

# Promoting child welfare and supporting families in Europe: Multi-dimensional conceptual and developmental frameworks for national family support systems

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## ABSTRACT

Family members across Europe are currently experiencing a range of socio-economic adversities, as well as health and welfare risks. These issues are particularly challenging in the context of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, war in Ukraine, increasing poverty, socio-economic disadvantages, and societal and technological transformation. Consequently, there is an ongoing and pressing need to provide effective support for families in response to their diverse needs and circumstances. However, European governments have diverse political persuasions regarding social and family policies and operate in differentiated and complex contexts. Such factors influence their approaches to, and configurations of, family support policies and provisions. This article investigates the conceptualisation and development of family support policies and provisions, and proposes a multi-dimensional, multi-modal, and multi-level conception of formal family support. It also provides a framework for analysing and developing family support and highlights challenges that arise within and across the relevant 'policy, provision and practice' domains while promoting a participatory ethos.

## 1. Introduction

Many young people, parents, and families across European countries navigate significant socio-economic adversities as well as health and welfare risks. The Covid-19 pandemic and recovery have proliferated and intensified these adversities (OECD, 2021). In conjunction, societal and technological transformations contribute to a changing typology of opportunities and risks and the diversification of national and trans-national family structures and connections (Adler and Lenz, 2023).

These major social risks and changes provoke questions about roles and partnerships among individuals, families, and welfare states for social welfare, inclusion, and equality. Regarding support for children, parents, and families, associated questions concern the nature of cost-effective and equitable provisions and services (Daly, 2015). In some respects, contemporary imperatives have provoked national governments to reconfigure family support provisions (OECD, 2021). However, governments across Europe and internationally have diverse political persuasions about social policy, family policy, and children's rights; and operate within differentiated and complex socio-economic, political,

and institutional contexts (Nieuwenhuis and Van Lancker, 2020). These factors significantly influence approaches to, and configurations of, family support policies and provisions.

Within this context, this article deliberates the conceptualisation and development of family support policies and provisions among European countries informed by the aims and activities of the European Family Support Network (EurofamNet) network. This network was funded by European Cooperation in Science and Technology agency (EurofamNet Grant CA18123) to undertake a four-year programme of scoping studies and knowledge exchange activities to advance family support research, policy, and provision among European countries. Central to this article is a programme of scoping studies about the conceptualisation and development of national systems of family support provision in Europe (Abela et al., 2021; Churchill et al., 2021; Devaney et al., 2021). The first section of the article introduces the network and the aims, objectives and questions that informed the scoping studies. The second section outlines the theoretical underpinnings and rights-based orientations that informed the network's activities and the scoping studies. Drawing on the scoping study findings, the third section develops multifaceted

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conceptions and positions concerning the components, values, and scope of family support provision and services relative to European contexts. This section provides a general conception of family support as a valuable and varied form of social support and social provision; and proposes a multi-dimensional, multi-modal, and multi-level concept of formal support for families with children. Building on these conceptualisations, the fourth section develops a framework for analysing and developing national systems of family support as constituted by: (a) policy choices and orientations, (b) modalities and continuums of provisions and services, and (c) professional practice paradigms. This discussion highlights the critical issues and challenges that arise within and across these ‘policy, provision and practice’ dimensions and domains of family support. Emphasis is placed on promoting comprehensive, coherent, and collaborative national reforms and systems. Particularly important is the cultivation of a participation ethos to ensure the involvement of parents and young people in service development and delivery. The final section presents the conclusions.

## 2. Methods

The COST-funded EurofamNet initiative sought to construct high-level common understandings and conceptualisations of the value and scope of family support provisions and services across European countries, and establish a progressive agenda for research, policy, and practice. At the outset, the network adopted a position that recognised children’s rights, family welfare, and social justice rationales for family support. It endorsed an evidence-based approach to policy and practice valuing multi-disciplinarity and methodological plurality. Fundamentally, EurofamNet placed central importance on stakeholder expertise incorporating engagement with service delivery professionals, advocacy organisations, and children/youth and parents (Dolan, Zegarac, & Arsic, 2020; European Family Support Network, 2020). A key question the EurofamNet scoping studies addressed was: *Given the diversity of contexts and approaches, how can we better understand and develop national family support provision systems for parents and families with children in European countries based on collaborative relationships between the state, civil society, children/youth and families?* This article presents research and frameworks produced by a Working Group (WG) within the EurofamNet COST action that addressed this question.

The WG comprised researchers (from various backgrounds in psychology and social sciences) and stakeholders (national and European policy/practice agencies and service user advocacy groups). To address the question above, the WG adopted scoping review and knowledge exchange approaches. Firstly, the WG produced a ‘methodology and position paper’ which, as discussed further below, drew on sociological conceptions of ‘family, childhood and parenthood’; and broad conceptions of ‘family support’ and ‘parenting support’ (Churchill et al., 2019). Secondly, three scoping studies were conducted to examine how family support was understood, conceptualised, developed, and delivered among European countries and research literature (Abela et al., 2021; Devaney et al., 2021), and how family support is conceptualised and promoted within prominent international and European inter-governmental agreements (Churchill et al., 2021). The scoping studies employed national reports (Boddy, 2009), literature review (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005) and policy review (Saraceno, 2022) methods.

One scoping study surveyed national developments in family and parenting support among European countries represented in the network. Akin to Boddy (2009), a national report template was developed, piloted and circulated to the national coordinators of the 34 countries represented within the network. The template included closed and open questions about the: (a) socio-economic and demographic trends and issues; (b) statutory roles and frameworks for policy and provision; (c) recent reforms; (d) participation of children/youth, parents/families and communities in policy development; and (e) current challenges and concerns. In total, 27 national reports were compiled and

analysed to generate themes and comparisons concerning trends, developments, and issues (Abela et al., 2021).

