

# **A Policy Framework for Parenting: Final Report**

Report for the Department of Families, Housing, Community  
Services and Indigenous Affairs

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Social Policy Research Centre  
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## Abbreviations

CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CCCH	Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Hospital for Children
DHHS	Department of Health and Human Services
FaCS	Australian Government Department of Families and Community Services
FaHCSIA	Australian Government Department of Families, Housing and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
NGO	Non-government organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
USA	United States of America

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## **Executive Summary**

### **Background to the report**

Parents have a profound effect on their children's well-being and also their quality of life as adults. Parenting is also important for social mobility and social cohesion. Yet policies towards parenting and family support are still not well developed or understood.

### **Aims**

This review compares parenting and family support policies in seven countries – Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), the United States of America (US), New Zealand, Ireland, Sweden and Canada. It aims to:

- Briefly review the current literature relating to parenting and children's wellbeing, especially for vulnerable groups of parents including sole parents, fathers, teenage parents, grandparents, poor parents, parents with disability, parents of children with disability and Indigenous parents
- Provide a greater understanding of the content of policies and programs towards parents in the countries under study
- Identify the governmental structures which underpin these policies
- Study the challenges and facilitating factors to development of a comprehensive parenting policy framework

### **Methods**

In the current comparative research, the goal is descriptive, not prescriptive. This report seeks to describe and analyse different countries' approaches to supporting parents through social policy, seeking to answer the following questions:

- How is parenting policy articulated and formalised by governments?
- Are divergent child and family policy agendas drawn together to express a cohesive approach to parenting and if so, how?
- What are the key elements of parenting policies and what government institutions and mechanisms implement such policies?
- What are common challenges and difficulties in the development and implementation of a parenting policy and how are such challenges identified and overcome?

The research consisted of the following components:

A literature review was conducted to ascertain main issues to do with parenting and family policy in Australia and internationally. This included research on parenting itself, policies and programs to address parenting issues and comparative research which focused on how different countries had developed family and parenting policy.

Questionnaires were sent to key informants in the six countries under study (Australia, UK, Ireland, Sweden, USA, Canada) these addressed the underpinning philosophy guiding family and parenting policy, the governmental structures for developing such policies and the content of significant policies and programs. Information was obtained largely about policies developed at the central government or federal level. The responses were then analysed

## **Parenting**

A large body of research shows that parents are by far the most important influence on their children's wellbeing and also on their wellbeing and productivity as adults. Although in the last decade several studies have emphasised the importance of parenting during the early childhood years, recent findings show that consistency in parenting throughout childhood and adolescence is equally crucial. Parenting style, in particular 'authoritative' parenting (e.g., high warmth and responsiveness combined with reasonable control) has been shown to be important in facilitating the socio-emotional wellbeing of children. Studies on resilience show that the quality of parenting is a predominant factor contributing to positive development among children growing up in risky environments. It has been acknowledged that some groups of parents have specific needs because they belong to socially excluded groups or because they face particular challenges in the parenting role. These parents often experience difficulties in accessing services and other support systems and so may be in need of additional supportive policies and programs. This study focused on the following vulnerable groups: sole parents, fathers, teenage parents, grandparents, parents with a disability, parents of children with disability, parents from culturally and linguistically diverse communities and indigenous families.

### **The rise of parenting in social policy**

Over the past decade, parents' roles and parenting practices have received increased public and policy attention in many countries. Historically, parenting was seen as a largely private matter; state intervention was only sanctioned if parents failed to meet basic standards of parenting or abused their children. Family support tended to be provided by NGOs, sometimes financed by governments, but seldom part of broader parenting or family policies. In the last few years, however, this has changed for a number of reasons. This section discusses some of the reasons for the increased focus on parenting and discusses arenas of social policy which address parents' roles and parenting practices more specifically.

### **Tensions in policies targeting families and parents**

There are a number of unresolved issues in the area of parenting. These include differing expectations of parenthood touching on issues such as corporal punishment, parental rights to privacy and to parent in their own fashion, and debates over the degree to which parents should supervise their children. Furthermore, from a government viewpoint, parenting has to compete with a number of other policy priorities for funding and the attention of policymakers. There are notable variations across countries concerning the appropriate role of government in issues associated with parenting. The combination of competing priorities and lack of consensus on the government's responsibility to enact policies targeting parenting has created a contentious environment toward parenting policy in some countries.

## **Vulnerable parents**

This section outlines the particular needs of certain groups of parents. Fathers are important to virtually all children, whether they are resident biological parents, non resident parents or non biological fathers who take on a parenting role. Grandparents also play important roles in caring for many children, but their needs are often not adequately supported by policies which assume the primary caregiver to be the mother of the child. Although the special needs of parents caring for children with disability have been widely recognised, they are often not met by current policies and practices. The needs of parents with disability (physical, intellectual, or psychological) have not been fully addressed in the parenting literature; both parents with disability as well as parents from culturally and linguistically diverse communities (CALD) have suffered from stigma and discrimination and are not well served by mainstream parenting programs and policies. Sole and teenage parents have been the focus of prevention programs and policies that aim to limit financial hardship.

Underpinning the needs and challenges of all these groups of vulnerable families is that people in these groups are more likely to suffer from financial hardship and social exclusion. All of them have difficulty accessing mainstream services and they require specific targeted policies and programs to support their parenting.

The section also discusses some of the conceptual and practical challenges and tensions inherent in implementing a parenting policy framework and the reasons why parenting policy is still fragmented both in terms of the structural location in government and in terms of the content of the policies themselves.

## **Conceptualising parenting policy**

After reviewing the importance of parenting in relation to child development and the needs of parents and subgroups of parents, the next section turns to policies and government models of support. This section first considers how scholars and governments have conceptualised family policies and examines whether parenting policy is included as a subcomponent of family policy.

There are a wide range of policies that target families and parents. The policy areas that are most commonly classified as family policy include transfer and tax policies, labour market policies and the provision of services. Despite the breadth of family policies, it is notable that very few policies focus explicitly on the task of parenting itself. Policies targeting parents' money, time and access to resources such as child care may have the intention of improving parents' financial and emotional capacities and thereby have indirect effects on the quality of their parenting and on children's healthy development. However, such policies do not directly seek to support or alter parents' provision of supportive, stimulating, and appropriately demanding parenting to their children.

These findings indicate a substantial gap in the literature around comparative parenting policy, supporting the importance of the current study. Given the heightened interest of governments in the role that parents play in promoting positive child development and creating human capital, understanding how governments currently seek to enhance and support optimal parenting is an important policy question.



This section further expands on the methodology followed in this report.

### **Broad agendas of parenting policy philosophy: our study countries in detail**

This section looks at the study countries in detail. It finds that most of the countries lack a formal and cohesive parenting policy framework that serves to define policy goals, direct legislative and service resources, or provide a blueprint from which policy progress can be assessed. Many countries acknowledge that parenting policy is an area that the government has explored, yet one in which government has failed to adopt an overarching policy philosophy or framework. As such, the family policy agendas in most countries under study include a range of targeted policies developed to serve a variety of rather narrow purposes (e.g. child protection policies) or subgroups (e.g. programs targeting adolescent parents) but that lack a cohesive unifying framework or set of explicit universal goals for parents and families.

Essentially all countries assessed noted specific policies or resources targeting parenting, although these were not framed within an overarching philosophy or policy framework. There were a variety of models in how countries defined and approached parenting and family policy. Some countries, most notably Canada, treat family policy as a provincial issue with a very limited role for the federal government in this policy area. Sweden, in contrast, has specific philosophies regarding family roles and children, but not a system of explicit goals or policies supporting parenting. Ireland is in the process of developing a philosophy of parenting policy.

In Australia responsibilities for policies and programs to address parenting issues are shared between the Federal and State governments. Although there are a number of programs to support parenting and families, there is no specific government philosophy or overarching policy framework, either at the federal or the state level.

The one country that could be characterised as having a unifying and holistic framework concerning parenting linked to a cohesive set of policy levers and programmatic efforts is the UK. The UK provides an example of a country that has declared a central government philosophy in relation to parenting and has developed laws, policies, and programs to enact this framework on the local level.

### **Family Policy**

It is evident from the responses to our study that policy coherence regarding families and parenting is the result of a concerted governmental effort to achieve explicit and defined goals related to families. Such countries include Sweden, Ireland and the UK.

Standing in contrast, the United States, Canada and New Zealand offer a multitude of policies relating to children and families, but these policies are piecemeal, not unified by a coherent framework or set of specified goals.

As with most of the other countries under study, Australia has a range of policies and programs for improving parenting and supporting families, but these do not represent a coherent philosophy, policy framework or government structure. There are programs funded by both federal and state governments.

A second distinguishing feature of countries' parenting policies relates to whether the policy philosophy is reactive or preventive in nature. The UK, Sweden, and Ireland, countries that have all taken steps toward coherency and coordination, have government policies that acknowledge the role the government can play in supporting and investing in parents. In contrast, the United States, Canada and New Zealand primarily implement targeted policies and programs, taking a reactive approach of intervening in or supporting parenting only in cases in which a safety net is deemed necessary. Australia is in the process of moving from a reactive towards a much more proactive and preventive policy.

There are very few examples of universal policies and programs targeting all parents. Rather, in most countries, parenting policies are limited to laws and programs that are targeted at specific subpopulations. The scope of these populations ranges from children with disability and parents with disability, to teenage parents and low-income parents. In all of these cases, the implicit goal of the policies is to support parents who may face particular constraints and challenges in meeting the needs of their children. However, the approach, structure and extent of the policies differs between individual countries for a variety of reasons due to need, available resources and the history of the policy approach in that country to the particular issue. The detailed approaches of the study countries to disabled parents, children with disability, teen parents and low income parents are explored in detail in Section 5.3.

