Commission for the Coordination of Help for Child Victims of Maltreatment”, which is destined to help streamline care pathways for children on a local level by facilitating collaborations.

The philosophy of this decree, which has guided the actions of SOS Children since its creation, rests on the principle of the absence of obligation of reporting to the judiciary sphere. Reporting is replaced with an obligation to personally

provide help and care or to refer the situation to specialized workers. It also stipulates to shared confidentiality, meaning that sharing information among workers is possible but must be discrete and decisions to share information must be resolutely informed by what is necessary to collaborative care.

Furthermore, the Government of the French community put in place the Coordination of Help to Victims of Maltreatment in 1998. This body’s missions are centered on prevention and the training of professionals. The Coordination developed Yapaka, a prevention program, one of the axes of which is parenting support (for instance, it includes a campaign titled “Being a Parent means...”).



<sup>24</sup> Decree on Help to children who are victims of maltreatment, dated the 16/03/1998, amended the 12/05/2004.

# FOUR PRINCIPLES FOR PARENTING SUPPORT

Four main principles emerged which offer a possible framework for a global parenting support policy in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation:

- Children are at the heart of parenting support
- Parents are skilled agents
- Parenting support is for all parents
- It is necessary to take into account the contexts in which parenting takes place

These principles and values should inform practice and policy on every level.

## 1. CHILDREN LIE AT THE HEART OF PARENTING SUPPORT

Children are considered to be unique and connected persons with skills and rights. The International Convention on the rights of the Child emphasizes that children must have access to adequate responses to their basic needs: necessary care, eating, sleeping, being clothed, being protected..., but there are also other essential needs, such as the right to be considered a person, the right to live with both parents and so on. The importance of relational needs is emphasized: attachment, socialization, self-realization... Children must have access to an environment which is favorable to their development and fulfillment.

**Best interests of the child are and must remain central. In most cases, the child's interests are adequately taken into account by her parents.**

However, although parents are the very first educators, any adult in a child network has a moral obligation towards her<sup>25</sup>. The proverb "it takes a village" illustrates the importance of community in raising children.

Alain Renaut<sup>26</sup> adds that children also need to have confidence in the people and institutions that surround, educate, protect and care for them.

Parenting support means building respectful partnerships with parents rather than hierarchical dynamics over them.

However, it can happen that a conflict arises between children's rights and parent's rights, and this conflict must be analyzed in all its complexity<sup>27</sup>. Best interest of the child may be analyzed differently by workers, parents or other members of social or care networks.

Some parents have trouble or are incapable of adequately fulfilling, in the short or long term, their children's needs. In these situations, in order to ensure the respect of the child's rights, different alternatives are available, the most drastic being substitution of the parent. However, even in the most extreme situations, parents matter to their children and may manage to mobilize parental skills, maintaining partial parenting.

<sup>25</sup> Sylvie Mesure, 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Alain Renaut, 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Dominique Youf, 2002.





## 2. PARENTS AS SKILLED AGENTS

*“Rather than regard families starting from their weak points or the inadequate things they may do, we look at them through a different lens: what they are doing must be the best solution they managed to find in their current situation. This changes our relationship with them.”*

Guy Ausloos<sup>28</sup>

Parenting support interventions must build on the strengths and resources of parents. Parents are the first and foremost educators of children and most of the time they are “good enough”, according to Winnicott’s famous phrase<sup>29</sup>.

According to Catherine Sellenet<sup>30</sup>, parenting involves:

- Knowledge
- Know-how
- Problem solving skills
- Natural and acquired abilities
- An attitude

This set makes up the skills necessary to parenting. Different elements may be present and/or active to different degrees in different individuals, and in their interactions with different children. Most of these skills can be acquired and strengthened. Furthermore, they make up a whole and must be considered as such.

An intervention developed in Montreal<sup>31</sup> underlies the evolving and circumstantial nature of these skills: “As various life circumstances change and positively or negatively impact parental roles, skills can be reinforced or deteriorate over time”.

In order to evaluate parental skills when there is possible danger, workers should appraise observable skills at a given time and in a given context. This appraisal should then allow for choosing and implementing a pathway for guidance, help, support or protection. Frontline workers sometimes resist the notion of assessment, fearing generalizations, clichés, common places and stereotypes as well as losing carefully built trust relationships with parents.

In their daily practice, through the intuitive interpretation of their observations, workers use implicit assessments which may, at any given moment, be informed by latent stereotypes. Thus, objectivizing and systematizing assessment would improve evaluations and make it possible to clearly articulate issues with concerned parties<sup>32</sup>. Parents have the right to understand, contest and discuss decisions made concerning them, and communicating evaluations clearly makes this possible.

The goal is not to list parental skills in order to normalize and count behaviors. Assessments should lead to a subtle and comprehensive view of the situation, making use of the initial, intuitive impressions and reinforcing these through an objective analysis of the situation. Assessments also must be done in collaboration with parents. Recognizing their skills means recognizing that they are active subjects in their situation, legal subjects, capable of expressing and analyzing their situations. Educational alliances and true partnerships cannot be built without this fundamental assumption. This also means being willing to discuss and debate our observations, our worries, our assessments, and taking into account families’ points of view.

Professionals should also avoid centering their assessments exclusively on the child and her parents, and take into account life and family events comprehensively. More specifically, workers should observe:

- The child’s emotional, psychological, motor, social and relational development
- Interactions between parents and children (attachment, eye contact...)
- The family’s life context and its interactions with its environment

28 Guy Ausloos, 1997.

29 D.W. Winnicott, 2010.

30 Catherine Sellenet, 2007.

31 « To each child, her permanent life plan », Youth Center of Montreal, 2004.

32 Catherine Sellenet, 2012- conference of the 12 January for the agents of the ONE.

Lastly, assessments of any situation should be guided by the well-being and best interests of the child, and should be based as much as possible on the needs expressed by the family. Plans should be built together and centered on children, or as

the case may be, through implementing protection measures. Each worker will make assessments based on her specific functions and skills. She will collaborate with pairs when the situation requires it, always respecting parental and child rights.

A strong **triangular relationship** between the child(ren), parent(s) and professional(s) is an important starting point for offering parenting guidance which is both effective and respectful of families. It is also a condition for building educational alliances around the child.



**A mother** says: *"If you wish to understand a child, know things about her, go towards her mom, ask her, listen to her. She can tell you a lot about her child. Approaching the mother is approaching the child."*<sup>33</sup>

### 3. PARENTING SUPPORT IS FOR ALL PARENTS

All too often, parenting support is associated with only certain types of families, such a single parent household, recomposed families, families with same-sex parents, poor families... as if these families were intrinsically dysfunctional.

All families face increasing difficulties in raising a child, given the shifting boundaries between public and private spheres (such as daycare) amongst other current complexifications of roles.

Family forms vary, as do educational practices and the conditions in which parenting is carried out. Sometimes the cultural framework of a family is totally different from that of the worker. In this case, the worker has a duty to decenter herself from her own values and practices in order to meet the family halfway.

Oftentimes, poverty is confused with poor parenting. Of course, people in precarious situations face increased difficulties in parenting because their life circumstances are so complex. Everyday issues like housing, food, heating, and clothing mobilize a large part of their energy. Despite this, these parents also spend considerable energy promoting the well-being and education of their children.

Parenting support must adapt to the needs, expectations and projects of each family in flexible and dynamic ways.

Public policy which defines parenting support is addressed to all parents. Interventions do not target certain kinds of families or issues a priori.