A second scoping study adopted policy review methods (Saraceno, 2022) to examine European and international policy frameworks concerning rights to, and provisions for, family and parenting support. Focusing on children’s rights, family policy, and social policy frameworks, the review considered how prominent agreements and recommendations adopted by the United Nations (UN), Council of Europe (CoE), and European Union (EU) conceptualised rights to, and components of, national state support and services for parents and families with children (Churchill et al., 2021). A third scoping study adopted systematic literature review methods (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005) to examine the academic literature on how family support was conceptualised and delivered in European countries (Devaney et al., 2021). Reflecting the focus of EurofamNet, this review analysed peer-reviewed literature focally about family and parenting support services, child welfare services, and professional service delivery; and literature published in English between 2015 and 2020. The literature was analysed to explore how family support services were understood, theorised, developed and delivered (Devaney et al., 2021).

On completion of these scoping studies, the authors of this article, as the WG leaders, conducted an integrated analysis ) and proposed high-level frameworks for conceptualising and developing family support policy, provision and practice. This follow-on stage of analysis, on the one hand, identified common conceptions and positions related to understanding and developing family and parenting support across sectors and countries; and, on the other hand, significant tensions and inconsistencies in the ways in which family support was defined and developed across sectors and countries. To advance a comprehensive approach, we proposed multi-dimensional, multi-modal and multi-level frameworks for understanding and developing family support as policy field, provision domain and practice paradigm. The proposed framework was presented and deliberated at several WG-level and network-wide consultation events. The feedback from these led to further refinements. Before presenting these findings and frameworks in more detail below, the next section of this article clarifies the theoretical and positional influences concerning family support which informed EurofamNet and the WG scoping studies.

### 2.1. Promoting child welfare and supporting families: Rationales and influences

As a ‘transdisciplinary field’ concerned to “understand and respond to complex human needs”, Herrera-Pastor, Frost, and Devaney (2020, p.28) argue family support provision and practice should be underpinned by social justice values, inter-disciplinary research, ‘psycho-social’ and ‘socio-structural’ theories of child and family welfare, and “research-based guiding principles” for professional practice. This section situates the aims and objectives of EurofamNet as oriented by: (1) social ecological conceptions of child welfare, parent–child relations, and family welfare; and (2) children’s rights, gender equality, and social justice imperatives.

Multi-contextual and interactional frameworks for understanding child welfare, parent–child relationships, and family life are important theoretical orientations (Heath, 2017; Taraban & Shaw, 2018). The social ecology model is one influential schema. This considers children’s development and well-being as the outcome of bio-psycho-social processes, reflecting how children experience and interact with proximate and distal social systems that are deeply intertwined and subject to change over time (Canavan, Pinkerton, & Dolan, 2016; Houston, 2017). In this schema, children routinely experience, and interact with, multiple ‘microsystems’, including their households and families, peer networks, social activities, neighbourhood setting, pre-school and school settings, and engagement with digital and mass media and technologies. Prominently, parental responsibilities for children and family contexts in children’s lives has generated considerable research about the

relationships between parenting and children's outcomes; theorising and indicating how parent-child relationship qualities and parenting practices are highly significant for child/youth identities, development, health, welfare, behaviour, and education (Heath, 2017). However, differences in outcomes between children, and across family and social contexts, also "demonstrate that a "one parenting-style-fits-all" approach is not optimal" (O'Connor & Scott, 2007, p.29); and there remains less research about father-child relationships and diverse families (Heath, 2017).

The social-ecological lens locates the microsystems children inhabit within broader mesosystems (interacting microsystems) and macrosystems (such as the labour market, economy, social policies, and culture). Many studies evaluate the range of 'risks and stressors' and 'supports and protections' impacting children, parents, and families related to these broader contexts (Canavan, Pinkerton, & Dolan, 2016; McGregor & Devaney, 2020b). A series of parental factors (e.g., personal, social, and gender identities; socio-economic background; health and well-being; and childhood and life experiences), child factors (e.g., children's identities, age, stage of development, and health), family factors (e.g., family relationships, size, resources, informal family support, and living arrangements), and social factors (e.g., social norms, employment conditions, and neighbourhood characteristics) are all important influences (Devaney and Crosse, 2023). Critically significant are patterns of social inequality and social positioning, which influence parental and familial access to resources and 'capitals' (Houston, 2017). Furthermore, access to informal and formal social support and services, such as childcare or parenting support, can help parents and families manage costs and pressures, and become resilient in the face of adversity (Canavan et al., 2016; Heath, 2017; van Breda, 2019).

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) and, in the European context, its advancement by the Council of Europe (CoE), articulates comprehensive rights for children/youth aged 17 and under, offering three key implications for family support policy and practice (Churchill et al., 2021). First, the UNCRC positions children as both members of families and citizens with independent status. The UNCRC emphasises children's rights to family life, parental care, and family/kinship connections and heritage, and corresponding familial/parental duties to children. It emphasises all children are equally entitled to the UNCRC rights 'without discrimination' including parental marital status. Moreover, children are granted agency as individuals and citizens with 'evolving capacities'. The UNCRC promotes children's welfare and equality 'to the maximum extent possible' and recognises these outcomes are secured by society as a whole. Second, the UNCRC positions parents and families as having both primary duties for children they have assigned responsibilities for and wide-ranging support needs. It calls for state parties to provide 'assistance to parents' and 'the family' as key components of children's rights. Additional human rights treaties such as those concerning the rights of women, those with disabilities, and refugees further emphasise these imperatives.