### **Government structure of parenting**

Results from our analysis indicated notable similarities in how the countries under study structure and implement their programs and policies relating to parenting. All countries have one lead government agency or department which contains the majority of their parenting related policies and supports. In all cases, the major focus in this lead department is not on parenting but rather encapsulates a broader portfolio. The policy portfolio of the lead department often covers families, children or education. Although countries all have one or more central government agency overseeing policies related to parenting, it is important to note that all countries also have varying amounts of their family policy agenda spread out over numerous other agencies and departments. Several countries also have an official or body outside of the lead department and separate from the government who is specifically focused on children and/or families.

Many policies relating to families and children are actually implemented at the state/province or even local level with great variety in how these policies are envisioned and legislated. Countries fall along a continuum between a federalist (or national government) system and an anti-federalist (local authority or state government) system. Sweden, New Zealand and Ireland are examples of countries where nearly all policy is created at the national government level. These countries do not have any coordinated system for policies to trickle down to the local level or to be legislated and implemented at the local level only.

In the middle of the continuum lie Australia, the US and the UK, all of which have a system where the majority of the legislation and funding originates at the national level, but where states and local governments (or NGOs) have the responsibility for implementing programs. This section looks in detail at the study countries' government structures. In the area of parenting policy Canada lies at the extreme of the continuum, with the vast majority of policies and programs being developed by the provinces rather than the federal government.

### **Legislative and evaluative processes underlying parenting policy**

This section looks at the specific legislative processes in the study countries. It finds that nearly all countries use legislation to develop their policies. For countries with devolved structures, legislation may occur at multiple levels (e.g. federal, state/province and town). The federal government is often only able to direct policy through the designation and allocation of money to states/provinces. States/provinces can be left with a wide range of discretion in designing and implementing programs enacted into law at the federal level. For countries that are more centralist in nature, policy and legislation are developed at the central government level, although the implementation of policies through services and programs are often conducted at the local level. These countries also tend to adopt successful programs from other countries and implement them with or without legislation.

Similarly, there is variability in how policies and programs are evaluated. Some countries have formal systems of evaluation required by legislation or policy; others use more informal evaluation mechanisms; some provide little support or incentive for evaluation. Some countries import policies or program structures, whereas others, such as the US, tend to eschew replication of policies.

The above sections show that most of the countries under study have similar objectives relating to parenting and family policies. Furthermore the majority of countries are moving towards more coherent policies and more centralised approaches to family policy. However each country has developed these policies in accordance with its own policy traditions and government structures and there is no one model for incorporating parenting policies within the wider frameworks of children and family policies.

### **Obstacles to developing and implementing parenting policy**

Perhaps the major hindrance to the development of comprehensive parenting policy is the ideological tension between those who see children being a public good as opposed to the view that children are essentially a private good. The role of parents may be perceived as important and programs themselves may be seen as effective, but government intervention into parenting and the implementation of related programs is viewed by many as an interference in private life and a threat to personal freedom. Philosophical resistance to parenting policy also comes in the form of tension between female labour supply objectives, gender equality, and the value of nonmarket labour vis-a-vis caring for children. Rising female employment rates call for policies targeted at alternate care arrangements for young children by some and for parental leave policies by others.

Separate from the philosophy of a country, the government structure and typical legislative process can help or hinder the development of a parenting policy. Countries that have a more centralist government structure appear to have an easier route to enacting parenting policy.

A further conceptual challenge to parenting policy is the relationship between parenting, families and children's policies. In many countries parents are not seen as a separate group with their own needs and policy structures.

Across countries, a common barrier to developing and implementing parenting policy is a lack of financial resources and uncertainty on the best use of available resources. Parenting

policy is sometimes perceived to be a ‘luxury’ rather than a necessity and therefore the philosophical and political will to implement parenting policies tends to be reduced during periods of economic adversity.

## **Conclusion**

This literature review and data collection on parenting policies has provided an overview of why parenting is important for children and the reasons why governments are becoming increasingly interested in parenting.

The results suggest that in most countries studied, governments generally have not sought to define the specifics of how parents should parent their children, nor have they sought to develop comprehensive parental policies and programmes.

However, our analysis also indicated that this is a policy arena that may be in a period of notable expansion and growth. Results from our country studies indicate that some governments (e.g., the UK and Ireland) are creating holistic philosophies or frameworks defining positive parenting or delineating characteristics of parenting which are optimal for child development.

In other countries, the philosophy is less clear or universal, the system is more piecemeal, or the targets are narrower. However, there is reason to believe this is changing. Essentially all countries have government agencies that are primarily responsible for parenting and child issues, encapsulated within a broader agenda of child and family policies. There appears to be acknowledgement that greater coordination and a more cohesive framework to approach parenting would benefit policy making and the provision of services. Nevertheless there is no consensus that policy should be moving towards an increasing role for the state in the private lives of families. Rather the consensus appears to be around more transparency and a more explicit statement by governments of their expectations of parents and also their commitment to parenting. There is also a developing consensus that, as far as possible, Governments should attempt to coordinate those policies which do impact on parenting so that they do not appear to be contradictory or confusing for the public.

Overall, however, only the UK has created a coherent set of principles and goals supporting the importance of parenting and the role of the government and the community in promoting positive parenting across all families. Other countries have far to go to emulate such a coordinated and universal system

## 1 Introduction

This review compares parenting and family support policies in seven countries – Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), the United States of America (USA), New Zealand, Ireland, Sweden and Canada. The report aims to:

- Briefly review the current literature relating to parenting and children’s wellbeing, especially for selected groups of vulnerable families
- Provide a greater understanding of the content of policies and programs towards parents in the countries under study
- Identify the governmental structures which underpin these policies
- Study the issues relating to the development of a parenting policy framework

### 1.1 Definition of terms and exclusion criteria

There are no universally accepted definitions of parenting, parenting policy or the related terms we will be using in this review. The following list is therefore aimed at clarifying these terms for the purposes of the review. These should be read as working definitions, however, because the research which will form the bulk of this project is likely to inform these definitions. Furthermore, many of these terms – particularly family and parenting policy – are often not clearly differentiated and are often used interchangeably. The terms are discussed in more detail in Sections 2 and 4 below.

#### Parenting

This term is used to describe the activity of being a parent, including the “socialisation, care and development of children as future adults” (Kolar & Soriano, 2000, p. 3). Parenting is a relatively recent term. The term is gender neutral but many theorists point out that *fathering* is in fact different from *mothering* and therefore the term *parenting* is rather misleading (Featherstone, 2009).

#### Family policy

Vail (2002, p. 3) argues that family policy consists of:

Policies, programs, laws and regulations designed explicitly to support families in raising children. It includes policies that support parents and communities in providing environments that ultimately assist a child’s development.

Family policy provides the overall framework of policy direction towards the family. It outlines governments’ specific vision of what families should be like and the role of the state in promoting families and family life. Family policy focuses on the question of when state intervention in families is justified and increasingly involves policies which promote certain types of families (e.g. marriage promotion, incentives for fertility, disincentives for teenage parents) or certain family behaviours (e.g. work life balance, child care subsidies, work promotion for single parents). Family policy also includes such elements as family tax

benefits, baby bonuses, child care subsidies etc. In this review, we treat parenting policies and children's policies as sub-categories of family policies.

### **Parenting policy**

The term parenting policy is used here to describe policies and programs that seek to support the quality of parenting or to alter parents' activities with their children in or outside of the home. These include such policies as:

- Parenting information
- Parenting orders
- Income management
- Child support

Parenting policies also include policies to promote interests or improve the parenting capacity of particular groups of parents such as fathers, parents with disabilities, minority (CALD) parents, teenage parents, sole parents, grandparents as primary carers and parents of children with disability.

### **Children's Policy**

Children's policies are aimed specifically at improving the wellbeing of children and include:

- Child care/preschool
- Education
- Child health
- Child protection
- Out of home care
- Juvenile justice
- Youth policy

