



Breaking the cycle of deprivation
Report of the ESN working group on social work with children and families





Breaking the cycle of deprivation

Introduction

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Regional and local public services provide vital care and support to children and families experiencing social exclusion and poverty. They carry the responsibility for funding, organizing and coordinating specialist social work and other services. Safeguarding children and helping those from difficult backgrounds to realise their potential is one of the most challenging areas of social work today and local authorities are usually legally responsible for the safety and protection of children.

This support can take many forms, such as promoting the welfare of children by helping parents to overcome or manage their own individual problems, or by offering parenting and household management advice. Working with children and their families allows social services to detect and address issues such as mental health problems or drug addiction in the family and ensure appropriate action. In addition, social services may sometimes need to place children at risk in a foster family or in group homes for teenagers with behavioural problems.

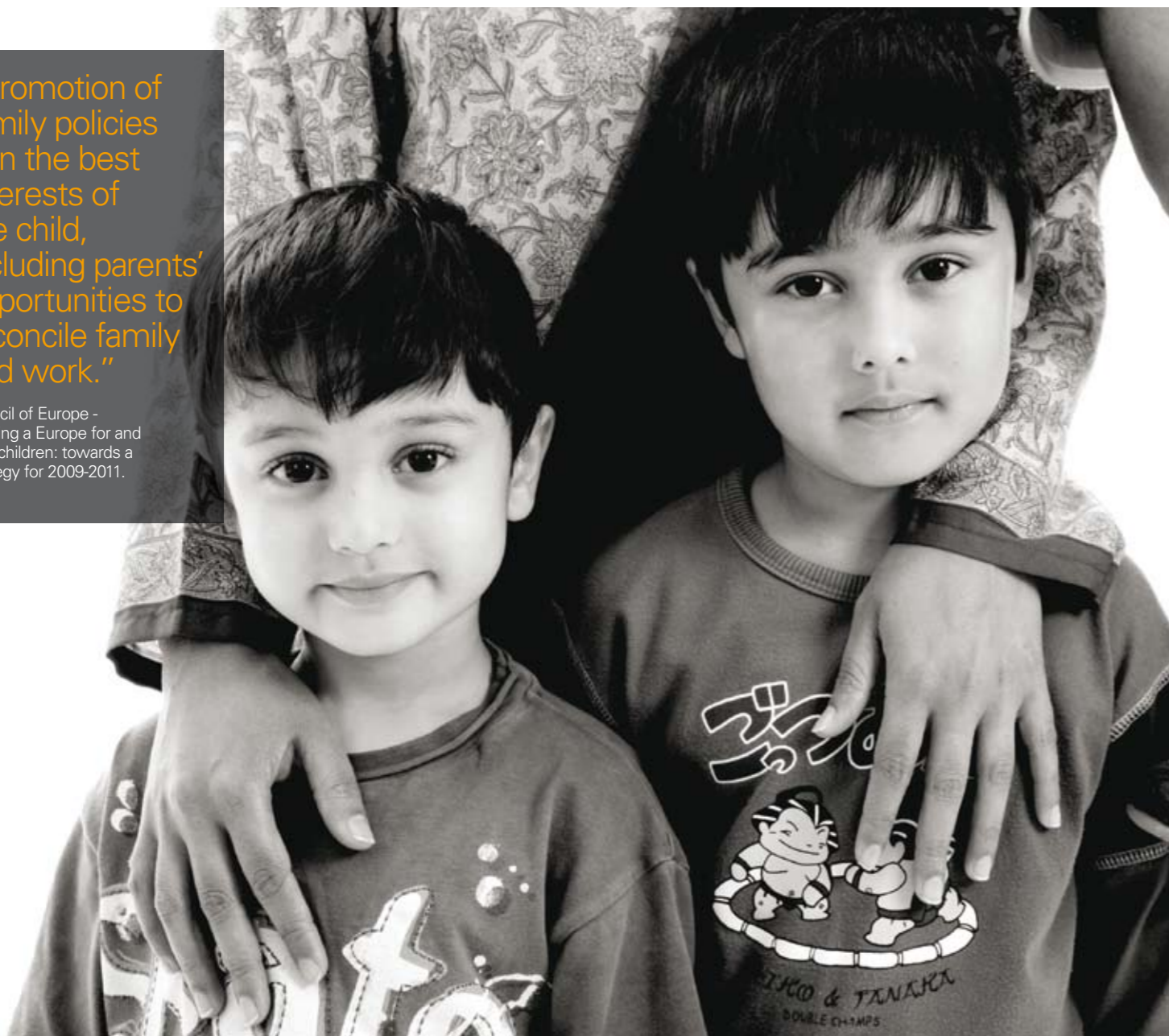
During 2008 – 9, ESN's working group Children and Families (pictured on page 15) brought together people with experience of managing public childcare and specialised services for vulnerable children alongside others with a strong background in research and policy development. Sharing knowledge from each other's countries and reflecting together on their experience of working with children and families, the group highlighted the importance of:

1. Working with families
2. Working with vulnerable children
3. Working in partnership
4. Working for excellence
5. Investing in children's services in Europe.