Parenting support is part of a global approach developed together by policy makers and the non-profit sector. **It aims to provide to each and every parent whatever guidance he or she needs, at the time when it is needed, without stigmatization and with respect for her skills, in order that he or she may fulfill his or her parental role.** Each level of power participates in applying the International Convention, especially with regards to the development, education and protection of children.

Parenting support includes both direct and indirect interventions: midwives following a pregnancy, workers in parent-child meeting spaces, daycare workers, doctors, teachers, educators, public health nurses, social workers and child protection and welfare workers... but also public policies concerned with birth, childhood, parenting and families, as well as information campaigns.

## 4. IT IS NECESSARY TO TAKE CONTEXT INTO ACCOUNT

Generally speaking, parenting support should always have a **twofold objective**:

- **Respecting individuals** and taking into account cultural and other diversity
- **Reinforcing autonomy**

Responses should thus be adapted to the diversity of situations and contexts. While some situations require accompaniment, or sometimes intensified guidance, others may only need information or a point of contact.

Taking into account life contexts also means adapting each intervention to each family, following collaborative assessment of specific needs.

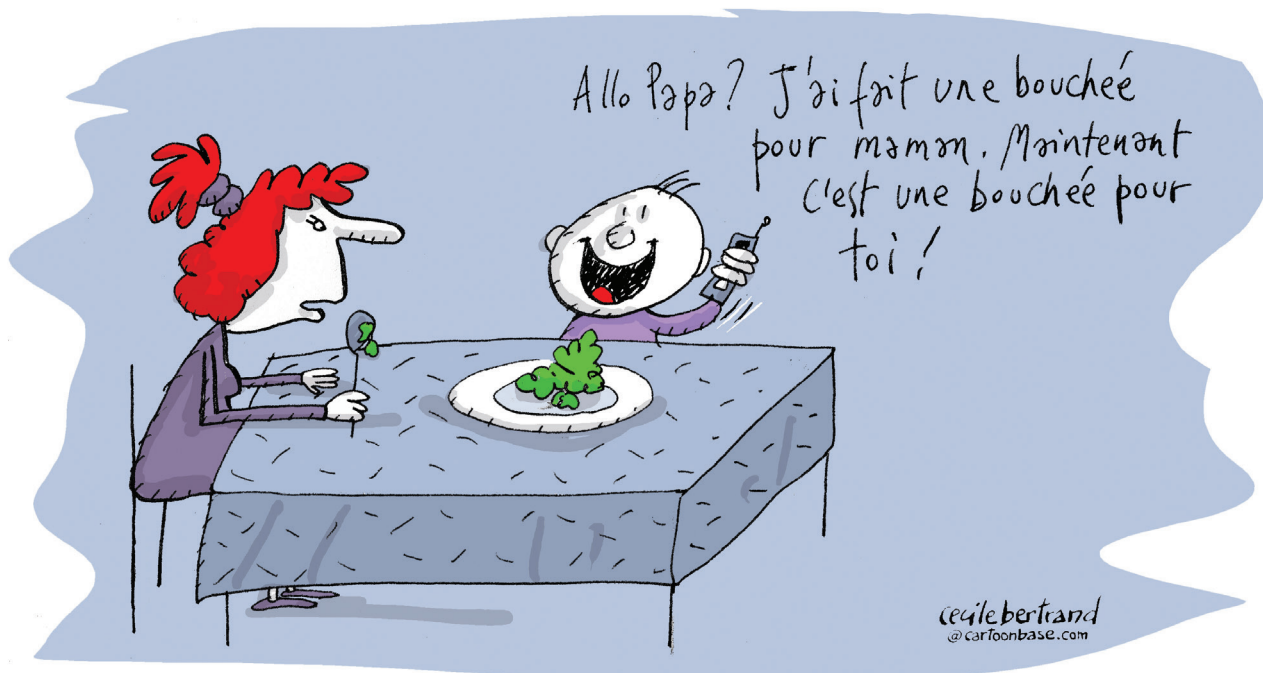
Viewing parents as the number one agents of their situation means assessment must take place with them and must be clearly expressed to them. This means being ready to face disagreement and contradiction with respect and accepting that sometimes protection measures must be taken.

Professionals also must be capable of decentering themselves and their representations of (good) parenting.

This also means being capable of understanding which reference systems are in play, identifying one's own and those of the parents.



*A young mother<sup>34</sup> says: "Daycare allows me to have an hour or two to myself and to take the time to do administrative procedures. It's also a place where my son can play with other babies. Putting him in daycare is a relief. When I need to run certain errands with him, like going to my health insurance office, it's hell. I run around like crazy. I'm not really available for my errands or for him in those moments, whereas when he's at daycare, I can really focus on what I need to do and I take care of him better afterwards, it's better for both of us."*



Hello Dad?  
I've eaten a mouth full for Mum. Now I'm having a mouth full for you.

# GUIDELINES FOR PARENTING SUPPORT INTERVENTIONS

*It's about working with a family who is capable of solving problems, it's not about taking into care but activating a process in which the family can observe, experiment, grow...*

Guy Ausloos<sup>35</sup>

Ethical and practical questions underlie the field of parenting support. Some of these questions will be broached here, albeit not exhaustively, in order to prime reflexive thinking.

## 1. TAKING THE TIME TO ANALYZE THE SITUATION

In order for parenting support to be adequate and respectful, it is necessary to carefully analyze the needs and requests of parents and children.

This means actively listening to the people involved, to their experiences, their expectations... One very frequent need expressed by parents is: "take us as we are, where we are, with our stories, our skills, our reality, our value system...".

Professionals need time to carry out an objective, comprehensive and subtle assessment.

The use of tools can help professionals avoid resting on intuitive needs assessment. Tools allow us to decenter ourselves from our biases, and provide structured reading of situations.

Meeting within the familial environment, i.e. the home, also strengthens evaluations.

## 2. ADOPTING AN ATTITUDE OF WELL-TREATMENT TOWARDS PARENTS

One of the basic principles that we have already mentioned is starting from parents' skill set, meaning starting with them, where they are, and advancing with them, sharing our knowledge, experience and expertise.

It is important to take care in determining how we offer our expertise and to constantly evaluate the potential impact, positive or negative, that an intervention may have on a family.

The well-treatment stance implies:

- Absence of judgment
- Absence of disqualification
- Empathy
- Active and respectful listening
- Building a mutual bond of trust
- Taking into account the family's cultural framework
- Respect
- Absence of stigmatization
- Co-construction of solutions and educational alliances.

<sup>35</sup> Guy Ausloos, 1997.

These elements make up well-treatment, which was initiated by fieldworkers of the ONE. Well-treatment is defined as “a relational, shifting and dynamic process whose intentions and actions aim towards allowing for optimal physical, psychological and social development of the child in her environment.

The idea of optimal development is reliant on the representations and norms of a given time and social and cultural context.”<sup>36</sup>

## PROFESSIONAL HUMILITY

Respect is an indispensable condition for approaching people. Respecting parents implies professional humility: workers are not omniscient and should not do everything, all the time. Adopting this stance goes a long way towards an attitude of well-treatment which founds parenting support. There would in fact be some hypocrisy in expecting parents to be well-treating towards their children if professionals cannot adopt such an attitude towards parents.

It is also necessary to start a dialogue with families, respecting the differing representations and experiences of everyone. One skill set is not inherently better than another. From differing realities, parents and professionals must build a relationship, an alliance which benefits the child.