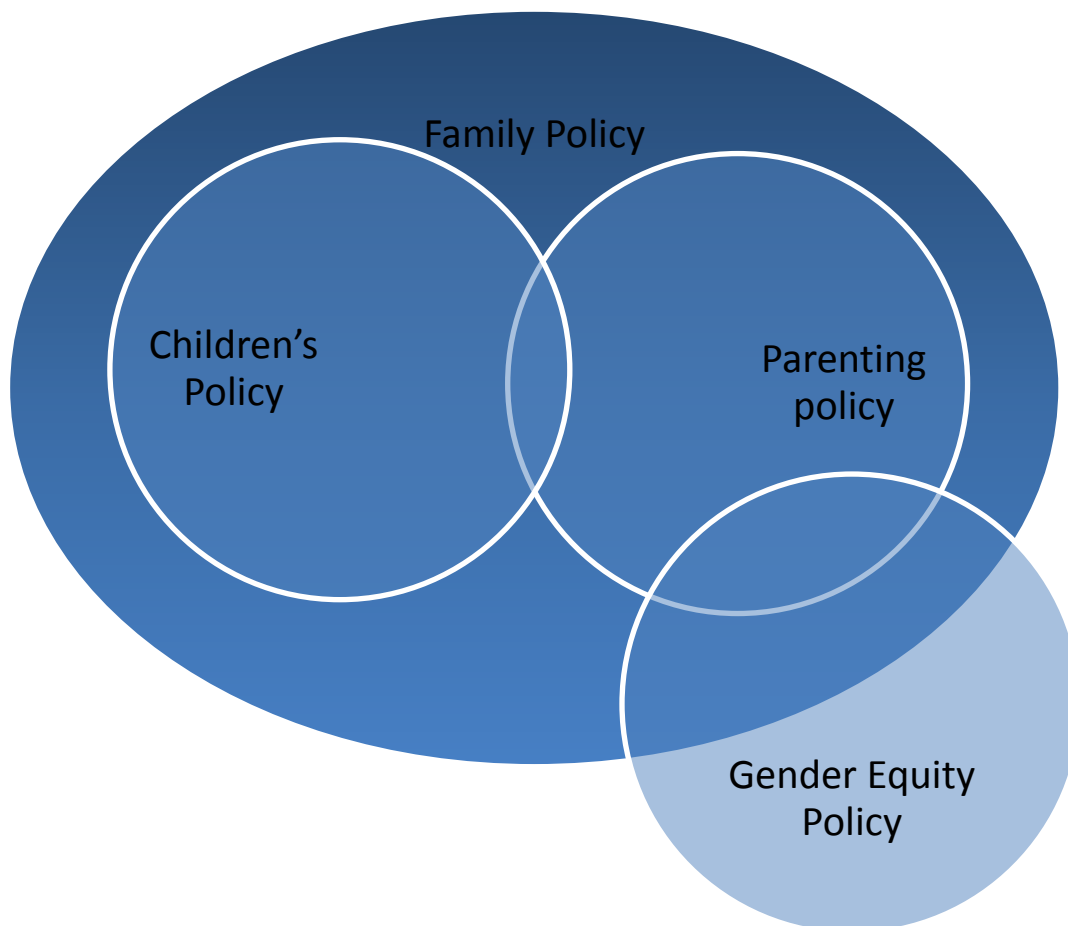
As mentioned above, this review treats parenting and children's policy as components of family policy. Of course there are overlaps and grey areas between these components of family policy, and indeed between family policy and other areas of policy, which directly or indirectly affect parenting and family life. Nevertheless parenting policy does seem to be emerging as a specific concern for governments around the world.

### **Gender Equity**

Another area of policy which overlaps with parenting policy is gender equity. In many countries policies such as paid parental leave, flexible working hours etc are designed not only to support parents to better look after their children and to help women maintain their attachment to the labour force, but are also designed to facilitate greater gender equity in the labour market and also in the home. Indeed as we will show below, In some countries, (most notably Sweden and the Nordic countries) gender equity, rather than child welfare, has been the primary driving force behind many of the moves for high quality services for young children.

Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the relationships between these various related areas of policy.

**Figure 1 Position of Parenting Policy within Family Policy**



### **Programs**

Programs are direct interventions that support parents or influence their behaviour. Many programs aim to improve children's outcomes but work primarily through parent training and/or support. Often these programs are targeted at disadvantaged families. Some examples of parenting programs are Triple P, Sure Start, Headstart, Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, Parentline Plus and Best Start. In this review, we do not include cash transfers or tax credits (baby bonus, child care subsidies) as programs.

## 2 Methodology

This study aims to provide a comprehensive and systematic comparison of national policies and programs relating to parenting and family support in seven countries – Australia, USA, New Zealand, UK, Ireland, Sweden and Canada. The study draws together the disparate parenting threads that may exist in areas such as child protection, early education, criminal justice, adult mental health and work and family. The research examines how the policies are administered in each country and the countries’ underlying conceptualisations of parenting, children and the family, as well as the role of government in these areas.

### 2.1 Research Questions

The specific aims of this project are to describe and analyse different countries’ approaches to supporting parents through social policy, seeking to answer the following questions:

- How is parenting policy articulated and formalised by governments?
- Are divergent child and family policy agendas drawn together to express a cohesive approach to parenting and if so, how?
- What are the key elements of parenting policies and what government institutions and mechanisms implement such policies?
- What are common challenges and difficulties in the development and implementation of a parenting policy and how are such challenges identified and overcome?

Within this work, we view questions of how to define parenting policy as being as important as questions about the nature of the policies themselves and of their implementation. In order to keep the scope manageable we have excluded the following areas from this project:

- a. Child support and post-divorce contact issues
- b. Policies and programs aimed at addressing work/life balance (except as part of broader family support programs)
- c. Maternity/paternity/adoption leave
- d. Cash transfers to parents such as baby bonuses, tax credits, child care subsidies
- e. Child protection or child welfare policies or programs of which parenting is not the primary object

We will, however, allude to some of those policies where relevant. In addition, we are mainly focusing on central (i.e. federal or national) government rather than state or provincial governments, although exemplary policies or programs at the lower tiers of government are included occasionally.

### 2.2 Selection of countries for study

The selection of the seven countries under study was driven by both pragmatic and conceptual considerations. We included English speaking countries because literature and



documentation on government policies is available in English, and also because they all have similar welfare and service systems; they are all ‘liberal’ or ‘residualist’ welfare regimes in the Esping-Andersen categorisation (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Sweden was chosen partly because many of the documents relating to its policies are in English but also because it is known to have the most developed policy regime for families. It provides a contrast to the Anglophone countries, as it has an archetypal social democratic welfare regime.

### **2.3 Data collection and analysis**

A useful strategy for achieving the complex goals of comparative policy analysis is the triangulation of information from multiple sources. Gathering information from multiple sources and stakeholders allows assessment of multiple viewpoints, providing opportunities to assess the both the “how” and the “why” questions related to policy development and implementation. Triangulation of information, particularly the inclusion of structured interviews, provides opportunities to replicate and clarify central pieces of information, to develop a common language and assess the functional equivalence of core concepts across locations, all key concerns in comparative research (Rainbird, 1996).

In the current work, data were gathered from multiple primary and secondary sources including: government documents; published journal articles, books and reports; and structured, open-ended interviews with key informants in each of the six countries. For the key informant interviews, the same research instrument was used across all of our countries to provide a base of parallel information, as suggested by comparative methodologists (Hantrais, 2004). Key informants were drawn from government departments and leading research and educational organizations focused on child and family policy. Informants were chosen based upon their identification as experts in or managers of government policies directed at children and families in each of the countries. Triangulating data from these three sources (government documents, published works and key informant interviews) provides rich information, helping to increase the validity and rigor of our results (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

Data from the key informant interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis as a basis for identifying distinct concepts in the data which were then grouped into broader categories through an integration process (La Rossa, 2005; Patton, 2002). The categories represent larger themes evident in the data and were used to organize the presentation of results. Concepts, or sub-themes, represent more detailed descriptions of a larger category. The primary goal of content analysis is to form a small number of descriptive categories that encompass the complexity of intricate patterns across respondents.

The data collection was supplemented by a series of workshops held in March 2010 in which key informants from the countries under study(excluding Sweden and Canada) were invited to Australia to present insights from their countries of origin and discuss these with policy makers from Commonwealth and State governments, academics and NGO representatives. These observations and discussions have been included in this analysis.

### **2.4 Comparative policy analysis**

In the current research, we employ a comparative policy analysis approach. A central goal of comparative research is to systematically study an identified phenomenon across multiple countries, cultures or otherwise defined groups. Comparative analysis has been defined as

“research which systematically investigates one or more phenomena in two or more countries or ‘nations’ as given contexts for actors and institutions” (Clasen, 1999, p. 2). In a very similar approach, Kennett defines comparative or cross national policy analysis as the “explicit, systematic and contextual analysis of one or more phenomena in more than one country” (Kennett 2001, 3).

Comparing and contrasting phenomena in a systematic manner increases understanding of social realities, leading to new insights and a deeper understanding than studying phenomena in one context only. Comparisons allow both generalizing and distinguishing conclusions (Hantrais, 2004; Pinkerton & Katz, 2003). Comparative research seeks to identify patterns and create categorizations by comparing the goals, nature and evolution of policies across locations (Hetherington, 2003). By assessing similarities and differences across nations as well as across time, comparative policy research seeks to assess both trends within and variations across countries (Gauthier, 1998). Thus, patterns are identified and relationships unearthed (Hetherington, 2003).

Moreover, comparative policy analysis explores policies and methods of framing policies that differ from those in the country of research origin. This approach is most often confined to a specific policy area (M. Hill, 1996). According to Antal et al (1987, p. 15), the consultation of alternative approaches to policy problems by comparative policy analysts not only provides them with new insights and options for policy making but brings to the fore latent constraints on options for policy change in their own systems. In short, comparative analysis can:

fill important gaps in knowledge about how other countries deal with similar situations, about the background and effects of alternative strategies for solving common problems (or avoiding their emergence in the first place)... Comparative research can aid in the specification of the conditions under which one country can learn from another... Identifying the differences among various national approaches to a given policy problem can assist in the specification of the structural, institutional and cultural constraints of the public policy (Antal et al 1987, pp. 14-15).

When conducting comparisons of policies across nations, it is essential to carefully specify the policy objectives being implemented as well as the criteria being utilized to evaluate policies (Walker, 1996). For example, the goals or objectives of social policies may vary both across nations and across time. On the other hand, differences in policies may be superficial. That is, different policy levers may be utilized in an attempt to reach similar goals even though they appear to address different issues (Walker, 1996). Due to these complexities, international comparisons must address similarities as well as differences between policies. Another set of complexities relates to the differences in language, time, historical forces, etc. As such, comparative analyses require careful attention to the equivalence of terminology, goals and policy practices, and a keen eye for the subjectivity of policy aims and assessment of outcomes (Gauthier, 1998).