Third, beyond parental support, the UNCRC stipulates wider state duties to uphold children's rights to 'protection, provision and participation' (Churchill et al., 2021). State parties are required to pass laws and create systems to protect children from neglect, abuse, and exploitation, and provide alternative care for children, preferably within kinship networks, when parental care is absent or not safe for children. States are required to 'develop institutions, facilities and services' across society, enabling children 'to reach their full potential', 'recover from trauma', and understand and realise their rights (UNCRC, 1989). Certain groups are recognised as highly vulnerable and disadvantaged (e.g., children with disabilities, asylum seekers, and refugees). Furthermore, state parties should ensure that children, according to their evolving capacities, are involved in efforts to understand and promote their rights, and that their views and wishes in decisions about their care are respected and promoted including within decision-making concerning parental and family supports. Overall, the UNCRC underscores the importance of wide-ranging state support and services for children,

parents, and families. However, internationally nation-states are highly diverse politically and socially, and implementation of the UNCRC has therefore varied widely among its 198 state signatories (Churchill et al., 2021). Critical rethinking around the UNCRC also considers its normative and Western constructions of childhood, 'family' and social policy (Cregan & Cuthbert, 2014).

## 2.2. Conceptualising family support

Despite many advances in recent years, family support is at times still considered an uncertain and ambiguous topic in global public policy and academic discourse (Devaney & Dolan, 2017; McGregor, Canavan, & Nic Gabhainn, 2020). Ambiguity arises because the term 'family support' can refer to a wide variety of social supports and services, and its meaning is infused with normative and political perspectives, such as about parental duties, family life, childhood, and the role of the state in these spheres (Canavan et al., 2016). These complexities are magnified in the context of cross-national debates and the Anglophone roots of the concept itself.

Overall, our scoping studies (Abela et al., 2021; Churchill et al., 2021; Devaney et al., 2021) highlighted significant shared meanings and applications related to family support discourses within European countries. However, our reviews also indicated family support can be conceptualised in different ways depending on context, purpose, and perspective; and is often poorly defined, narrowly conceived, or under-represented within academic literature and policy/practice debates. Our national reports study noted the considerable variations in national contexts, policies and provisions among the European countries surveyed (Abela et al., 2021). However, common concerns coalesced around levels of unmet needs, and problems of inadequate and fragmented provision. Common innovations sought improved access to a range of provisions as mechanisms for improving children's outcomes, enhancing parental capabilities, reducing social disadvantages, and tackling social problems (Abela et al., 2021).

Our review of international and European intergovernmental policies indicated these promote European countries to: (1) develop a range of family support policies and provisions, and (2) respect rights to family life, recognise cultural diversity, and recognise family diversity (Churchill et al., 2021). Alongside the UNCRC, the CoE's (2006) 'Positive Parenting' policies and the European Union's (EU's) (European Commission (EC), 2013; 2021) 'Investing in Children' strategies promote developments in children's rights, anti-poverty measures, family and parental support services, disability support services, family-friendly employment, gender equality measures, and anti-discrimination measures. However, 'family support' as a concept and discourse in inter-governmental agreements and strategies tends to be implicit, poorly defined, or narrowly framed. This partly reflects the limits of international jurisdiction over family and social policies. It also reflects the significance of a cluster of concepts in family support debates, including 'social protection', 'parenting support', 'early intervention', and 'social services'. Furthermore, this review found debates and proposals oriented towards child well-being, parenting, and family welfare concerns were often disconnected from anti-poverty, gender equality, and work-family balance debates and proposals (Churchill et al., 2021).

Further, the literature scoping review identified diverse concerns, terminology, disciplines, approaches, and perspectives informing the research and delivery of family and parental support services among several European countries (Devaney et al., 2021). For example, significant shared cross-disciplinary and cross-national concerns and perspectives were identified, emphasising holistic conceptions of well-being and support, multifaceted approaches to family support, and emphasis on fostering partnerships with families, and prevention-oriented and strengths-based approaches. However, the review also revealed that family support as a concept and approach was often poorly defined, narrowly conceived, and under-theorised in

literature (Devaney et al., 2021).

Informed by the synthesised scoping study findings and follow-on WG consultation, the culmination of our WG activities was to develop new contemporary multi-faceted conceptualisations and unifying positions concerning the components and potential scope of family support provision and services in Europe. Here we sought to address some of the conceptual and positional inconsistencies and limitations identified above. This led to the formulation of a ‘multi-dimensional, multi-modal, and multi-level’ conception of family support with two key elements: (1) a general conception of family support as a valuable and varied form of social support incorporating informal, semi-formal and formal types of support; and (2) a conceptualisation of the more formalised types of support and services for families with children as ‘an integrated programme within which a broad range of provision is brought together’ (Pinkerton, Dolan, & Percy, 2003, p.312) as national systems. These conceptualisations are summarised as follows:

*Family support is the mobilisation and provision of resources and support for the purpose of sustaining and enhancing family roles and assets, and promoting the well-being and capabilities of family members, including children and parents. Family support includes a range of resources and support provided by ‘informal’ networks, ‘semi-formal’ community groups and ‘formal’ provision and services. Formal services should seek to provide timely and enabling support for children, parents and families; be developed and delivered based on an ethos of participation; and promote inclusive and supportive communities.*

In this conceptualisation, our reviews echoed Sandbaek (2007, p.77) that a common distinction is made between ‘informal, semi-formal and formal support’ whereby ‘support from family and friends’ are examples of ‘informal support’, state-funded and/or regulated and/or provided provision and services are conceived as ‘formal support’, and ‘community groups and volunteers’ can also provide forms of ‘semi-formal support’. Regarding the more formalised forms of family support, these are more regulated, funded and provided by state agencies, and collectively provide a “package of time-related, resource-related and service-related” entitlements and provisions for parents and families with children (UNICEF, 2019, p.1). Starting from a multi-dimensional and multi-model conception of family support, a range of considerations come to the fore such as, what constitutes the relative applications, developments and complexities of varied types and modalities of family support? To what extent, and in what ways, can more formalised approaches ‘reinforce positive informal social networks’ for the benefit of children and families (Dolan, Pinkerton, & Canavan, 2006, p.16)? As discussed further below, the care versus control dynamics of social relationships and family governance versus the family support dynamics of social policies and formal services are critical issues (Daly, 2015).