Professionals are not parents and parents are not professionals. Each has responsibilities, needs, fears and issues, and workers must keep in mind professional humility as a strong ethical principle, even when involved in child protection work.

For the ONE and youth outreach, professionals must determine interventions starting from four key attitudes:

- Decentering oneself
- Understanding the family’s reference system
- Building a relational alliance
- Negotiating and implementing a plan for change

These key attitudes are put into play via professional humility, educational partnerships and alliances and focusing on strengths rather than on weaknesses.

Practitioners must develop listening skills and avoid taking the position of “expert” through ensuring that their communication with families is non-judgmental and non-authoritarian. Even in the most difficult circumstances, they must find parental abilities and promote them in choosing interventions.

Workers must also put their knowledge to good use for the benefit of parents and children.

Well-treatment is not to be confused with complacency. As Sellenet states, “parents only cooperate if they are told with sincerity the areas where they are doing fine and those where there are problems, and informed about current knowledge on the issues”<sup>37</sup>.



A team of professionals was working with a mother in order to restore her self-confidence in her abilities through encouraging her in her care for her child. This mother was particularly lost when her baby would cry. One day, she happily told one of the workers that she had found a solution. When her child would cry, she would sit him in front of the television in a trotter and give him coke to drink. The worker, wishing to encourage the mother, said nothing. She did not question the solution the mother had found. To the worker, what mattered was the mother’s self-esteem.

A few months later, the mother criticized the worker for not telling her that her solution was not adequate. She had learned that neither coke, nor trotters, nor television were good for her child. What came from good intentions (encouraging the mother to find solutions) was inappropriate for the health and development of the child. The mother felt betrayed by the worker, who she trusted to guide her in childcare, when she realized this.

36 From « Une alliance vers la bientraitance », dans Travailler le Social, trimestrial journal, 2003, translation by author.

37 Catherine Sellenet, 2012. Quote from a workshop in the collective discussion of the present document.

## POINTING OUT WEAK POINTS OR FOCUSING ON STRENGTHS ?

In the paradigm which focuses on weak points, we are tempted to look at the other through a lens of incompetence and difficulties. The temptation is then very strong to take over, to replace... This way of thinking results from prejudice and clichés: "absentee parents", "children with no boundaries",...

There is a second paradigm possible which involves focusing on strengths and skills and encouraging the development of these skills. In this case, a partnership is built up with parents. As legal

subjects, parents become actors of their own lives. They are considered capable of having an opinion and of acting in the best interest of their child. Parents and practitioners can then have a conversation about the interests of the child and practitioners can accompany parents in working towards the goals set. Acting with thoughtfulness and attentiveness allows for respectful collaboration.

## PARTICIPATION, PARTNERSHIP AND EDUCATIONAL ALLIANCES

How to move away from "going against" or "doing instead of" towards "doing with" parents?

*"Anything you do for me, without me, is against me."*

— Gandhi

For parents to get involved, their participation must be meaningful to them and children must be at the heart of the partnership. It is necessary to listen to parents in order to help them understand their needs and expectations; to offer a partnership which is meaningful, all the while following one's mission or mandate.

On this basis, parents and workers can build solutions together, make plans and take initiatives. Plans must be realistic and adapted to the family's solutions. Particular attention must be paid to language so that parents do not feel submerged by jargon which they do not understand.

An informal setting, it has been suggested, is fertile ground for building and maintaining relationships and encouraging citizen participation.



**Practitioners working in a parent-child meeting space:** *"In December, on request from the moms, we held a Christmas party. Isolated mothers and mothers in precarious situations came, as well as European Commission moms who couldn't go home for the holidays. The party fulfilled the need of all these mothers to not be alone over the holiday. Everyone contributed in their own way, some brought food. Even though they came from very different backgrounds, these mothers were brought together by their need to be with people at that time of year."*

### 3. ACKNOWLEDGING OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Most children and families meet with several practitioners. Some parents speak to the inconsistencies and false notes between what they are told by workers as well as by people in their network.

How can we ensure collaboration and avoid these inconsistencies, which leave parents perplexed or even destabilize them? It is essential that workers **be aware of the other stakeholders surrounding the family and attempt to build collaborations with and between these actors, in order to work with parents and children as whole beings and not reduce them to certain aspects of their lives or persons.**

A more institutionalized networking is also necessary. Through the implementation of collaboration protocols, and before any intervention takes place, professionals from different institutions clarify their mandates, areas of expertise and conditions of collaboration. In doing this, parents have a clearer framework of intervention, whatever the particular situation may be. This positively impacts the effectiveness of cooperation and thus the right of every child and every parent to access the same services, wherever they live in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation.

#### PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS...

Before discussing networks, there is an ethical prerequisite which must be specified: mobilizing a network around a family requires, at least, consulting parents first and getting their approval, except

in the case of grave danger and non-cooperative parents<sup>38</sup>. If parents are to be agents of their situations, they must be given center-stage in whatever network surrounds them.

Parents sometimes worry about the information professionals may share about them or their children. In a care network, who has the information? How and when can it be shared? To what purpose? Will parents be informed beforehand? Will they be asked for their permission? Will they be told if their child is referred to a different professional, especially in the child protection sector? All these questions must be broached when building a network of professionals.

These questions are connected to the notion of **shared confidentiality**<sup>39</sup>. The code of deontology which determines youth outreach stipulates in its article 7 that no information concerning a child or his family can be communicated between professionals, unless these professionals are also under confidentiality and the information is necessary to the intervention objectives. Stakeholders must be told beforehand if information is to be shared.

Defining network practices and goals and sharing common values between practitioners (for instance, well-treatment) contribute to making a network work for families and help them.

**Network collaborations must be consistent, singular, stable and complementary, determined by shared goals and geared towards opening families towards the world rather than constraining them.**

The network must be consistent, which requires open dialogue, agreement and ethical practices. Otherwise, individuals will end up confused and no better off. Practices should be adapted to individual needs.

To encourage professionals to work together, it is necessary to take the time to get to know each stakeholder, their expertise and framework for intervention. It is also important to determine the respective roles of the different actors, although these may evolve over time. Agreement and consistency between practitioners in a network does not go without saying, it must be built. If arguments appear,

they must be dealt with without the family suffering from the consequences.

Networks are essential to professionals because they mean they do not have to make decisions alone. Exchanging information and taking into account the points of view of others' (children, parents, peers) open up reflexive possibilities and allow for taking a step back. Working in a network allows for roles to be distributed with the family and, when necessary, for sharing the weight of difficult decisions (without mixing up the contrasted legal responsibilities of different workers).

Network practices can thus be a safeguard against crossing boundaries, making decisions unilaterally or arbitrarily or having a limited or insufficiently complex point of view...

In order to offer a degree of stability to families, continuity of interventions should be maintained as much as possible to avoid sudden changes which can bring feelings of abandonment or solitude. Oftentimes, referral from one practitioner to another

<sup>38</sup> See articles 38 and 39 of the Decree of the 4th March 1991 on Youth Outreach.

<sup>39</sup> See article 12 of the deontology code of youth outreach and the Intervention Protocole for the medico-social-psychological sector and the judiciary sector (protocole « Robseco », December 2007).

causes a break in the chain of care, so referral must be well thought-out and accompanied.

When necessary, workers must take the time to properly relay to their colleagues, when possible in the presence of the family.