In addition to concerns over equivalence, there are also a multitude of layers to consider in policy analysis. According to Heidenheimer et al (1990, p. 3) comparative public policy “is the study of how, why and to what effect different governments pursue particular courses of action or inaction”. The ‘how’ refers to the way in which “different governments and their related constellations of parties, interest groups, and bureaucracies actually work through

various policy problems” (Heidenheimer, et al., 1990, pp. 3-4). The ‘why’ can refer to reasons behind policymakers’ decisions, reasons that can be historical, economic, political or social and which, in reality, interact in various ways to influence policymaking. For these authors, it is not enough to compare policies alone, rather, the analysis must situate policies within an “overall configuration of movement and activity” (Heidenheimer, et al., 1990, p. 5).

A variety of methodologies have been implemented in comparative social policy studies (see Clasen, 1999; Hantrais, 2004). These range from historical case studies conducted in parallel across countries, to parallel quantitative analyses, to less defined approaches employing systematic multi-method techniques (Mabbett & Bolderson, 1999). Historical case studies tend to be exploratory rather than prescriptive, gathering extensive data (often through years of immersion) on political, institutional and historical trends across countries in order to generate a theoretical model. Quantitative models, on the other hand, start with a testable model, quantifying concepts in order to assess their statistical relationships across countries. A third type of comparative policy analysis starts with neither an explicit, definable theoretical model nor with the resources for years of immersion for in-depth case studies, yet seeks to develop a model of how policies compare and contrast across multiple locations. This type of comparative analysis employs a systematic yet open approach to gathering data, often incorporating numerous sources and methods of data collection in a comparable manner across countries in order to generate a cohesive body of knowledge. Moreover, this broader and more diverse technique of comparative policy research may also incorporate pieces of case-study or quantitative approaches. Heidenheimer et al (1990, p. 12) identify a “growing recognition that analysis needs to utilise both broad-scale comparative mapping of similarities and differences *and* contextually rich individual case studies”.

As with other types of comparative policy analysis, this systematic approach requires careful attention to the equivalence of concepts and terminologies across countries. Equivalizing concepts are often explored as a mechanism through which to capture differences and similarities across countries, systematically evaluating and explaining generalizing and distinguishing features of policies across countries (Hetherington, 2003; Mabbett & Bolderson, 1999).

### **3 Literature review**

This section describes why there has been an increased focus on parenting policy and interventions in many western countries. The section begins with a brief review of the extensive body of literature on how parenting affects child development before focusing on some groups of vulnerable parents who are of particular concern to policy makers. In particular, this section reviews the literature around sole parent families, fathers, teenage parents, grandparents, parents with disability, parents caring for children with disability, parents from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds and Indigenous parents. We then discuss the importance of parenting in social policy and provide a brief overview of the existing comparative literature on parenting policies.

#### **3.1 Why parenting matters for children**

There is now a substantial body of scientific literature which confirms that parenting plays a central role in child development and wellbeing (Centre for Community Child Health, 2004; Darling, 1999; O'Connor & Scott, 2007; Zubrick, et al., 2007). This section provides a brief overview of this literature by examining the influence of parenting and parenting style on developmental growth and resilience. In addition, the influence of effective parenting practices on parents themselves is briefly explored.

#### **Developmental growth**

Parenting has been shown to provide a strong foundation for the cognitive, social and emotional development of children (Bornstein & Tamis-LeMonda, 1989; Kochanska, 1994; Landry, Smith, Swank, Assel, & Vellet, 2001; Ramey & Landesman Ramey, 1998; J. P Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Infancy, in particular, has long been regarded as a crucial stage in positive development because this period is characterised by tremendous psychomotor growth, development of information-processing skills, language learning, emotional expressivity and temperament formation (Bornstein, 2002). During the first years of life the brain is particularly adaptable and consistent responsiveness from parents, including physical touching, social interaction and sensory stimulation, has been found to increase brain function, boosting rates of cognitive and social growth (Dawson, Ashman, & Carver, 2000; Landry, Smith, & Swank, 2003; Nelson, 1999). Research also shows that, throughout the early childhood years, responsive and attuned caregiving provided by parents leads to denser brain circuitry (Davies, 2004).

Across the childhood development field, research has found that parental involvement, responsiveness, stimulation, warmth, sensitivity, acceptance, predictability, consistency, as well as household rules and structures, contribute to positive developmental outcomes (Teti & Candelaria, 2002). Positive relationships between parents and shared caregiving by other relatives also lead to better developmental outcomes (Werner, 2000). Conversely, empirical research has shown that harsh and inconsistent discipline, low levels of parental involvement with the child and poor monitoring of the child's activities constitute some of the variables that contribute to early forms of antisocial behaviour, which may lead to delinquency (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 2000). In addition, conflicts between spouses, parental difficulties such as substance abuse or psychopathology, as well as high levels of financial and social stress, have been shown to contribute to a climate of hostile parenting and inconsistent relationships with children, in turn harming children's development (Cowan &

Cowan, 2002; Fincham, 1998; Shaw, Owens, Giovannelli, & Winslow, 2001; Zahn-Waxler, Duggal, & Gruber, 2002). Parental stress has been shown to be a major risk factor for a range of negative child outcomes (Conger, Conger, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994; Elder, 1985; Katz & Redmond, 2008) and postnatal depression seems to be a significant predictor of poor outcomes for children (L. Murray & Cooper, 1997).

Although in the last decade several studies have emphasised the importance of parenting during the early childhood years, recent findings show that consistency in parenting across childhood and adolescence is equally crucial. Indeed, middle childhood development is characterised by improved self-regulation which is essential to accomplish school tasks, an increasing peer orientation and an ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. It is also a period when the child internalises social norms of right and wrong and shows a growing awareness of adhering to rules, enabling him/her to control negative or antisocial behaviour (Davies, 2004). Sustenance, stimulation, support, structure and surveillance from sensitive caregivers decrease the risks of psychological and behavioural disorders in the child (Waylen & Stewart-Brown, 2008).

The next developmental stage, adolescence, is characterised by rapid physiological changes, increases in cognitive abilities such as abstract reasoning and decision-making, development of social competence and autonomy, transition in personal relationships, and identity development. Psychosocial disorders associated with adolescence include drug and alcohol abuse, depression, suicide, risky sexual activity and mental illnesses, which make teenagers vulnerable to problem behaviours (Adams & Berzonsky, 2003). Yet studies have shown that continued parental support and monitoring of teenagers contributes to better academic performance, lesser behavioural problems, better mental health, higher self-esteem and improved social skills (Gunnoe, Hetherington, & Reiss, 1999; Jackson, Henriksen, & Foshee, 1998).

### **Parenting style and reciprocity for parents**

In developmental psychology, the concept of 'parenting' style has become the dominant model for explaining how parents influence their child's development (Baumrind, 1991; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Baumrind (1991), who conducted the seminal work on parenting styles, argues that this concept captures two interrelated elements: *responsiveness* and *demandingness*. Parental responsiveness refers to "the extent to which parents intentionally foster individuality, self-regulation, and self-assertion by being attuned, supportive, and acquiescent to children's special needs and demands" (Baumrind, 1991, p. 61). Parental demandingness refers to "the claims parents make on children to become integrated into the family whole, by their maturity demands, supervision, disciplinary efforts and willingness to confront the child who disobeys" (Baumrind, 1991, pp. 61-62). This is closely related to the parents' beliefs and values concerning the aims of parenting and the expected developmental trajectories of their child. Taking into account the varying degrees of responsiveness and behavioural control, researchers have articulated a typology of four parenting styles: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive and withdrawn. The authoritative style, which combines both high responsiveness and high demandingness, has been found to generate the most positive developmental outcomes, with research largely focusing on parents with white middle-class backgrounds (Baumrind, 1991).

Moreover, research shows that aside from influencing their child's development through direct interactions, parents also affect their children's experience in indirect ways, through their individual characteristics, provision of resources and opportunities, their spousal/co-parental relationship and their participation in larger social activities and networks outside the household (Holden & Buck, 2002; Sigel, McGillicuddy-DeLisi, & Goodnow, 1992).

Effective parenting, positive parent-child relationships and productive child development have positive impacts not only on children but also on parents themselves. Surveys of parents indicate that they consider the task of parenting as personally rewarding, although demanding and stressful (Centre for Community Child Health, 2007). Positive responsiveness from the child diminishes levels of parental stress and increases parental self-esteem, contributing to a sense of self-efficacy and mastery. These outcomes are not only key factors in positive and competent parenting practices (Coleman & Karraker, 1997), they also affect parents as individuals, improving their general abilities to face challenges in their work and social environments.