This report has been published to contribute to policy-making at the European level where ESN believes that the challenges and achievements of social work with children should be better understood.

“Promotion of family policies is in the best interests of the child, including parents’ opportunities to reconcile family and work.”

Council of Europe - Building a Europe for and with children: towards a strategy for 2009-2011.



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Working with families

Children in jobless households are at a greater risk of experiencing poverty. Ensuring that parenthood and work are compatible through accessible child-care, parental leave and flexible working hours, is one of the main elements for preventing child poverty.

The number of childcare places set out by the EU as a target for 2010 has not been achieved by Member States, which should lead to a reconsideration of the approach taken at the European level to promote services for children. Further attention needs to be given to increasing the quantity and quality of childcare places and ESN considers that national governments should especially focus on access to services for families living in disadvantaged areas, recognising that access can be constrained by affordability.

Helping families in difficulty to access childcare more easily also brings them into contact with social and health professionals, who may be able to offer them other forms of support. In Hungary, for example, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has developed micro regional programmes, in order to develop social and child welfare services in the most disadvantaged regions. The aim of these programmes is to establish networks of social and child welfare services based on local resources and to ensure a consistent framework for services.

Growing up in a loving and positive family environment is what can make the most significant contribution to a child's wellbeing. Parents of children experiencing poverty and exclusion may themselves need additional support to realise their potential in working life, which would help them in their family life. This is a core area of responsibility for social services, which have to consider the needs of a whole family and actively support the inclusion in the labour market and society of parents with, for example, poor workplace skills or a mental health problem.

Supporting children with disabilities and their parents, whether at risk of poverty or not, is an important area for social services and serves as a reminder that social exclusion goes beyond material poverty.

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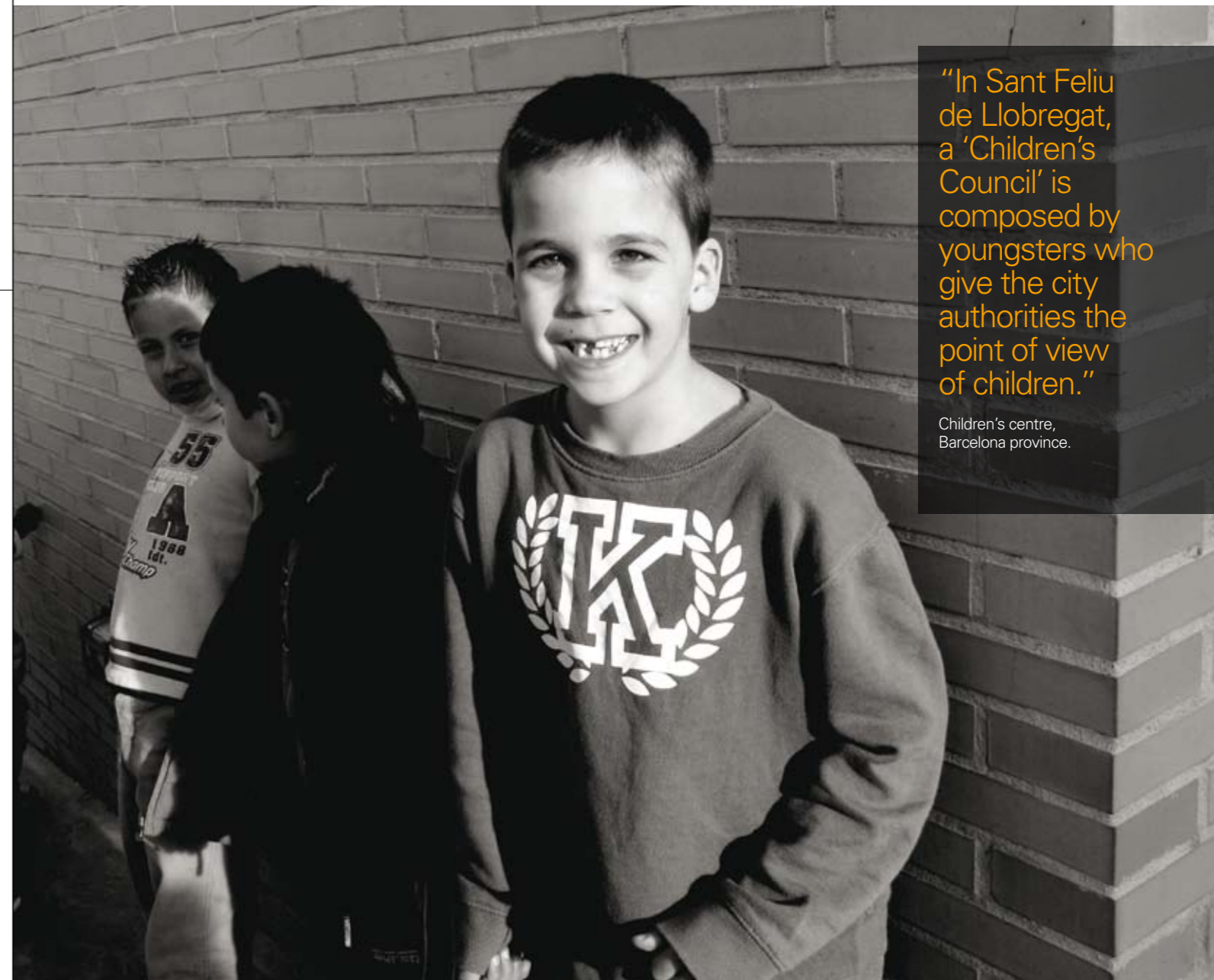
Working with vulnerable children