These definitions and positions frame family support as ‘a social good’, defined by Mor Barak (2020) as “social resources and services that contribute to social welfare, social inclusion and social justice” (p.139). The arguments proposed by Gilligan (2000) are relevant, that family support incorporates developmental, compensatory, and protective orientations and strategies. In developmental terms, family support seeks to bolster child, parental and family capabilities and resources, and “strengthen the social supports and coping capacities of children and adults” (Gilligan, 2000, p.15). Compensatory support “seeks to compensate family members for the disabling effects of disadvantage or adversity in their present or earlier life” (Gilligan, 2000). In a protective sense, family support seeks to reduce risks of severe problems, significant harms and detrimental outcomes for children/youth, parents, and families via problem-solving and “strengthening coping and resilience” (Gilligan, 2000; van Breda, 2019) and may be employed alongside state-mandated measures to protect vulnerable children and adults, including from family members (McGregor and Devaney, 2020b). The public health discourse of ‘whole society’ primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention is also highly significant. Informed by this approach, the Hardiker model of cascading levels and child and family welfare service

types has been influential, with an emphasis on a cascading system of universal, early intervention, and remedial support and services (Hardiker, Exton, & Barker, 1991; OECD, 2021).

These family support concepts are generic, multifaceted, and positional. However, national and sub-national policy and practice developments reflect considerable complexity in practice as well as the contested nature of ‘the purpose, process and outcomes’ of family support policies and services (Canavan et al., 2016, p.21). To consider these further, the next section presents an analytical and developmental framework developed as an additional key output from the EurofamNet reviews and collaborations. This framework promotes the analysis and consideration of family support as: (a) a policy choice, orientation, and domain; (b) a broad range of provisions; and (c) a professional practice paradigm. The scoping studies highlighted the significance of all three of these foci for understanding and developing formal family support as well as tendencies to insufficiently consider their interconnections (Devaney et al., 2022).

### 2.3. Analysing and developing national systems of family support

Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 provide visual representations of our analytical and developmental framework. Analytically, the framework promotes analysis of formal family support as shaped by: (1) the statutory, policy, and institutional contexts and jurisdictions that structure family support rights, provision, and delivery; (2) the spectrum and coherence of family support provision and services; and (3) the nature and scope of professional roles and practices, including interactions and collaborations between service providers and users within service delivery and everyday life. Our scoping studies demonstrated the significance of all these domains for understanding how family support is conceptualised, developed, and delivered as well as their significance as factors that shape access to, experiences of, and outcomes from family support for children, parents, and families. Furthermore, our studies found that European policy debates and academic literature often neglected the significance of all three domains and their interconnections. While considerable social work, child welfare, and family support systems literature does consider all three domains and their interconnections (e.g., Canavan et al., 2016; Daly, 2015; Gilbert, 2012), shortcomings remain. Additionally, European inter-governmental policy and provision debates tend to consider the policy and/or provision domains (e.g., evidence-based policy and programmatic debates) but neglect the significance of frontline professional practice and service provider/user relationships to service delivery, experiences, and outcomes. As a developmental framework, we argue that considering family support ‘policy, provision and practice’ can facilitate more comprehensive, coherent, and collaborative agendas and reforms. The following discussion elaborates on these arguments, highlighting critical issues and challenges, and considering building blocks for progressive approaches.

### 2.4. Family support policy

Multiple state structures and actions influence how family support is understood, developed, funded, regulated, delivered, and evaluated. Critical components include legislation, government policy, departmental duties, public spending, institutional arrangements, statutory guidance, state-funded or state-provided provisions, and policy evaluation activities. National and sub-national state agencies, agendas, actors and contexts dominate as ‘driving influences’, advancing national developments in family and parenting support (Daly, 2015, p.31). These actors and contexts are connected to and influenced by supranational agencies and contexts, with the 27 European countries that make up the EU member states uniquely engaged in legally specified common policy actions.

The EU’s ‘Recommendation on Investing in Children’ (European Commission (EC), 2013) calls for member-states to reduce childhood disadvantage and promote children’s rights as “crucial investments