### **Resilience**

Independent of the different stages of developmental growth, the direction of a child's development can change – and be influenced to change – at critical points in life. External influences, such as trauma or increased opportunity (a more stimulating environment at home or at school), may change a child's developmental trajectory (Davies, 2004). This is all the more true during the first five years of life, when a child experiences the most rapid development, so that positive or negative experiences during this period strongly influence later developmental opportunity (A. S. Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; J. P. Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Resilient children are those who display positive developmental outcomes despite having been exposed to risk factors such as poverty, community violence, parental unemployment or family disruption. Factors which promote resilience operate at various levels: the child, the family, the community and the wider society all contribute to resilience (Rutter, 2000). Resilient children are generally healthier, good-tempered and perform better at school. Later in life, they are found to respond more actively to stress, display a high degree of autonomy and a positive social orientation (Luthar, 2006; A. S. Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Werner, 2000). Studies on resilience show that the quality of parenting is a predominant factor contributing to positive development among children growing up in risky environments. Most importantly, there is a great deal of evidence showing that qualities such as emotional security, confidence and trust in others are fostered by a caring and supportive parental environment in the face of challenges (Daniel, Wassells, & Gilligan, 1999). Other family factors, including provision of adequate role models, guidance, structure and rules are also found to promote positive coping responses to adversity (M. Hill, Stafford, Seaman, Ross, & Danie, 2007). In this way, “effective parenting is strongly associated with positive adjustment, in both normative and high-risk situations” (A. S. Masten & Shaffer, 2006). Poor quality parenting, in contrast, may lead to negative child developmental outcomes that can have lasting effects on individuals throughout life and increase the chance that children will be adversely affected by challenging circumstances (J. P. Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

### **Interactive nature of parenting**

Recent theorising emphasises two further aspects of parenting: (1) that parenting is not just something parents do **to** children, but that children play an active role in their own development and that they influence parenting style; and (2) that parenting takes place in the context of the community and the broader social and cultural environment (Ghate & Hazel, 2002; Pećnik, 2006). Parents respond differentially to children's different characteristics and behaviours and children's responses to parents affects the parents' mode of parenting (O'Connor & Scott, 2007). In addition, the neighbourhood and the cultural context of parenting has a significant effect on the way parents interact with their children (Barnes, 2007; Barnes, Katz, Korbin, & O'Brien, 2006; Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1998; Ghate & Hazel, 2002). Parents who live in low income or dangerous neighbourhoods tend to respond to the environment by being more restrictive in their parenting practices. The economic context is also extremely important, with a large body of literature indicating that poverty or economic stress inhibits parents' abilities to provide appropriate emotional and cognitive supports to children and increases the use of harsh or punitive parenting practices, thereby negatively affecting children's development (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Katz, La Placa, & Hunter, 2007). There appear to be particular risks for children who grow up in jobless families (Taylor, Edwards, & Gray, 2010)

It is clear that in each stage of life, parents can have a strong positive or negative impact on their children's development. Parental involvement can assist children in learning how to cope with stressors caused by external events in order to develop the resilience needed to navigate difficult situations. Parental warmth and responsiveness, stimulation, structure and consistency and demandingness are all central features of productive parenting that foster positive outcomes for children and also provide rewards more broadly for parents, communities and society. Moreover, such positive parenting is most likely to occur in contexts of economic, relational and contextual safety and stability, when parents' own resources allow them to effectively and positively parent their children. Extending this base of knowledge into the context of policy requires consideration of two additional issues. The first is the vulnerabilities and needs of different groups of parents and children who are growing up in diverse circumstances, particularly those in adverse or challenging situations. The second is to consider the evidence on what particular policy interventions best support parents in their efforts to effectively and positively parent their children.

### **3.2 Vulnerable groups of parents**

The previous section demonstrated the importance of parenting on child development. Although the mainstream scientific literature focuses on parents generally, it has been acknowledged that some groups of parents have specific needs because they belong to socially excluded groups or because they face particular challenges in the parenting role. These parents often experience difficulties in accessing services and other support systems and so may be in need of additional supportive policies and programs. This section considers the particular needs faced by sole parent families, fathers, teenage parents, grandparents as primary carers, parents with disability, parents of children with disability, parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and indigenous parents. The review also points to specialised supports that are noted in the literature as necessary to effectively support these groups.

## **Sole parents**

The incidence of sole/lone parenthood has been increasing across developed nations over several decades and represents one of the biggest changes to the traditional nuclear family form (Goodger & Larose, 1998; Gregg & Harkness, 2003; Harding, Vu, Percival, & Beer, 2005; Rowlingson, 2001; Waldfogel, Danziger, Danziger, & Seefeldt, 2001). Intensified by social, economic and industrial changes, sole parenthood is a heavily gendered area of concern because a high proportion of sole parents are women (Rowlingson, 2001). Sole parents also tend to have lower levels of educational achievement and the physical, emotional, financial and geographical effects of divorce or separation affect their capacity to search for paid work (ACOSS, 2005; Goodger & Larose, 1998). Furthermore, their specific challenges and needs intersect with other vulnerable groups of parents. Teenage parents, for instance, are more likely to be sole parents and, in some countries, sole parents are more likely to belong to culturally or linguistically diverse communities (Goodger & Larose, 1998; Waldfogel, et al., 2001).

Despite the responsibility of being the main carer and breadwinner sole parents generally provide their children with similar amounts of care as coupled families (Craig, 2004). They also generally provide their children with a stable environment, passing on values that enable them to respond positively to adversity (Lindblad-Goldberg, 1989). This group is considered to be vulnerable, however, because they report a greater need for external support to assist them in responding consistently and positively to their children, particularly in the context of parental separation, divorce or death (Australian Department of Family and Community Services, 2004). Research also shows that sole parent households are at a higher risk of poverty and hardship than the rest of the community and report higher levels of financial strain than any other household group (ACOSS, 2005; Harding, et al., 2005; Waldfogel, et al., 2001). As a result, children in sole parent families have been identified as having a particularly high risk of poverty, lower educational attainment and more limited employment prospects and the rate of joblessness is much higher for sole parents than for two parent families (Harding, et al., 2005).

Since the 1990s, in many countries, there has been an increasing emphasis on participation in paid work as a route out of poverty for sole parents and, as a result, eligibility for publicly provided support has been more closely tied to workforce participation (Harding, et al., 2005). Though employment rates vary across countries, there has been a shared desire to improve the attachment of sole parents to the labour market (Gregg & Harkness, 2003). For example, the New Deal for Lone Parents in the United Kingdom and a work test for sole parents in New Zealand have been introduced to increase workforce participation among sole parents (Goodger & Larose, 1998; Gregg & Harkness, 2003; Waldfogel, et al., 2001).

## **Fathers**

Although across cultures mothers are usually the primary carers for children, recent studies have noted the increasing involvement of fathers in child-rearing. In research conducted by Cabrera et al. (2000), men who are more involved in the lives of their children are better educated and more financially secure than average and are therefore able to provide for their family's basic needs. Fathers' involvement in caring for children and the closeness of father-child relationships have been shown to have far-reaching positive implications for child development (Amato, 1998; Lamb, 2004). In the case of both resident and non-resident



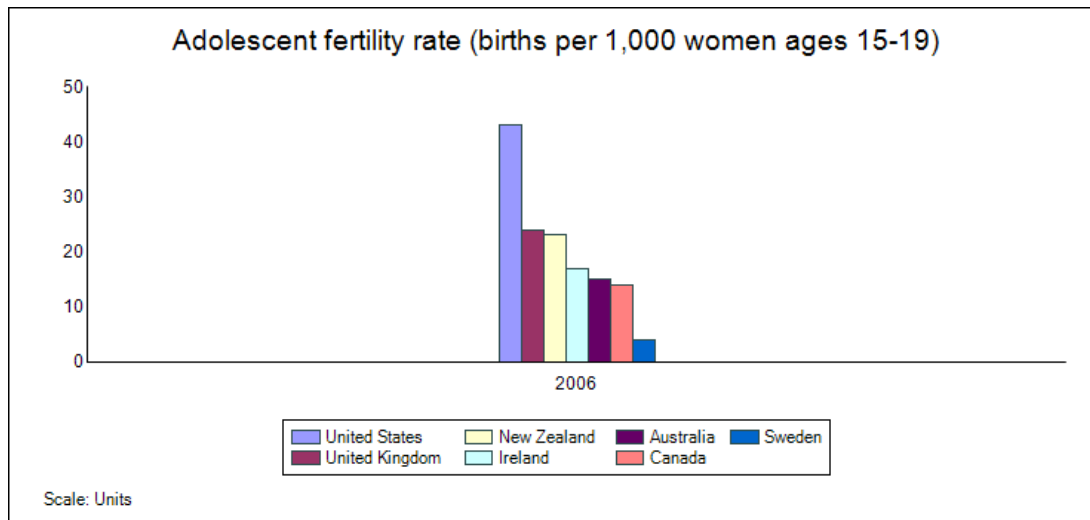
fathers, studies have found that active and voluntary paternal involvement plays a crucial role in shaping positive emotional, behavioural and educational outcomes for children (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997; Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997; Tamis-LeMonda & Bornstein, 1989).

Policy and research interest in fathers and fatherhood has increased considerably over the past decade, driven by a number of factors including, on the one hand, pressure by women's groups for fathers to take more responsibility for their children and, paradoxically, pressure from fathers' groups to increase their contact with children, especially following divorce and separation. The research evidence cited above has also had an influence on policy, especially in relation to fathers' engagement with their children's education.

While the discourse on gender has progressed over the past few decades, evidence suggests that schools and services that aim to support parents still consistently fail to engage fathers. One of the primary reasons for this is that parenting and childcare services are usually framed around mothers, making fathers more reluctant to seek help and advice (Ghate & Hazel, 2002). Specific effort and structures are therefore required to address paternal involvement (Daniel, et al., 1999; Mortley, 1998; Smyth & Eardley, 2008; Waylen & Stewart-Brown, 2008) and a variety of models have been put into place in recent years across numerous countries. It is too early to tell whether new programs targeting fathers have had a significant effect on father involvement. However, recent findings from the evaluations of Head Start, Sure Start and the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy show some potential in this area (Berlyn, Wise, & Soriano, 2009; Ghate & Hazel, 2002; Lloyd, O'Brien, & Lewis, 2003).