Workers regularly report that parents often ask them questions which are outside of their area of expertise or their professional mandate. These parents would possibly rather discuss issues with someone they know and trust than with an expert stranger. In this context, networking is essential. Practitioners who have already gained parents' trust are in a good position to relay towards other professionals who can help the family. By accompanying parents, they can introduce the other members of the network and contribute to priming a trust relationship between parents and colleagues.



**Counselor for youth outreach:** *“Meeting with parents and practitioners and the times set aside for coordination between different professionals are essential to offering quality services and continuity. They allow for clarifying the intervention goals of everyone and being transparent with families”.*

## FAMILY NETWORKS

Besides the professional networks, families have more or less present social and familial networks. This primary network, which is important to explore, is a major factor: it can allow for parents to avoid solitude and contributes to avoiding social isolation which can be harmful to children and parents alike.

It opens possibilities for extra support for the child and has an undeniable impact on her socialization process. It is important to help parents develop this primary network.



**A mother says:** *“my mom went through the same thing as me during her pregnancies. She helps me and understands me. It is really important to me.”<sup>40</sup>*



Parents are not the only ones who care for children. In any society, children are surrounded by adults who have a role to play in their education and even

sometimes fulfill certain parental functions. Some authors name this phenomenon “social parenting”.



**A childcare worker from a parent-child meeting space says:** *“Recently, a mother who took part regularly in the Guili-Guili activities became very ill. Very quickly, the other mothers gathered around her and organized support for her and her family. After her hospitalization, they brought food around, fetched the kids from school. With Guili-Guili as a meeting place, they built solidarity and supported each other.”*

## INDIVIDUAL, COLLECTIVE AND COMMUNITY APPROACHES

Parenting support takes many forms and uses contrasted approaches. Each approach has its particularities, and none is to be used in exclusion of the others. Each one has its advantages and limits, and combining them only enriches them.

**The individual approach** is the most frequent type of intervention, whether in medical care or psychological and socio-educational interventions with parents and children. This approach allows for the construction of a privileged interpersonal relationship, sometimes over the long term.

**The collective approach** allows for building social fabric and learning with and from peers. It offers a space where new behaviors can emerge, feelings be lived and expressed. It offers opportunities for parents to share their experiences, outside of their family environment and opens up new possibilities. Exchanges of knowledge and know-how between peers can bring change and support.

For example, parent-child meeting spaces offer a space in which children and parents alike can socialize and be confronted with other way of parenting. It also is a space in which parents are acknowledged as such and allows them to rest.

**The community approach** is about going above and beyond the problems faced by individuals to politicize them. It’s about encouraging parents to mobilize themselves and their local resources with the hope of bringing about collective solutions to the difficulties they face.

These three approaches, individual, collective and community are complementary. The individual approach has the advantage of intimacy but may generate (co)dependency. The collective approach opens up new experiences and lets parents regulate their implication (they may sit removed from the group, act neutral or get very involved).

However, some parents have a hard time taking that step and gaining enough self-confidence to take their place in a group. The community approach requires parents to be as involved as professionals, whose role is to create the conditions which enable parents to become collective agents.



Personal account

**At the Popular University for Parents<sup>41</sup> (UPP) in Anderlecht**, a group of parents who were first brought together by meeting space and daycare activities, carried out a local research project on the consequences for parents and families of the lack of room in daycare, as well as the strategies parents use to adapt to this reality. The entire process (asking the question, data collection, analysis, writing up, sharing the results, proposals, and so forth) was carried out by the parents themselves, with methodological support from professionals. By mobilizing their resources, by boosting their confidence in their abilities and in their legitimacy, the project gave parents a voice in public space and reinforced their power of action, individually and collectively, as people, parents and citizens. Based on a participatory process, the UPP aims to create spaces for dialogue between parents from popular neighborhoods, professionals and politicians to arrive at novel solutions, which may be transferable, to the identified and analyzed phenomena<sup>42</sup>.



- Your daddy's black, your mummy's yellow, your step brother's white and your step sister's red...
- That's what makes a multicultural family

<sup>41</sup> In short, we can define the Popular University of arents as a group of parents (usually between 15 and 20) who do research collectively on a theme connected to parenting, with the methodological support of an academic. When they have well constructed knowledge, they debate this with other actors, elected officials, teachers, social workers, in order to merge and confront points of view.

<sup>42</sup> Personal account from the UPP of Anderlecht, a collaboration between the RIEPP, Vie Féminine and the Ballon Rouge.

## 4. STIMULATING REFLEXIVITY ABOUT INTERVENTIONS

Working with people means regularly putting oneself into question, being aware of one's own values and examining one's practices.

It means finding a balance between taking a step back from oneself and looking at one's values, practices, role and mandate. As a practitioner, it is important to build a way of being and acting which is in harmony with one's individual values, the ethics of one's institution and the expected professional role in a given institutional context.

Several authors articulate this "correct distance" which workers must adopt and adapt to each family.

- Jan Peeters (2008) speaks of a professional who is warm but keeps her place. This place is defined iteratively in relation to each parent and each child.
- Catherine Sellenet (2012) speaks of "well-meaning implication", which means getting involved, trusting, mobilizing.
- Lastly, Martine Beauvais (2004) speaks of three major principles of ethical guidance: responsibility, self-control and doubt. The "correct distance" must be taken, which is not "true or exact", but "adjusted, thought through, questioned, evaluated and readjusted permanently given the relational and institutional context, the pathway which is being laid and the plans being made". She suggests "leaving more space and time for yourself and for the other to think, to doubt, to try, so that little by little, the other can lay a path, invent her work."

Contrary to private persons, professionals intervene in a framework which must be clearly enunciated, for themselves and for users.

**The professional framework** is defined by a mandate in a given institution and instantiated in the professional in a given context. In a democratic society, this framework is anchored by legal and regulatory texts which define the roles, rights and prerogatives of each.

Being able to make explicit the paradigm in which we work, communicating about it with parents and with other professionals is absolutely essential. For this to be possible, every worker needs to be clear about her work, about its contours and limits, and regularly question these.

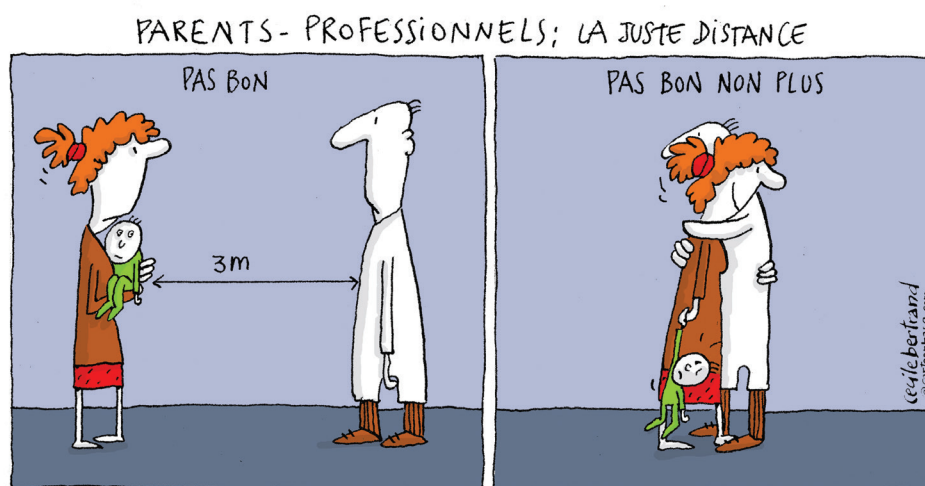
The professional framework provides both support and protection. It helps to think through one's work, guides interventions, and protects workers and service users alike. Enough flexibility however needs to be maintained to avoid offering rigid and formatted interventions, which cannot be truly respectful of the families' individuality.