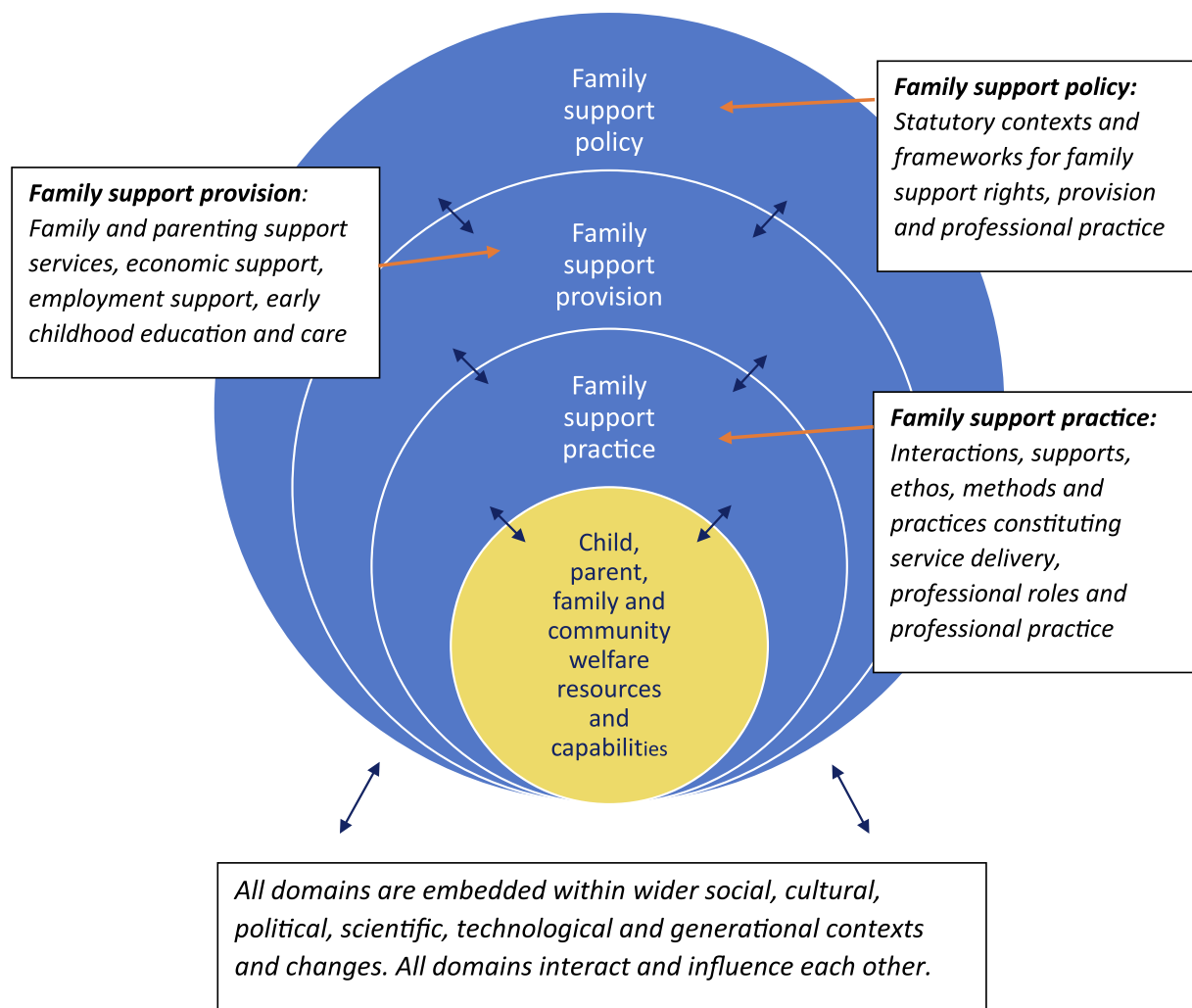


Fig. 1. Understanding and developing formal family support: The interconnected domains of policy, provision, and practice.

benefitting children, societies and economies” (p.1). It proposes “multi-dimensional policy strategies” based on three pillars: access to adequate resources, access to affordable and quality services, and children’s participation (European Commission (EC), 2013, p.2). Key measures to promote ‘access to adequate resources’ include: (1) family-friendly employment policies and childcare reforms to reduce work-family conflicts; and (2) family/child, welfare, and housing benefits and social assistance schemes to reduce poverty risks (European Commission (EC), 2013, p.7). ‘Access to affordable and quality services’ emphasises accessible and affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC), education, healthcare, housing, and social services. Service systems designed around the principles of progressive universalism are advocated, combining (1) universal and targeted services, (2) an ethos of empowerment and early help, and (3) multi-level prevention and intervention strategies and programmes targeting complex needs, at risk groups, and risk factors (European Commission (EC), 2013, p.6). ‘Children’s rights to participation’ entails measures to promote children’s social inclusion and involvement in decision-making. Member-states are encouraged to develop “comprehensive policy coordination and collaboration” across all levels and areas of government, and between the state, NGOs and communities. Moreover, an “evidence-based approach” is advocated whereby rigorous research, reliable data and stakeholder consultation underpins policy decisions (European Commission (EC), 2013, p.10).

The CoE’s (CoE, 2006) ‘Recommendation on Policy to Support Positive Parenting’ applies to a much larger group of 46 member states and

similarly proposes policies based on the three pillars noted above. As a complement, ‘supporting parenting’ and ‘promoting positive parenting’ are also prioritised (CoE, 2006). While also “adopting a pluralistic approach” that recognises “diverse types of parenting” and modern families, ‘positive parenting’ is understood as an orientation to parent-child relationships and parenting practices that respects children’s rights, dignity and individuality; nurtures children’s welfare and development, and adopts “non-violent” practices (CoE, 2006). To promote children’s rights, family welfare, and social justice, member states are encouraged to develop: (1) facilities and initiatives that help parents and communities build social support networks and social capital; (2) semi-formal community support and advocacy initiatives; (3) networks of accessible, quality, and coordinated parental and family support services; and (4) positive parenting education and children’s rights awareness schemes. Emphasis is placed on understanding and addressing the needs of disadvantaged and marginalised groups, first-time and young parents, alongside measures to support men’s roles as fathers (CoE, 2006). Reform agendas involve children and parents as partners and decision-makers and value parents’ knowledge and strengths, especially those from disadvantaged groups (CoE, 2006).