### **Teenage parents**

Across Western countries, early pregnancy and adolescent parenthood are consistently associated with negative outcomes for both parents and children. Medical studies have found that childbearing during teenage years increases a range of pre- and post-natal complications for the baby and the mother (Botting, Rosato, & Wood, 1998). Social research shows that young mothers are more likely to be single parents and to have poor parenting skills. Teenage parents are more likely to come from a disadvantaged socio-economic background and to have a low educational attainment; these characteristics are also likely to be experienced by their children (Bradbury, 2006; Brooks-Gunn & Chase-Lansdale, 1995; Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998). Compared to their peers, children of young parents also have poorer mental health and are at higher risk of behavioural problems (Vinnerljung, Franzén, & Danielsson, 2007). Adolescent parenthood is therefore seen as a social problem especially in the United States, where teenage birth rates are the highest among all Western countries, followed by the UK and New Zealand. With this said, however, teenage pregnancy rates have declined in many western countries since the 1970s (Arias, MacDorman, Strobino, & Guyer, 2003; CAPC/CPNP National Projects Fund, 2000).

**Figure 1: Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1000 women aged 15-19)**

Source: World Development Indicators (WDI) (2006). WDI Data Query. Accessed at <http://devdata.worldbank.org/data-query/>, October 2008.

A range of programs have been implemented to prevent teenage pregnancy; most are aimed at preventing young mothers from conceiving (Bunting & McAuley, 2004). In the United States, such programs aim to prevent early pregnancy through abstinence and, when pregnancy has already occurred, they aim to foster better educational achievements, reduced welfare dependency, improved parenting skills, stronger social support systems and better health outcomes for mother and child (Boonstra, 2002; Gestsdottir, 2005; Seitz & Apfel, 1999). The UK also has introduced early intervention and preventive measures such as the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy, which aims at reducing the rate of teenage pregnancy and, through the Care to Learn initiative, encouraging young mothers to remain in or re-enter education or training by helping with the costs of childcare.

### Grandparents as primary carers

Grandparents often assume a range of different types of care for their grandchildren, from supporting and providing advice to family members to child minding several days a week. However, there is increasing awareness of grandparents assuming the role of primary caregiver when their children are temporarily or permanently unable to fulfil their caring responsibilities (Brennan, Cass, Hampshire, & Marchant, 2007). Research has found increases in primary caregiving by grandparents spanning across many countries (Edwards & Mumford, 2005; Orb & Davy, 2005; Worrall, 2005). This increase is related to the rising incidence of relationship breakdown, neglect and child abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, mental illness, teenage pregnancy, imprisonment, or death of a parent through illness or suicide (Adkins, 1999; Field & Blaiklock, 2005; Worrall, 2005). In Australia, the number of children being raised by grandparents is small, estimated to be about 1% of all families with children under 17, and it is unclear whether this number is increasing (Australian Government, 2003; Gray, Misson & Hayes, 2005). Many children for whom their grandparents assume primary responsibility are dealing with high levels of trauma and are in need of more intensive support services (Adkins, 1999; Field & Blaiklock, 2005; Worrall, 2005). The result is that both grandparents and grandchildren in this relationship

tend to face difficulties with their emotional and physical wellbeing (Edwards & Mumford, 2005).

The literature shows that, across countries, grandparents providing primary care can experience a variety of legal, financial, physical and emotional difficulties. Many find the legal system confusing and expensive and they often have limited access to legal aid. Grandparents also experience frequent challenges to their custody and guardianship status (Council of the Ageing National Seniors, 2003; Worrall, 2005). Due to the fact that many have already retired and are living on reduced incomes, the acceptance of a parenting role also places significant financial strain on these grandparents and yet financial support is often limited and piecemeal. When financial assistance is available, many are not aware of their entitlements (Edwards & Mumford, 2005; Field & Blaiklock, 2005). Grandparents also face physical problems, with a significant proportion reporting a deterioration of their health status (Edwards & Mumford, 2005; Worrall, 2005) and a high level of emotional strain, with many experiencing stress and depression associated with their new caring role (Orb & Davy, 2005; Sands & Goldberg-Glen, 2000).

Internationally, there has been considerable emphasis on the need to improve support services – both financial and psychological – for grandparents assuming parenting roles. Caregiving grandparents have reported positive experiences of government and community-provided support groups (Worrall, 2005). Key areas of concern for grandparents as primary carers are the need for improvement in and coordination of government-provided financial support as well as increased access to respite care (Council of the Ageing National Seniors, 2003; Orb & Davy, 2005).

### **Parents with disability**

A growing body of literature focuses on the needs of parents who have physical, sensory, intellectual and mental health impairments. In the past, these impairments were believed to limit people's capacity to parent effectively. Olsen and Clarke (2003) argue that public perceptions are often ambivalent or negative about the very idea of people with disability having children. Hence, the literature frequently addresses the negative impacts of the disability on child development. The lack of physical mobility, for example, is seen as restricting parental ability to accomplish essential parenting tasks such as holding, feeding, bathing or clothing children. Likewise, studies on parents with mental health impairments have mainly focused on negative developmental outcomes and emphasised child neglect, deprivation and abuse (Sheppard, 1997, 2002). James (1994) and Falkov (1996) contend that children with mentally ill parents are more likely to develop mental health problems of their own. Given this backdrop, it is not surprising that parents with disabilities frequently report facing scepticism or discrimination from both practitioners and the society at large about their capacity to parent (Campion, 1995; G. Llewellyn & McConnell, 2010).

Olsen and Clarke (2003), however, refute the assertion that physically or intellectually impaired people do not have the ability to provide love, support, structure, guidance, and leadership as part of their parenting role. They argue that, instead, it is necessary to understand the impact of disability on parents within the context of available support. Indeed, one of the major problems faced by parents with an intellectual disability is social isolation from the extended family, neighbours and the community (G. Llewellyn, 1995; Whitman & Accardo, 1990). Moreover, parents with mental health impairments are often reluctant to seek

services for fear of having their child removed by child protection services. In the UK, psychiatrists have the authority to determine when children of parents with a mental illness should be removed from home (Reder & Duncan, 1997). Existing services to support parents with disability are often inadequate and do not involve them in decision-making processes. Some effective supports have been identified, although notable barriers remain. For example, a recent systematic review of access to services as well as the effectiveness of services for parents with mental health problems found that cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) has some effect for both parents and children compared to no treatment, similar to positive effects of other services such as play groups (Beresford, et al., 2008).

Physically impaired parents often view their involvement in parental support groups as isolating and stigmatising given that few parental groups make special attempts to include parents with disability (Henricson, Katz, Mesie, Sandison, & Tunstill, 2001; Olsen & Clarke, 2003). Specific efforts have been made in the UK to answer the needs of parents with disability. An 'equitable treatment' has been introduced in the Community Care (Direct Payment) Act (1996), and a Fair Access to Care Services (2002) now specifically recognize disabled parents as a category that may legitimately receive support (Olsen & Clarke, 2003).

### **Parents of children with disability**

Parents caring for children with disability or children who have long term illnesses have been more thoroughly researched than parents with disability. Although this group differs depending on the child's disability, illness, and caring needs, parents of children with physical and/or intellectual disabilities or long term illness share common reactions to the challenge, including protectiveness, grief, revulsion, anger, denial, shock, guilt and embarrassment (MacKeith, 1973). In addition to normal parenting tasks, these parents also need to attend to treatment programs, additional physical duties and to adjust emotionally to their child's difference (Pain, 1999).

These additional tasks have profound effects on parents as well as on other children in the family (Australian Department of Family and Community Services, 2004; Carer Payment (child) Review Taskforce, 2007). The role of caring for children with disability is substantially gendered, with mothers much more likely to assume the caring role than fathers (Traustadottir, 1991). Parents of a child with disability have been found to be significantly less sociable after the birth of the child due to the lack of time, energy and opportunity to socialise, and because of intolerance from others (Case, 2000). This social isolation can lead to feelings of depression and tiredness, and so family cooperation, acceptance and social support is necessary to help parents cope with these demands (Taanila, Syrjälä, Kokkonen, & Järvelin, 2002). Moreover, parents caring for children with disability or children who have long term illnesses also experience increased rates of poverty which contributes to parenting stress (Emerson & Llewellyn, 2008; Smith, Oliver, & Innocenti, 2001). Interestingly, there is a general consensus among parents of children with disability that they are unlikely to receive supportive, concerned and knowledgeable advice from practitioners and professional workers. Perhaps because of this, parents place a high value on support groups where they can meet with other parents in similar circumstances (Case, 2000).

One of the key challenges faced by these parents is to come to terms with the disability or long term illness when it is first diagnosed. Research has shown that parents often feel isolated and abandoned by services at this crucial moment and that adequate support can help

the family to adjust to the practical and emotional challenges which they will have to face (Case, 2000; Dowling & Dolan, 2001; Tudball, Fisher, Sands, & Dowse, 2002).

### **Parents from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities**

Although difficult to define, minority communities encompass those who share a common cultural practice and history and who experience a less powerful position within society (Phoenix & Husain, 2007). They are not necessarily a minority in number but suffer various degrees of social discrimination in employment, housing and education. Linguistic, religious and ethnic differences exist within the minority populations in each country, and proportions of refugee and immigrant populations vary widely as well.