Being clear about roles and mandates is indispensable to respecting parents and children. The institution is responsible for this framework.

### Basic training:

Not all programs address parenting sufficiently. Initial on-site training is thus very important: mentoring, specific training...

**Ongoing training** is one of the most effective ways to evolve, to remain open to new practices and gain new skills, to mobilize resources and better respond to the needs of families. In most sectors, the applicable legislation, regulations or deontology call for professionals to train all through their career.



Not good

Parents-Professionals: the right space

Not good either

**Team work** also encourages reflexivity. While pluridisciplinary teamwork is very rich, team work or at least the possibility of referral to another professional within one's institution or service (maltreatment advisors for instance...) offers space for reflection, taking a step back, completing one's points of view and getting the support one needs. It allows for the

existence of diversified and complementary interventions. Much like network collaborations, team work means not staying alone faced with difficult or uncertain situations, for example when a young person with difficulties or in danger needs to be referred to youth outreach, when placement of a child outside her home needs to be considered...



**Medical-social worker of the ONE, working in a maternity ward:**

*"A future mother suffering from drug addiction arrived at the ward. Her partner, who was there for the birth, is also a drug addict. That was the only time we saw him. The baby was born with neonatal withdrawal syndrome. The midwives called me, and we met with the mother together. The mother is aware of her son's condition. The midwives, psychologist, pediatrician and I met several times, to discuss our concerns for the mother and child. However, we observed that the mother is able to read and respond to her baby's needs. Given these skills, we decided to put off calling SOS Children or child protective services.*

*We met with the mother, explained what we had observed and offered care, which she accepted. We made a "contract" of sorts together.*

*When she left the maternity ward, we made an appointment for a first home visit, with my colleague from the child consultations. That moment allowed for us to relay between medical-social workers and be consistent about what we had agreed upon with the mother and the other practitioners from the ward.*

*The mother continued to care for her baby and talk regularly with my colleague."*

Beyond teamwork, spaces for support and accompaniment of professionals allow for reflexive processes, support and taking a step back, and should be installed over time, with continuity and regularity. This process must be recognized as essential by the institution, as a guarantee of quality services provided to service users. It is an issue which goes above and beyond the comfort of workers.

Recognizing the impact of one's work and what happens in the course of the day on oneself, identifying resource persons to whom one can turn, allowing for referral within the institution allows for preempting problems for professionals.

In human job, it is essential that workers have spaces and times which allow them to manage their emotions in order to not be overwhelmed with different feelings: fear, sadness, anger, impotence. This allows in turn for more emotional availability in the situations they face. Faced with urgency and acute crisis situations, sometimes there is very little space for breathing and thinking it through. Supervisions or interventions are important supports for professionals. These spaces allow for tackling many subjects, including well-treatment, transparency, respect, equal relationships, the place of the child, how to enhance parental skills... Often, asking the question is more important than answering it.

In order to develop reflexivity, professionals need time and space, training, interventions and supervisions... Workloads and other organizational constraints often allow for too little time for reflexivity. Questions and difficulties which arise in daily practice often feel urgent. Taking time becomes a "luxury we can't afford". This lack of time and feeling of urgency generate stress, discomfort and risks, for workers and families alike.

Reflexive work, exchanging around practices, and not only around situations, is not a luxury. It is important that institutions guarantee these moments to their workers so that they may take a step back, because this is necessary to the quality of services provided for children's benefit.

## 5. A FRAMEWORK FOR THINKING ABOUT PARENTING SUPPORT

Many actions exist for supporting parenting, carried out by a multitude of actors in various fields of interventions.

Professionals who accompany parents are confronted with many paradoxes, paradigms and must make choices:

- How best to accompany parents?
- Why?
- For whom?
- At which time?
- With whom?
- On what issues?
- ...

### OBJECTIVES

The “Intelligibility grid for parenting support actions”, presented hereafter, is **a tool which allows for a pause in thinking about a family situation and to think through the best possible intervention at a given point in time**. It can help professionals to take a position, alone or in concertation with other actors, and facilitate dialogue between practitioners.

**On an individual level**, it can help workers:

- Question their interventions;
- Think about their mandates and where they are situated in relation to the family;
- Think through their professional attitudes and roles;
- Question their place and role within a network of practitioners.

**On a collective level**, it allows for a network of colleagues to:

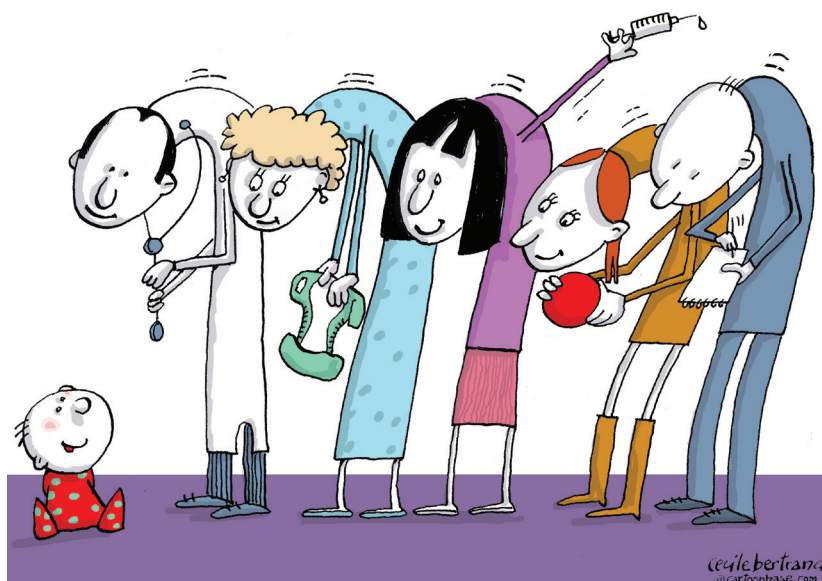
- Observe the configuration of the care group at that time (who does what? With which position? Which mandates? Which objectives?...)

- Better visualize existing resources within the network;
- Work with consistency and ensure continuity, coordination of practices and actions between different practitioners in the perinatal, child and youth sectors.

**On the community level**, it can bring about an inter-sectorial reflection which moves towards shared political continuity and allow for better coordination of actions.

The Intelligibility Grid for Parenting Support Actions is not:

- A guide for action
- An intervention model
- A diagnostic tool
- A typology of families
- A static, fixed object.



## UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

The Intelligibility Grid for Parenting Support Actions crosses different types of parenting accompaniment actions with different life situations of a child in her family.

This grid is constructed according to a continuum logic. By continuum, we mean a series of elements where we can go from one to another continuously.