The national reports study evidenced the multiplicity of ways European countries pursued these agendas and policies; and highlighted major policy challenges and shortcomings (Abela et al., 2021). Several countries, including Albania, Croatia, Hungary, Spain, Malta, and Ireland, have introduced cross-sector and cross-ministry national policy strategies. There were inconsistencies, however, in the degree to which

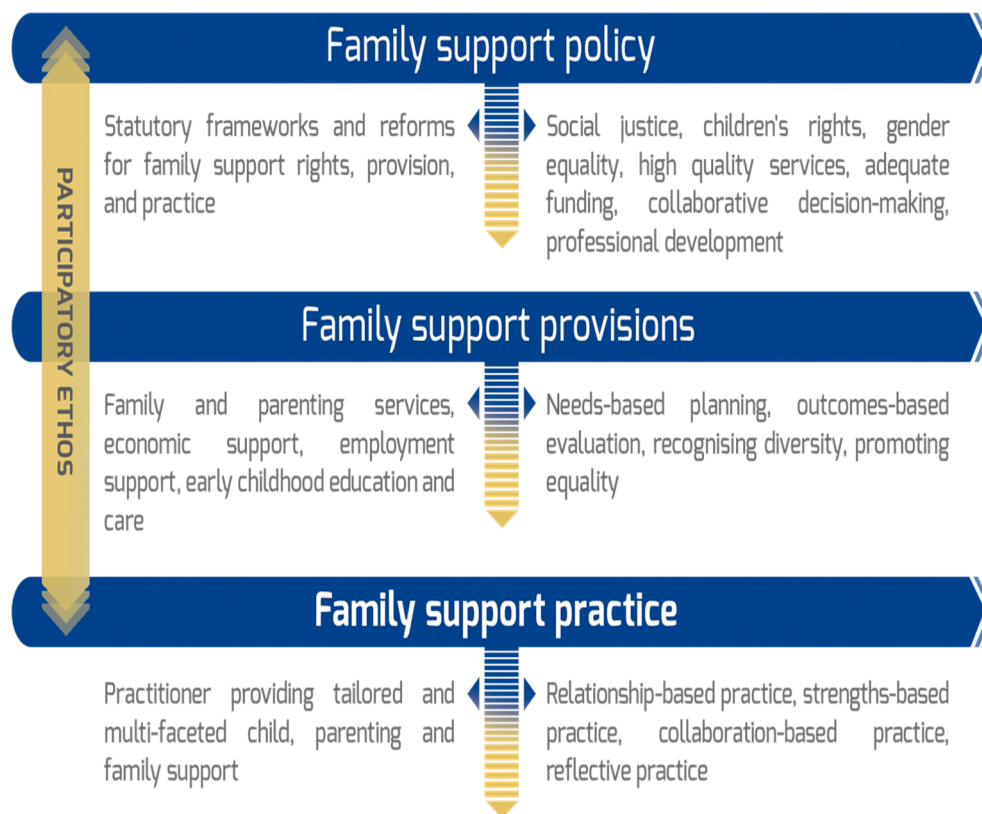


Fig. 2. Family support 'policy, provision and practice' domains and progressive orientations.

governments adopted wide-ranging systems-change approaches with multiple and coordinated national strategies that simultaneously combined strategies to prevent and reduce major social problems (e.g., domestic violence, child poverty, and child maltreatment) alongside national strategies for children's rights, family support, positive parenting, gender equality, and social inclusion (Abela et al., 2021). Common provision-level reforms and expansions developed ECEC services, parenting support and education initiatives, parental leave entitlements, and community-based multicomponent children's and family services (Abela et al., 2021). In addition, several countries had introduced significant policy implementation, monitoring, and evaluation measures and accountability (Abela et al., 2021). However, the national reports study also showed widespread patterns of increasing poverty and socio-economic disadvantages. Heightened poverty risks were particularly evident for single-mother families, families impacted by disability, larger families, ethnic minority groups, newly arrived migrants, and rural communities. The Covid-19 pandemic and its enduring socio-economic impact also figured highly in fuelling childhood risks and inequalities. These reports were critical of limited and punitive national policy responses and social provision. The coverage and availability of the following provisions were particularly criticised: child and family benefit schemes, social assistance and housing support schemes, paid employment-leave for parents, ECEC services, child maltreatment and domestic abuse prevention initiatives, multilingual and culturally-sensitive services as well as services for youth, educational welfare, family and parenting support, disability support, and child/youth mental health (Abela et al., 2021). The reports highlighted enduring concerns that support and services for children, parents, and families tended to be developed in piecemeal and fragmented ways, whereby restrictive eligibility criteria and gaps in provision compromised access to, and thereby benefits from, formal family support. Problems from inadequate and short-term funding for programmes and services were prominent. Social policies and provisions were criticised for neglecting the role and needs of fathers and for inadequate outreach

to, and provision for, minority groups and vulnerable families. Some policies were also criticised for engendering negative outcomes. For example, detrimental outcomes associated with welfare-to-work reforms and austerity programmes increased economic precarity and work-family conflicts, heightening welfare risks (OECD, 2021). The 'turn to parenting policies' has also been criticised for its alignment with over-simplifying parental influences on children's outcomes, stigmatising the parenting practices of disadvantaged groups, and reducing 'good parenting' to 'authoritative parenting techniques' (Betz et al., 2016). This reflects a pervasive emphasis on parental responsibilities for children rather than shared responsibilities for children's rights. In addition, it was found major data and research gaps often inhibit national policy development (Abela et al., 2021).

In the post-Covid-19 era, the EU's 'Child Guarantee Recommendation' (European Commission (EC), 2021) called on member-states to 'guarantee children in need' can access 'high quality ECEC, education and school-based activities, healthcare, healthy nutrition and adequate housing' (p.6). It specifies the needs and measures concerning children and families impacted by housing deprivation, disabilities and mental health issues, and those from disadvantaged migrant or ethnic minority backgrounds. Moreover, to promote greater 'genuine choice' (Lewis, 2009) for men and women negotiating parenthood and employment, the EU's 2019 'Work-Life Balance Directive' established new standards for the 27 EU member-states to provide flexible working rights to parents and carers, at least ten days of paid paternity leave for fathers and co-parents, and individual parental rights for at least two months parental leave. Among EU member states, these recent measures are contributing to significant advancements. However, there are also concerns take-up and implementation of these measures is progressing at mixed rates among EU states, and beyond the EU, there are calls for these areas of reform to be central to children's rights developments (Dolan et al., 2020).