Minority issues, including questions around parenting and ethnicity, have been of concern for policy-makers in Western countries for some time. A number of research studies dating through the 1980s attributed the poor educational and behavioural outcomes of children in African American families in the USA and African Caribbean and South-East Asian families in Britain to poor parenting styles (Phoenix & Husain, 2007). Today, researchers and practitioners acknowledge that early assumptions about parenting practices in minority groups relied on limited or biased data (Kotchick & Forehand, 2002). They also point to the inadequacy of separating race and ethnicity from socio-economic status and gender and advocate for the use of intersectional models that integrate various social dynamics instead of isolating populations on the basis of their racial background alone (S. A. Hill, 2005).

Bailey-Smith (2001) suggests that most parenting policies, programs and supports recognise white middle-class parenting behaviour as the norm and that these assumptions may conflict with other cultural attitudes on child rearing. CALD parents may originate from cultures in which parents are not expected to be actively involved in their children's education, or may participate in ways that differ from white middle-class European or American standards (Webster-Stratton, 1999). Recent findings also have challenged the notion that there is a universal relationship between parenting styles and child outcomes (Darling, 1999; Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Steinberg, 1996). However, while there is general consensus that African American, Asian American and Latino parents have different parenting styles to those of white European and American middle-class parents, few methodologically rigorous studies have been done to further elucidate how different cultural understandings impact on child outcomes.

Parents from minority ethnic or immigrant communities may have limited access to services because cultural interpretations of parent-child relationships differ from those of practitioners and policy makers (Becher & Husain, 2003; Butt & Box, 1998; Johnson, 2003; Jones, Atkin, & Ahmad, 2001; Thoburn, Chand, & Procter, 2004). Language skills and other factors such as lack of minority ethnic staff, gender issues and concerns about privacy and confidentiality also serve as significant barriers to service access (Katz, et al., 2007). According to FaCS (2004), many immigrants report that they prefer to seek information from their extended family rather than from external sources and feel that cultural differences around gender roles reduced the perceived relevance of mainstream parenting information.

Although CALD parents are an important target for parenting interventions, they form an extremely diverse group and the diversity of this population makes it difficult to design services which meet the needs of all CALD parents (Katz, et al., 2007; Sawrikar & Katz,

2008). For parenting policies to adequately support CALD families, consultation with the communities is necessary, as is adapting programs to the cultural needs of particular groups.

### **Indigenous parents**

Indigenous people in many western countries face a range of disadvantages due to historical, social and cultural differences and a history of colonisation and discrimination. Together, these experiences of economic and health disadvantage and social exclusion limit resources for parenting. According to the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2007), Aboriginal Australians in particular are worse off than the mainstream Australian population on a number of key indicators of disadvantage:

- Life expectancy is 17 years lower than in the general population
- Labour force participation rate is 25 per cent lower for Indigenous people and the unemployment rate is about three times greater than non-Indigenous people
- Indigenous children are four times as likely as other children to experience abuse or neglect
- Indigenous people are 13 times more likely than non Indigenous people to go to prison
- The fertility rate of teenage Aboriginal women is 4.5 times higher than non-Aboriginal counterparts (Kinfu & Taylor, 2002)

Disadvantage is also experienced by Australian Aboriginal children. Those under four years of age are more likely to be hospitalised for preventable diseases (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2007). Aboriginal children have much lower rates of school attendance than non-Aboriginal children and the rate of school attendance in rural areas is even lower than that in urban areas (Bourke & Rigby, 2000).

Some of these trends are similar among Indigenous people in other countries. In Canada, First Nation people have experienced a higher rate of substantiated child abuse cases, a higher incidence of substance abuse and experience poorer socioeconomic outcomes than the general population (Blackstock, Trocmé, & Bennett, 2004). They also experience a pregnancy rate four times higher than the Canadian population (CAPC/CPNP National Projects Fund, 2000). Māori people in New Zealand have poorer educational outcomes and also experience a disparity in life expectancy rates; the gap was closing in the 1980s but little change has occurred since then (Anderson, et al., 2006). The concept of 'parenting' has a very different meaning in many Indigenous communities from that of mainstream western societies. Although there is a wide diversity within Indigenous communities, they all tend to place a great deal of emphasis on extended rather than nuclear family care. Most Aboriginal Australian children, for example, grow up with multiple carers rather than being looked after by one primary carer who is their main attachment figure. Aboriginal Australian parents tend to have a much less controlling style of parenting than is prevalent in the Anglo-Australian majority and Aboriginal children tend to be given much more autonomy at a younger age. Children are expected to learn from parents and elders by example with less emphasis placed on discipline or instruction than is typical in western families. There is also much more

emphasis on spirituality (Penman, 2006). Some similar patterns are found in other first nation peoples, for example in Canada (Neckowaya, Brownleea, & Castellana, 2007). Of course these are general trends and individual parents and communities will differ considerably in their particular approach to parenting. Nevertheless, as a general rule, many of the assumptions about parenting which are deemed to be universal do not necessarily apply to Indigenous groups.

Indigenous parents face a number of additional challenges. In Australia, for example, the historical ‘stolen generations’ policy had a traumatic impact on many communities and has disrupted the passing on of traditional knowledge, including knowledge about parenting (Atkinson, 2002). In addition, many Indigenous parents have to balance their own traditional methods of parenting with an increasingly western lifestyle and culture.

These varying patterns of parenting style and context challenge some of the fundamental beliefs about parenting which are assumed in many mainstream theories about what constitutes ‘adequate’ parenting. This has significant implications for parenting interventions and policies, which are explicitly or implicitly based on such theories.

Due to the specific cultural and spiritual needs of different indigenous groups, research suggests that Indigenous parents are often not served well by mainstream service systems (Yeo, 2003). For this reason, parenting programs need to be targeted to address the unique needs of these groups. In Australia, for example, the Indigenous RAP-P (Resourceful Adolescent Program for Parents) Program provided flexibility in how the cultural needs of various communities were addressed (RPR Consulting, 2004). The program was implemented after consultation with Indigenous communities and was found by an evaluation to be culturally appropriate and positively received by Aboriginal people (Mitchell, 2000). Another promising intervention is Let’s Start which has been developed in the Northern Territories (Robinson, et al., 2008). In addition a range of other programs such as Triple P and Nurse Home Partnerships have been or are currently being trialled.

### **3.3 The rise of parenting in social policy**

Over the past decade, parents’ roles and parenting practices have received increased public and policy attention in many countries. Historically, parenting was seen as a largely private matter; state intervention was only sanctioned if parents failed to meet basic standards of parenting or abused their children (Goldstein, Freud, Solnit, & Goldstein, 1986). Family support tended to be provided by NGOs, sometimes financed by governments, but seldom part of broader parenting or family policies. In the last few years, however, this has changed for a number of reasons. This section discusses some of the reasons for the increased focus on parenting and discusses arenas of social policy which address parents’ roles and parenting practices more specifically.

#### **Changes to family units**

The traditional family unit has undergone significant changes including increased maternal employment, greater residential mobility, decreasing fertility rates and increasing rates of divorce, single parenthood, cohabitation and single-sex unions (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005). While these changes can offer new opportunities to parents such as increased employment choices for women, they also have placed new strains on parents. Perhaps the two most significant demographic shifts that have affected children and families

in recent decades have been the dramatic rises in single parent families and the substantial increases in mothers' participation in the labour force. These are relevant to parenting and child development because, as stated earlier, there is increasing recognition that early environments provided for children are crucial for promoting positive child development (Bornstein, 2002; J. J. Heckman, 2006; Shaw, et al., 2001; Zahn-Waxler, et al., 2002).

The proportion of children being raised by sole parents, most often sole mothers, has grown dramatically as a result of transformations of the traditional family form. The rising divorce rate has been the primary driving force behind the increase in sole parenthood (Harding, et al., 2005; Rowlingson, 2001), alongside the growing numbers of children born to unmarried parents (McHugh & Millar, 1996; Rowlingson, 2001). Sole parents are likely to have lower educational attainment than coupled parents and they also are more likely to receive government benefits and support (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). As noted above, sole parents face increased caregiving demands and are much more likely than married or cohabiting parents to have limited economic resources. This derives from limited resources from non-resident parents, lower levels of human capital and skills and also from sole parents' need to balance the demands of work and family, which can serve as a constraint on their labour market and earnings capacities (Skevik, 2005).

Despite the constraints faced by some sole parents in accessing the labour market, a significant increase in women's participation in the labour market on a broader scale is the second demographic shift that has had a significant impact parenting. In Australia, for example women's participation has risen by over 10 per cent in the past 20 years (from 44.7 per cent in 1983 to 55.9 per cent in 2003; (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005). Maternal employment alters the traditional view of gender roles and division of labour to some degree, although shifts in these arenas are not as notable as many may have expected (e.g., even among two-career couples, women still do the lion's share of child care and domestic work (Craig, 2007)

Alongside these demographic changes there has been a fundamental shift in our understanding of the task of parenting over the past three decades. Traditionally, parenting consisted mainly of providing economically for children and ensuring they behaved properly, which was seen as the role of fathers; and providing the child with nurturing (feeding, love, etc), which was the role of mothers. Children were seen as passive recipients of parental care (Pećnik, 2006). Since the 1980s, this picture has begun to change. Children are no longer seen as passive recipients of parents' care, but as active participants in their own lives. The 'new sociology of childhood' forms the academic backbone to these evolving understandings (A. James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Qvortrup, 2005). Gender roles within parenting are also becoming more porous, although as noted above, changes have not been as significant as expected given shifts in women's behaviours outside of the home.

### **Children as human capital**

It is increasingly recognised that children constitute nations' human capital, that is, "the value of resources that are embodied in the working-age citizens" (Haveman, Bershadker, & Schwabish, 2003, p. 2). Children today are therefore considered to be important because they are the citizens and economic producers of tomorrow. This perspective argues that children's wellbeing is not just a private family matter but a societal matter and therefore, that resources provided by the state for children should be conceived of as an investment rather than as a



welfare expenditure (Heckman, 2000). The notion of investment in ‘human capital’ has tapped into a deep root for policy makers.