In all European countries, regardless of the overall level of child poverty, there will always be children and adults around them who will need extra support. Whilst universal policies and mainstreaming are essential in order to prevent child poverty, it is also necessary to put in place measures which specifically target the needs of vulnerable children. These may include:

- children who are victims of violence or sexual abuse
- children with mental health problems, physical disabilities or sensory impairments
- young offenders
- children from minority ethnic groups or from migrant families
- children who have drug addiction problems
- children in institutions and out of home care.

The help provided by social workers is vital for these children and very often it constitutes their only chance to improve their situation. This support takes different forms: in the Lazio Region (Italy), for example, social services carry out activities to integrate immigrant children as well as to combat the prejudices amongst their classmates. A personalized education and assistance plan is designed for each child that receives assistance and children are consulted about the measures planned.

It is important to give a voice not only to each child individually but also to children collectively. For example, In Sant Feliu de Llobregat (Barcelona province), declared “child-friendly city” by UNICEF, there is a “Children’s Council” composed by youngsters who give the city council the point of view of children. It is also a platform to familiarise children with the mechanisms of democratic participation.



“In Sant Feliu de Llobregat, a ‘Children’s Council’ is composed by youngsters who give the city authorities the point of view of children.”

Children’s centre,
Barcelona province.

“In Hungary, child welfare services have the duty to work with other services (childcare, health, social and educational) to help families with children at risk.”

Marta Korintus,
Institute for Social Policy
and Labour, Hungary.

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Working in partnership

Multiple forms of social exclusion are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Poor housing conditions could, for example, combine with poor educational attainment to give a child reduced opportunities in later life. The coordination of different services is therefore particularly necessary for helping children escape poverty and social exclusion.

The nature of social services leads them to work with other agencies and consequently they are often the nexus in partnerships. They may cooperate for example with the justice system in the reintegration of young offenders, with immigration in the case of supporting young asylum seekers or with health services in their work with children with addiction or mental health problems. By working together, different professionals can share information concerning specific children and thus are able to assess their needs from a wider perspective. This is the case for instance of the “protection maternelle et infantile” (PME) in France, where health and social care professionals carry out early intervention measures.

If partnerships are to last they must not only be well-managed at local level but also benefit from strong political leadership. In Denmark, cooperation between Social services, Schools and Police (SSP) is applied to all levels of intervention, from strategic design to street level implementation.

Setting up a new collaboration with its own independent leadership and resources can be a positive way of promoting interagency cooperation. In Ireland, national political leadership comes from the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, which is responsible for harmonizing policies that affect children including early years care and education, youth justice, child welfare and protection, children and young people’s participation as well as research and cross-cutting initiatives for children.