## 2.5. Family support provision

In addition to analysis and development of family support as a policy orientation and field, our scoping studies conceptualised and considered family support as types of “time-based, resource-based and service-based” provisions and services (UNICEF, 2019) which can enhance capabilities and welfare for children, parents, and families. Considering family and parenting support services, Pinkerton et al. (2003) called for family support services to be developed via social policies as part of ‘a strategically managed approach’ (p.309). This approach emphasised conceptions of family support needs and approaches to service reforms which incorporated systematic population needs and risk assessments, cross-sector service audits, planning and evaluations, and the consultation of rigorous research and stakeholder perspectives. Pinkerton et al. (2003) also proposed that family support reforms should be based on explicit positions about what family and parenting support means, the scope of provision, and what policies and services aim to achieve. Raising awareness about family support and providing extensive up-to-date information about services can help promote a shared public and professional understanding of family support as an enabling and relevant service critical to facilitating help-seeking behaviour (McGregor et al., 2020). Given these criteria, the development and implementation of regional and local service strategies were evident in several of our case study countries, but it was also an area needing significant development (Abela et al., 2021).

Our literature review study (Devaney et al., 2021) highlighted the significance of multi-tiered models of child and family welfare services. The contribution made by McGregor and Devaney (2020a,b) was particularly noted and useful to reproduce here (See Fig. 3). Based on research about child welfare services in Ireland, McGregor and Devaney (2020a) proposed a six-tier model of universal and targeted services providing ‘protective support and supportive protection’ for children and families. The model focuses attention on families with multiple and complex needs, what McGregor and Devaney (2020a) refer to as ‘families in the middle’ (p.28). In the Irish context (and arguably in other jurisdictions), these families often move between the thresholds of support and intervention provided by services focused on early help versus services providing child protection responses where there are concerns about the safeguarding of children. Significantly, the model also emphasises the importance of positive ‘informal support networks’ (Level 1a) in providing the most widespread (and often preferred) forms of protective support and supportive protection (McGregor and

Devaney, 2020a, p.28).

Our scoping studies highlighted that family and parenting support services must be delivered in coordinated and holistic ways. The national reports study identified several innovative and beneficial developments, including national and local ‘family services/family support’ information services providing accessible and up-to-date, digitally-accessed, community-wide and in-person information about available services and supports (Abela et al., 2021). Prominent innovations were community-based programmes, centres, or networks, providing: (1) access to a spectrum of support, services, and professional roles; (2) peer support initiatives; and (3) community consultation initiatives. Examples include Family Centres (Sweden), Social Welfare Centres (Croatia), Early Aid networks (Germany), Family and Child Welfare Centres (Hungary), Community Resource Centres (Malta), Children and Young People’s Services Committees (Ireland) and Child and Youth Centres (the Netherlands) (Abela et al., 2021). However, as noted by Daly (2015) a “dearth of information and research” remains about what provisions are available across countries, how similar services are being developed and implemented in different contexts, what the outcomes and benefits of service engagement are for children and families across contexts; and the connections between ‘behaviour-change’ interventions and ‘anti-poverty and anti-inequality measures’ (p.9).

Broad, effective coordination and collaboration between family support services and professionals in this area are highly important. The literature review highlighted that cross-sector and inter-agency cooperation across services facilitates a comprehensive response to child and parent support needs (Devaney et al., 2021). However, effective collaboration and coordination are challenging to achieve and sustain, with several factors influencing these processes including resource constraints and developing inter-professional relationships and trust (Devaney et al., 2021).

## 2.6. Family support practice

In our framework, the ‘practice domain’ constitutes the ‘front-line of family support’ when considering the delivery of family support services and from the perspective of children, parents, and families. For these service user groups, this domain reflects the micro-level of citizen-state interactions, professional practices, and service delivery. It is the interface through which policies and provisions are delivered, implemented, tailored, and adapted to diverse support needs. Our scoping studies

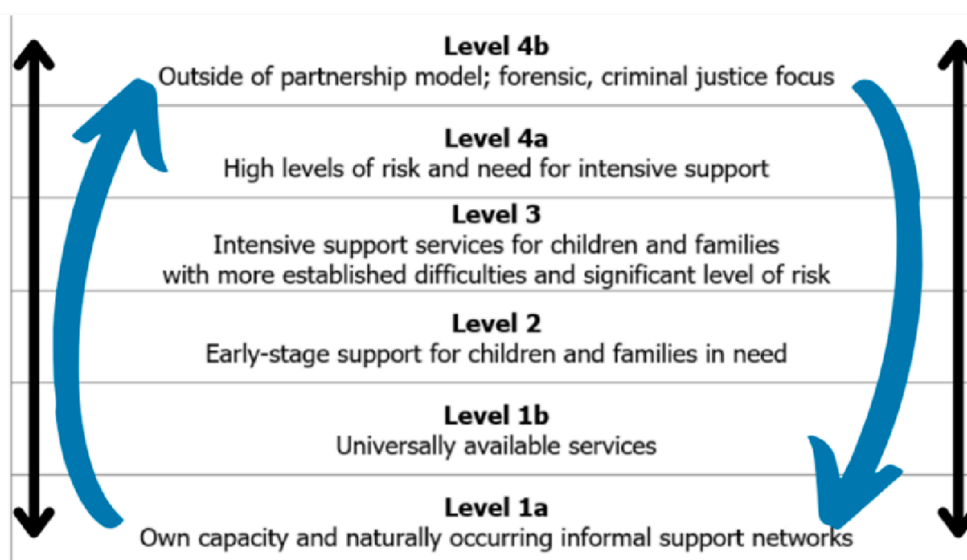


Fig. 3. Six-level multi-tiered child welfare service system (McGregor and Devaney, 2020a; 2020b).

indicated the significance of this domain in general, and, more specifically, a tendency for policy and provision debates and literatures to often neglect considerations about family support professional roles and family support as a professional practice paradigm (Churchill et al., 2021; Devaney et al., 2021). However, considering professional ethos, practice, competencies and skills, and the nature of provider/professional and service user relationships and collaborations are critical issues in the development and delivery of family support (Devaney et al., 2022; Dolan et al., 2006).