- **A continuum of family situations**

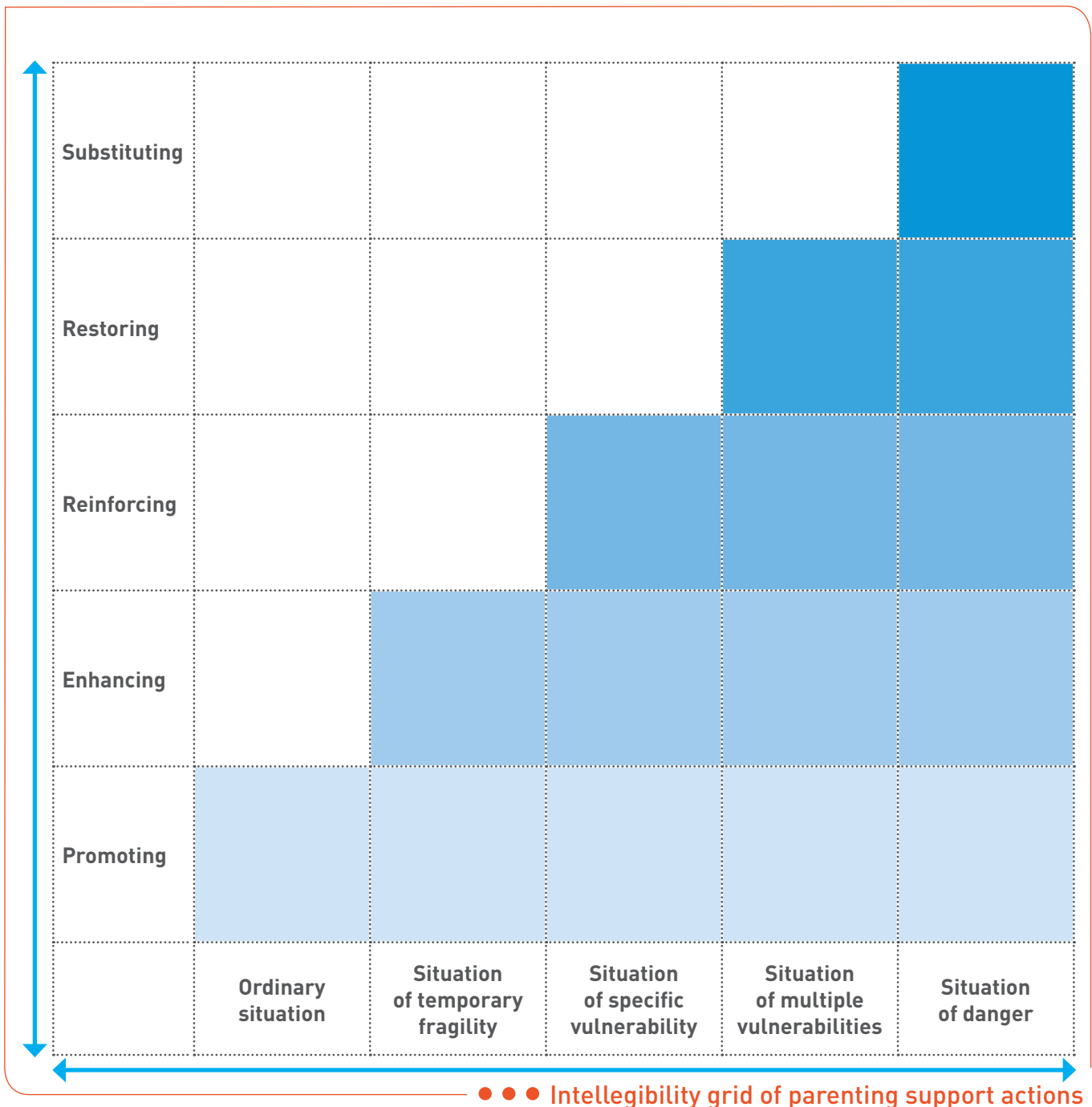
The idea of a continuum of family situations expresses that family situations are not fixed: each family goes through changes which can impact children and parenting (illness, separations, loss of home, going back to work, birth of another child...).

- **A continuum of parental guidance actions**

The concept of a continuum of parental guidance actions is based on the principle that accompaniment is offered to everyone. Any parent may be fragile at a given time and professionals must adapt their actions to the singularity of situations and to parents' specific skillset in the interests of the child.

- **Confronting the two continuums**

The idea of crossing these two continuums expresses the ever evolving nature of family situations and the necessity of constantly adapting accompaniment and/or support to these changes.



## AXES

**The horizontal axis** presents the kinds of family contexts on a continuum going from an ordinary family situation to that of danger to the child.

**The vertical axis** presents different actions to accompany and support parenting, also on a continuum, going from promoting parental skills to substitution of parental roles.

## HOW TO READ THE GRID

- **An additive reading**

Accompaniment actions can be cumulated: what we offer parents in an ordinary situation is also offered to parents in the situations of vulnerability or danger. In dangerous situations, sometimes substitution is put into place, in addition to promoting, enhancing, reinforcement and restoration.

**Both axes exist in time, because every situation evolves**, albeit at different tempos: a professional's time is not the same as that of a parent, or the child, or another professional.

- **An ascending reading**

There is also a gradation in the actions which go from simply recognizing parental skills by professionals and institutions to intervening in the case of danger to the child. Professionals must adapt their actions to the resources of the families and their environment.

- **An evolving reading**

Accompaniment actions evolve with the changing nature of family situations.

## FAMILY SITUATIONS

- **Ordinary situations**

In most situations, parents adequately meet children's needs. They take them into account properly, according to the forms they are familiar with and which are their own (their culture, personal history, lifestyle...).

- **Situations of temporary fragility**

These are situations which any family might go through at a given time, following certain crucial transitional periods (birth of a child, entering day-care...), or events (separation, loss of job, depression...). This fragility is temporary. Some parents might need to be helped through these periods.

- **Situations of specific vulnerability**

These are situations with recurring difficulties (handicap, deprivation, familial isolation, chronic illness...). The impact of these difficulties on parenting may make specific accompaniment necessary.

- **Situations of cumulated vulnerabilities**

These are situations where certain difficulties are cumulated and these can impact parenting heavily and thus the developmental conditions and general well-being of the child.

- **Situations of danger**

These are situations where the physical, psychological or affective integrity of the child can no longer be guaranteed by her parents.

## ACTIONS FOR ACCOMPANYING PARENTING

Any parenting guidance requires first for the professional to simply be there for each parent. This benevolent and respectful presence is the basis on which are built any following actions.

- **Actions for promoting parental skills**

*Promoting, from the latin pro-movere, literally means "to push in front, to advance", hence "extending, increasing, developing".*

These actions are targeted towards all families. They don't necessarily require direct one on one intervention. For the most part, these are actions of aware-

ness-raising, information, promotions designed to support parenting. Parents who feel that it is relevant to them pay attention, seek out information; they may explore the subject further with or without the help of a professional.



**The brochure titled "Growing up with limits and boundaries"** (Grandir avec des limites et des repères), created by the ONE, provides parents with bits of information and invites them to think about questions of limits: when to draw them, how to establish them, according to what behaviors, which punishment to offer if the child crosses those limits... These pointers can be adapted to every situation.

- **Actions for enhancing parental skills**

These are destined to support parents. The worker is careful to identify and underlie the parents' strong points, to reassure them about their competence and encourage them to use and develop them.

Effectively carrying out this type of action relies on all the stakeholders in contact with parents and children.



A mother who was visited by a medical-social worker of the ONE after returning home from the maternity ward explained being upset with her new-born: "I felt alone and powerless with this baby and the worker supported and reassured me".<sup>43</sup>



- **Actions for reinforcing parental abilities**

*To reinforce means to make stronger, but also to consolidate, make more resistant, extend...*

When a specific difficulty arises and affects parenting, support offered to families should be adapted and even intensified, as need be. Professionals sup-

port parents by helping them adjust and consolidate their skills.