Establishing effective partnerships is a challenging task, as it takes time to establish and for benefits to be felt. Increasing specialisation of services means that different professionals involved in partnerships may have very different views about the goal, methodology and outcomes and the division of responsibilities between professionals working with children. Commitment and accountability are, however, essential if partnerships are to be effective and mutual learning between services across Europe can be positive in overcoming such barriers.

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Working for excellence

Measuring the effectiveness of services for children is a complex issue, as the many dimensions of child welfare and policies may impact in different ways. Tools used by practitioners to ensure the quality of services include needs assessment and monitoring and regular consultation with children and families.

Furthermore, social services gather data on the situation of children at risk and their outcomes over time. In the French départements, for example, the Social Support Service for Children (Aide Sociale à l'Enfance) collects data from the children using their services in areas such as eating and sleeping habits, their degree of autonomy, health status and how they interact with others. Data gathered on the situation of socially excluded children also sheds light on the effectiveness of interventions by social services and helps them to build evidence-based practice (i.e. practice that is based on analysing and evaluating what works).

This knowledge provides a useful picture of the impact of policies for children. However, the areas monitored by local public social services are not generally covered by major international surveys. It is therefore important to include this expertise in the European debate in order to promote child wellbeing as a multidimensional issue informed by indicators which address non material aspects of child poverty.

Social work with children is both rewarding and challenging: it carries considerable responsibilities both for the assessment of their needs, their protection as well as their future wellbeing. Those working in services for

children and families require appropriate specialised training and support. Services for children in the Czech Republic for example, are regulated in the framework of socio-legal protection, which is different from the legislation concerning social services for adults. Czech social workers in services for children and families have typically a specialised degree or have complemented another degree with a training course on social work and relevant work experience.

The image of the social worker, can be negatively affected by cases of negligence that have receive widespread media coverage. Despite the fact that for every case that goes wrong there are hundreds of successful stories, it can have a damaging impact on the status and appreciation of social work. This, together with poor remuneration can ultimately make social work less attractive as a profession. Consequently, social workers may be overburdened with too many cases or have to resort to help from staff that may be less qualified.

Any national or broader European quality framework for social care should address the qualification and training of social workers, including new skills that in some countries are not included in curricula, such as performance evaluation and change management, ICT and intercultural skills. Moreover, there is also need to facilitate the increasing mobility of social workers between European countries with appropriate legal and practice safeguards.

“What inspires me most is trying to find ways that our work can help and add value to the work of practitioners in their dealings with children and their families.”

Aidan Browne,
Chief Executive of the Irish
Children Acts Advisory Board.





“Respecting and promoting the rights of all children should go hand in hand with action to address their needs.”

Communication from the European Commission: Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child.

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Investing in children's services in Europe

Social services across Europe work with children who are vulnerable, children who are underachieving, live in at risk families, are in care or leaving care, children who have been the victims of abuse, those that have special education and health needs and increasingly unaccompanied children seeking asylum. In addition to the statutory duty to safeguard children, the work of public services for children is underpinned by values which put the interests of the child before other considerations, listening to them and respecting their dignity.

Local public social services are the main guarantors that the rights of vulnerable children are respected in most European countries. In order to set out an effective strategy on the rights of children in Europe, the EU therefore needs to reflect the challenges faced by social services including the importance of developing community care alternatives to replace more institutionally based services.

The EU has positively contributed to framing child poverty from a multidimensional perspective and to maintaining the eradication of child poverty and exclusion as a priority in national policy agendas, mainly through the Open Method of Coordination on Social Protection and Social Inclusion (OMC). Yet more needs to be done to recognise that local public social services play a vital role in supporting vulnerable children in their families or and in their local communities and that this contribution needs to be properly resourced by all Member States.

ESN would therefore welcome policy initiatives that encourage:

1. extra help for the most vulnerable families to access mainstream services and achieve a healthy work/life balance
2. continuous assessment and monitoring of a child's needs
3. partnership working with colleagues from education, health and justice
4. the pursuit of excellence in social work practice based on locally based non institutionalised care and education.

In the European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion 2010, investing in the local social work services that care and support vulnerable children, is key to breaking the cycle of deprivation.

About ESN

ESN is the independent network for local public social services in Europe. Our mission is to help change the lives of the most vulnerable in our societies through the delivery of quality social services. With Members in local public social services across Europe, we bring together the people who are key to the design and delivery of vital care and support services to learn from each other and contribute their experience and expertise to building effective social policy at European and national level.

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