Child welfare, social work, and social pedagogy research have developed research-based guiding principles for holistic and enabling family support practice (Herrera-Pastor et al., 2020). This literature has conceptualised the following orientations to and principles for professional practice that are highly significant. First, relationship-based practices are emphasised. An increasing body of research demonstrates that effective and collaborative relationships between practitioners and service users are critical to building therapeutic alliances (Canavan et al., 2016; Wampold, 2015). Essential features of such a relationship include alliances, empathy, expectations, trust, and cultural adaptation (Wampold, 2015; Munford & Sanders, 2021). These qualities are often found to facilitate effective and responsive support for children, parents, and families, and to influence the experience of engaging with, and receiving, support and services (Canavan et al., 2016). Including the views and wishes of those engaged with services (children and parents) is also a fundamental principle of family support practice and increasingly recognised as a required feature of good practice (Devaney and Crosse, 2023). Many models of, and approaches to, participatory practice are increasingly recognised and employed across sectors and disciplines (Ibid).

Adopting a strengths-based approach is an additional widely recognised core feature of family support practice (Devaney et al., 2021). This entails recognising and building on individual, parental, and family motivations, strengths, qualities, and assets to nurture positive relationships, interactions and resilience in families (Canavan et al., 2016; Devaney et al., 2022; Herrera-Pastor et al., 2020; van Breda, 2019). In addition, holistic practice is important and accounts for the interconnected support needs of children and parents, including practical, financial, advisory, and therapeutic needs. The need to move beyond working in siloed, narrow, and fragmented ways is emphasised. Further, critical and reflective practice are increasingly viewed as important hallmarks of family support practice (Munford and Sanders, 2021). Houston (2015), Munford and Sanders (2021) and Sammut Scerri, Vetere, Abela, and Cooper (2017) highlight how reflexivity can enhance practitioners' self-awareness to become more sensitive to key issues that form part of the working alliance, such as the impact of power, culture, and biography on themselves, their professional work, and the lives of service users. Reflexivity also illuminates how personal and social contexts have meaning and can influence professional relationships. Self awareness and understanding is necessary among professionals in respect of the ways societal factors, structural inequalities and social norms contribute to childhood and family risks, including poverty (Munford & Sanders, 2021). More broadly, the literature review study highlighted the need for explicit professional consideration of the value system informing family support practice (Anonymised reference). This reviewed echoed other studies which found conflicting standpoints and approaches depending on whether family practitioners would see themselves as 'fixing' families and 'rescuing' children (McGregor & Devaney, 2020b) or supporting egalitarian principles and intervening together with families (Churchill & Sen, 2016). Informed by the European and UNCRC frameworks discussed above, it is vital the practice of child and family support, for example, understands and responds to poverty and discrimination as social injustices rather than psychologising and medicalising these issues. Finally, research-informed practice and practice-informed research are vitally important highlighting the recursive relationship between research and practice (Devaney et al., 2021).

Given the complexity of professional-child-family interactions and family support practice, critical issues include the importance of developing and investing in frameworks for professional knowledge, skills, and values; and supporting continuous professional development through training and support (WHO and Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2014). Furthermore, professionals and services that work with children and families must be adequately supported so that they have the skills to utilise family support approaches. Across these domains and issues relating to professional practice, there are also significant research gaps, particularly regarding holistic child welfare and family support practices undertaken by dedicated generic professional family support roles across national contexts and within interdisciplinary collaborations.

### 3. Conclusion

Informed by a four-year programme of scoping studies and collaborations involving researchers and policy/practice stakeholders, this article has considered key issues in conceptualising and developing family support across Europe; and presented a comprehensive multidimensional and multilevel framework to aid interdisciplinary dialogue and developments in family support research, policy, and practice. Drawing on the findings of three scoping studies, the article highlighted shortcomings in conceptual and analytic debates where family and parenting support are often defined in narrow, fragmented, and disjointed ways. It was argued shortcomings have inhibited the development of holistic, comprehensive, and enabling systems for providing material, social, and professional support and services to children, parents, and families. It also argued these shortcomings can inhibit interdisciplinary dialogue, research and development in both policy and practice. Funded by the EU supported COST research and knowledge exchange body and led by a European network of researchers and stakeholders working in the area, the critical issues raised and frameworks developed were particularly orientated towards advancing family support research, policy and practice among European countries. However, the discussions and frameworks considered in this article are also highly relevant to considering and developing family support policy, provision and practice in a wider international context and in line with near-global sign-up to the UNCRC.

To aid positive future development, the article presented a multidimensional definition of family support and encourages researchers, policy actors, service providers, and professionals to optimise the scope and quality of family support. It is argued these can be accomplished via coherent, collaborative, and comprehensive improvements in social policy frameworks, social provision systems, and frontline professional roles and practices. To promote and deliver family support benefits for children, families and societies, family support stakeholders must play (and be supported to play) a central role in considering issues, influences, and challenges that manifest at the policy, provision, and practice levels. All three domains and levels of family support must be considered when formulating a comprehensive, coherent, and collaborative reform agenda for children and family support. Critically, this formulation should incorporate a participatory ethos to ensure that the support appropriately addresses the needs of diverse families in various circumstances while respecting the agency of family members in determining their own lives. This study proposes positional and analytical frameworks to promote widespread cross-national and interdisciplinary knowledge exchanges and research in Europe and further afield.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.



## Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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