**A mother** who went through post-partum depression<sup>44</sup> : *“the nursery nurses from daycare really helped me. I had moved and I was in a fight with my family so I couldn’t find any help. I was afraid of being a bad mother and I was too codependent with my child. Thanks to the nurses, I regained self-confidence and the ability to leave my child with someone else because I knew who I was trusting with my child. It allowed me to focus on me again, and I needed that.”*

- **Actions for restoring parental abilities**

*To restore means to rebuild, redo, renew, to regain, to return to a previous state...*

When parents have accumulated difficulties and their capacity to care for their child and meet his needs are weakened to the point that there is a risk for him, professionals need to work on restoring parental skills. In some cases, it is more about helping parents acquire new skills.



**A counselor for youth outreach:** *“The prosecutor’s office was worried about a family with three small children with whom we suspected serious negligence. They were considering removing the children from their family environment. After analysis of the situation by the delegate, I met with the parents in order to establish a help program. Given the prosecution’s concerns and the risk of removal from the home, the mother was desperate to find a solution to not be separated from her children. She offered to go to a maternal house with the children and even offered to separate from their father, in order to reassure the practitioners. After our interview, the father got busy and did the necessary reparations in the house. The family asked for help from their entourage who agreed to taking the children during the house reparations. Youth outreach services collaborated with the ONE to care for the children. They also paid for a family help worker to come clean and cook. In this situation, the conjoined mobilization of the family’s close ones and a network of professionals, coordinated by Youth Outreach brought support to the parents and helped them restore their parental competence so that they may regain their full parental role as quickly as possible, while making sure the three children were safe.”*

44 Personal account from the action research led by Synergies et Actions « Parenting Support : the point of view of parents ».

- **Actions to substitute parental skills:**

*Substitute = «to complete by adding what is missing», but also «to replace», which gives the modern meaning. Put in place of (what is insufficient); put in more to replace (what is missing).*

*When a child is in danger, when parenting skills are so poor that his or her safety is compromised or when the relationship between the child and the parent hinders his or her physical or psychological development, intervention is needed to protect the child. The intervention here will be in the form of substitution, i.e. the child may, for his or her safety,*

*be temporarily taken away from his or her family environment. In some special cases, this separation may be considered therapeutic, particularly when the parent or child has personality disorders.*

*In any case, action to support parenthood must also be considered, in order both to maintain a link between the child and his or her parents and to guarantee, at the very least, partial parenthood.*



**The following testimony of a situation experienced by a worker from a specialised early childhood care service (SASPE) states:** *«The parents of three children have a mild mental retardation, the mother is hard of hearing and their social situation is disastrous. Their youngest daughter, Patricia, was born prematurely and remained in hospital for several weeks. On returning home, the medical social workers (TMS) are worried; the baby isn't putting on weight and her mother is unresponsive to her crying. Despite intensive family support, the situation is deteriorating. At the request of the youth welfare service (SAJ), Patricia is placed in hospital for severe dehydration and pneumonia, while her elder siblings are placed in a reception and educational assistance facility (SAAE).*

*Patricia, 9 months old, is then welcomed by the SASPE. She adapts well and her health improves. However, she remains fragile and easily becomes insecure, especially during her parents' visits. For their part, we observe a difficulty in decoding Patricia's signals and meeting her needs. The little girl refuses to be alone with them. We agree with the parents that a counsellor will be present at each visit, the duration of which will be adjusted each time according to Patricia's level of security.*

*Within a few months, she agrees to be alone with her parents, as long as the door of the room remains open. The parents, having experienced positive interactions with their little girl, regain confidence in their skills and thank the institution for the support provided. They also ask the SAJ to organise a return to family weekends together. SASPE workers, SAJ workers and the parents agree on a gradual approach: first a few hours, in the presence of a worker, then a few hours without a worker... Now 5 years old, Patricia is happy to spend a day at home with Mum and Dad. She will soon join the SAAE where her siblings reside and together they will spend weekends their parents.»*

## 6. ACKNOWLEDGING COLLECTIVELY THE RISKS PROFESSIONAL NEED TO TAKE

Professionals need to be supported in accompanying parents.

However, the current trend in our society is towards zero risk and seeking out who is responsible. This can discourage workers from taking risks and generate a constant state of stress.

Working with people is nonetheless inextricably linked to taking risks. Humans are not an exact science, which is what makes up their wealth and singularity. Supporting parents means betting on their abilities and those of colleagues. It is thus important to recognize and accept an unavoidable degree of risk taking. One of the major issues is how far to accept risk? How far can we go?

Some risks are predictable and need to be taken into account; others are unpredictable and it is important to be aware of this possibility.

Furthermore, according to Catherine Sellenet<sup>45</sup> three kinds of risk are possible:

- Offering or imposing too many interventions to a family;
- Not offering or imposing enough interventions to a family in situations where they would be helpful or necessary;
- Carrying out empty interventions which have no impact, neither positive nor negative.

By definition, working with humans is working with uncertainty. It is never possible to control all the factors which enter into play. What may seem like an ideal solution today may provoke undesirable effects tomorrow.

### TO INTERVENE OR NOT TO INTERVENE ? RECOGNIZING AND TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR RISK TAKING

Each situation is unique and practitioners need to take their time analyzing and observing to better adjust to each set of circumstances. Each time a practitioner finds herself in a worrisome situation and hesitates about what course of action to take, it is useful to share her thinking with other professionals.

Guiding parenting is accepting the risk of being confronted with representations, values and educational practices to which we are not accustomed. While respecting difference, it is also necessary to identify emergency situations in which the integrity of the child is in danger.

Accompanying parenting means that professionals need to confront their representations of emergency and risk taking between different professional mandates and roles.

When a worker observes a parental attitude which challenges or worries her, what stance should she take ? Should she intervene or not ?

In some situations, professional intervention can weaken the family's system, destabilize parents, and wreak havoc on their self-esteem and in their self-efficacy. It may also break the bond between worker and family or hurt the bond between parent and child or parents and their close ones.

But, and herein lies the difficulty of these decisions, not intervening can be just as disastrous, for the child and/or for her parents.

Taking time to think about the different options and their pertinence should thus be a prerequisite to any action taken, be it communicating, acting, and referral towards specialized services...

Weighing the pros and cons of the intervention means taking into account the customs and habits of the family. Each family has its own relational mode. This uniqueness is important because every intervention must be adapted to the family. The process of getting to know each other can take a lot of time.

Professionals may think through their intentions, to decide whether or not to take action: why am I acting ? Why in this particular way? In whose interests ? How will my intervention help the development of the child ?

Along with these questions, it is interesting, in order to prioritize the issues on which to act, to return to the parents' expressed needs: on what specific points are they requesting help? Where do they feel there's a problem? Are the child's needs fulfilled?

Sometimes it is difficult for professionals to be attentive to the needs of the child and the parents simultaneously.

<sup>45</sup> Catherine Sellenet, 2012. Quote from a workshop day.

## INTERVENING WITH CARE

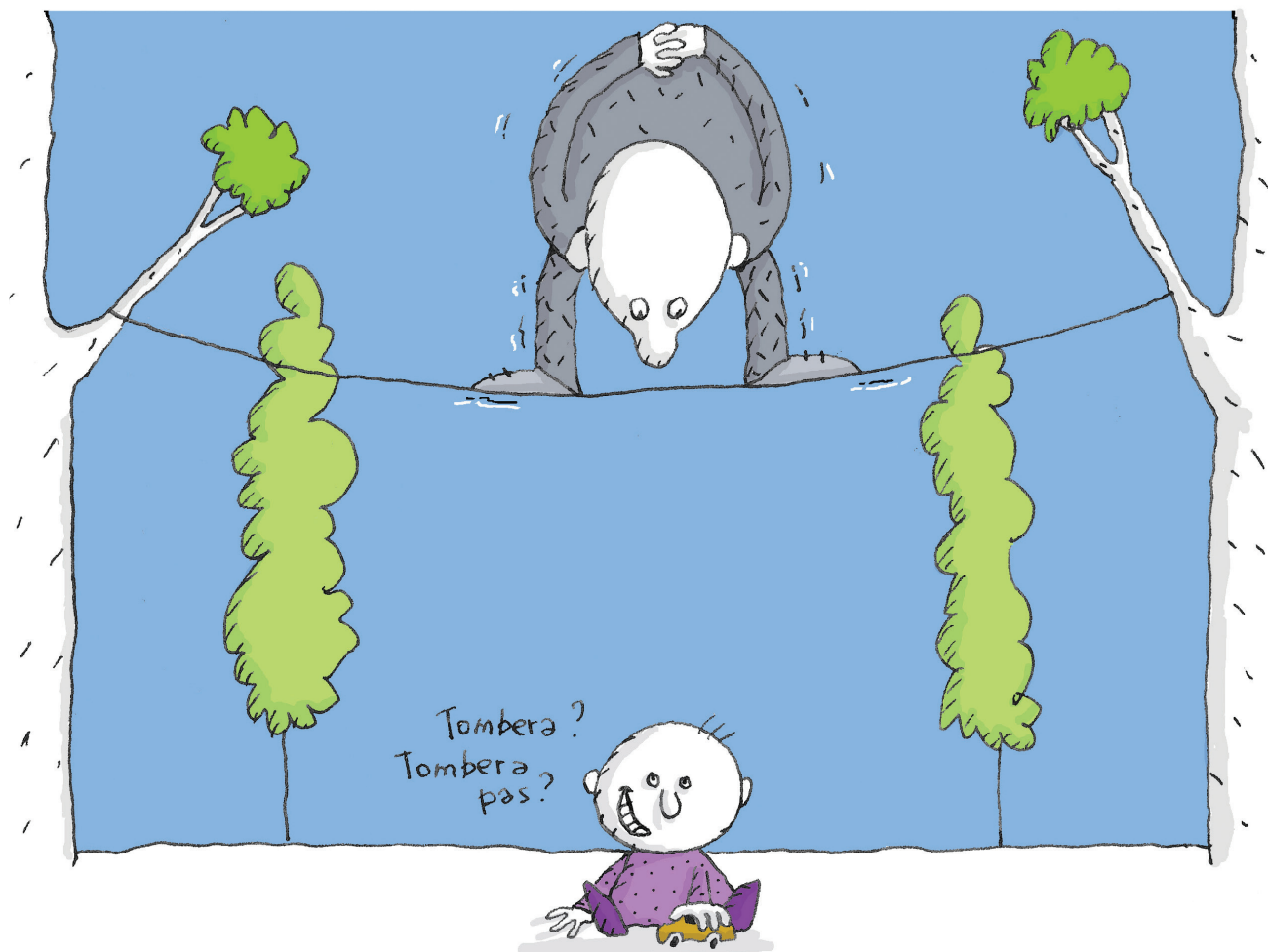
Whatever choice is made, it is important to act according to one's knowledge, mandate, observations and ethics... with the well-being and protection of the child and respect for the family as central goals.

Once the situation analyzed and the decision to intervene made, the second question is how to intervene?

Interventions can be of different types, according to the professional context. Mandates, which must be made clear to families from the get go as well as the family's expectations vary according to whether one works for health visiting, daycare, foster homes, schools, meeting spaces, youth work, child protection...

In taking this framework into account, it is important to put into place an evaluation of the action which will allow for measuring positive and negative consequences of the intervention and follow its evolution, adjusting it when necessary.

Finally, respect and partnership with parents means integrating them into this evaluation process, taking into account their observations, needs, expectations as well as feedback about the intervention and its effects.



Going to fall or not ?

# AND FINALLY...

## FEEDING AND CONTINUING TO BUILD THIS TOOLKIT

As previously mentioned, the authors were not intending to be exhaustive, but rather to gather strong ideas to start a conversation.

This document was created as a **starting point**, an anchor, and a kernel where interested parties can find food for thought.

Following this, the authors request your help to enrich and nuance this project.

### How? There are several ways of helping:

- Suggesting a satellite document
- Letting us know if you hear of a new or interesting parenting support tool
- Sharing your questions
- ...

Your contribution could for instance lead to a reference sheet, or spark the organization of a conference or workshop...

#### For further reading:

[www.parentalite.cfwb.be](http://www.parentalite.cfwb.be) (in French)

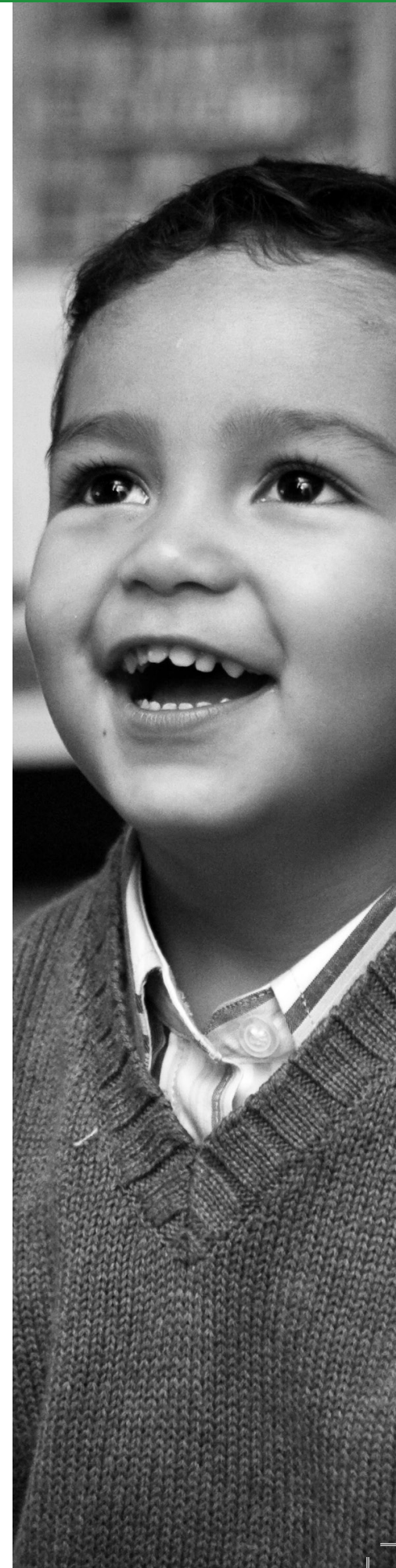
[www.one.be](http://www.one.be)

[www.aidealajeunesse.cfwb.be](http://www.aidealajeunesse.cfwb.be)

[www.dgde.cfwb.be](http://www.dgde.cfwb.be)

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# WORKING TOWARDS REFLEXIVE PRACTICES FOR FAMILY GUIDANCE: A PARENTING SUPPORT TOOLKIT

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