This change in thinking has increased research and policy attention towards the importance of investment in children’s early years. Early childhood had generally been seen as a private ‘women’s issue’ which sat at the very periphery of social policy (Lewis, 2006). However, the introduction of ‘hard science’ and economic discourse to the discussion of early childhood policy, particularly by economists such as James Heckman (2006), neurologists such as Bruce Perry (1996) and authoritative think tanks such as the Rand Foundation and the Brookings Institute, has led to a raft of reports advocating early investment (McCain & Mustard, 1999; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001, 2006; Jack P. Shonkoff, Phillips, & National Research Council . Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood, 2000). The increased focus on investing in children can also be attributed to research which suggests that crucial health issues such as obesity, mental health disorders and youth suicide, as well as social issues, such as child maltreatment, non-completion of school and youth crime, can be mitigated through early intervention. Vimpani, Patton and Hayes (2002) argue that the cost to the state and to the community of not addressing these risk factors early in life is considerable and that early interventions are cheaper or more cost effective in the long run than efforts to address these difficulties once they have already manifested. Furthermore, due to the ageing of the population and falling birth rates in western countries, policy makers are recognising the importance of the productive participation of young people in the workforce to reduce the impact of the increasing dependency ratio. Because children have a future role as adult citizens, investing in children today is seen as a necessary response to the ageing of the population (Lewis, 2006). Lewis and others, however, are critical of this perspective, pointing out that children should be valued as citizens in their own right, and that their current wellbeing is equally as important as their future productivity in the marketplace.

Although early intervention policies and programs ultimately aim to improve the development of children, the majority of programs are actually targeted at parents. As parents are primarily responsible for the economic resources, environmental and cognitive contexts and the relational inputs to children, policies and services that seek to target young children typically work through their parents. Supportive, stimulating and consistent relational inputs - in other words, good parenting - are therefore seen as essential ingredients in the overall human capital investment strategy.

### **Poverty, social exclusion and inclusion**

The increased participation of mothers in the labour force and the fact that divorce (and to a lesser extent, non-marital childbearing) crosses class divides has ensured that parenting policies apply across the socio-economic spectrum. Nevertheless it remains the case that a large proportion of family and parenting policies and programs are focused mainly on poor families (Kamerman & Kahn, 2001). Part of the reason for this is the emergence of policies to combat the ‘cycle of poverty’ or the ‘inter-generational transmission of disadvantage’ – expressed as part of social exclusion/inclusion in Europe and the UK (and now Australia) (A. Daly, 2006; Gillies, 2005; Ridge, 2002) and the underclass in the USA (C. Murray, 1996; Wilson, 1987). These understandings are still to some extent informed by the old political divisions of left and right – the left believing that poverty is caused primarily by structural factors in the economy and the right being more concerned about the individual

characteristics of poor people (Katz, et al., 2007; Welshman, 2007). Nevertheless, both political positions now acknowledge that children born into poor households are much more likely to remain poor than children from more affluent backgrounds. Research has shown that a central mediating factor between family SES and children's outcomes is parenting (see Katz & Redmond, 2008 for a more detailed explanation of this relationship). Thus, one of the key strategies aimed at combating child poverty and social inequality (from the left) and reducing the 'underclass' (from the right) focuses on improving parenting practices and parents' provision of resources – both economic and social – to children in low SES families. The linking of social inclusion with parenting and family support has had some effects on the development of policies and programs in this area. For example many of the more recent area based initiatives such as Sure Start focus not only on parent training and child care, but also provide interventions to facilitate the employability of parents (Katz, Bourke, & Wattam, 2001; Meadows & Garbers, 2004).

Another important development internationally has been the introduction in most OECD countries of paid parental leave programs. These are designed to encourage parents to spend time with their children in their early months, but also to allow mothers to maintain their connection to the workforce by ensuring that they do not have to resign from jobs when they give birth. However countries differ considerably in the scope, value and timescales of paid parental leave schemes (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2004).

### **Positive effects of parenting programs**

Along with research on the importance of parenting there has emerged a separate research strand which addresses the effectiveness of interventions to improve and support parenting in families that are considered to be at risk due to poverty, minority status, family structure, and a host of other factors. Many parent training programs have now been developed and evaluated and some have demonstrated significant improvements in a number of child and parent outcomes (Barrett, 2003; Centre for Community Child Health Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne (CCCH), 2004; Moran, Ghate, & van der Merwe, 2004 ; Sanders, Markie-Dadds, & Turner, 2003). This literature has tended to reflect the policy and practice in the area by focusing on single one-off interventions, typically parent training programs lasting between one session and several weeks. However the success of parent training has encouraged policy makers in many countries to begin to implement broad-based strategies to improve parenting and to take a more strategic approach to improving parenting within the population as a whole, or at least for particular communities or groups of parents (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2007; Prinz, Sanders, Shapiro, Whitaker, & Lutzker, 2009).

### **Summary**

In summary, over the past few decades and in all developed countries, there have been significant changes in demographics which have affected the context of parenting and have resulted in the task of parenting becoming increasingly challenging. Changes in the conception of families and parenting roles have, at the same time, resulted in governments being more willing to intervene directly in areas of family life which had previously been seen as exclusively within the private domain. Government intervention in families has been supported by a growing evidence base indicating the effectiveness of many programs aimed

at improving parents' capacity to manage their children's behaviour more effectively, to engage in children's education and to support their socialisation. How these factors have come together to influence federal-level policies directed at parenting is more of an open question and one of the primary foci of this report. Changes in demographics, social beliefs and evidence-based models of intervention have led to the possibility of developing a range of policies and programs aimed at supporting or influencing the behaviour of parents. Below we review challenges to this goal, followed by the limited knowledge base documenting parenting policies across our target countries.

### **3.4 Tensions in policies targeting families and parents**

As we described above, there is now a well established body of literature focused on how parenting affects outcomes for children and a growing consensus about the components of effective parenting. And yet there are still a number of unresolved issues in this area. Most importantly, the state and society's expectations of parenthood have to deal with traditions of parental autonomy, which advocate respect for privacy and the rights of parents and children to be consulted. Furthermore, parenting has to compete with a number of other policy priorities with which it may be in tension, such as maternal labour force participation and gender equality. There are notable variations across countries concerning the appropriate role of government in issues associated with parenting. Parenting has also become much more prominent within the media and the public discourse more generally, and there is a constant public discourse around issues such as the degree of autonomy which should be provided to children, how they should be punished when they misbehave, what responsibility parents should have for their children's behaviour etc.

#### *Degree of parental supervision*

A debate has begun to emerge around the issue of parental supervision of children and its effects on child development.. In recent years, parents have supervised their children more and more closely. As we have become more and more of a 'risk society' (Beck, 1992), risks to children through accidents, abduction and abuse have become increasingly highlighted in the media. Parents have responded by spending more time and resources monitoring and transporting their children to avoid them having to face risks in the public arena. This trend has been supplemented by changes in the way children play, with a significant increase in indoor activities (particularly computers and TV) and structured, adult supervised activities as opposed to outdoor games and unstructured play time. However, these shifts are now leading to a backlash. This was originally begun by libertarians such as Frank Furedi – a UK sociologist who has decried the risk averse nature of modern parenting (Furedi, 2001). Others have followed suit, pointing out that children's lives are much more restricted than in the past (J. Hill & Wright, 2003). Obesity and other health conditions related to a sedentary childhood have prompted concern amongst policy makers about the lack of exercise and outdoor activities for children. Whilst an active lifestyle need not necessarily involve risk taking, there are obviously tensions between ever closer surveillance on the one hand and the need for children to play outdoors without close adult supervision on the other. Parents may be excused for feeling rather bewildered by these tensions in media reporting and advice.

#### *Parenting vs support for parents*

Many of the policies and programs which have been developed over the past two decades have been based on the assumption of a ‘parenting deficit’ – that parents in contemporary society are less able to adequately care for their children than parents in previous generations because of the demographic and social changes discussed above. A wide range of publications have been produced which, at least in part, blame the problems of contemporary childhood on the inadequacies of modern parenting practices, including *Affluenza* (O. James, 2007), *Toxic Childhood* (Palmer, 2006) and *A Good Childhood* (Layard & Dunn, 2009) in the UK and another *Affluenza* (Hamilton & Denniss, 2005) and *Children of the Lucky Country?* (Stanley, Richardson, & Prior, 2005) in Australia. Because of this perceived deficit, many states are providing a range of interventions, both targeted and universal, to help and support parents. This perspective, however, is challenged by some theorists such as Sylvia Ann Hewlett, who argues that it is a public policy rather than parenting deficit which causes difficulty for parents in contemporary society and that left on their own, parents will do an adequate job of parenting their children without state intervention. In particular, long hours of work, punitive sanctions for parents who do not measure up to government expectations and negative media attention to ‘inadequate’ parents have undermined parents’ confidence and capacity to adequately fulfil the parenting role (Hewlett & West, 1998). According to this thesis, rather than providing parenting advice and training, governments should use social policy to create the conditions in which parents can reassert their role and again take full responsibility for their children. This also highlights the fact that the vast majority of policies and programs seek ultimately to enhance the wellbeing of children and that parents are often seen simply as vehicles to implement these policies. However parents themselves have needs, not only as adults or in relation to enhancing their children’s outcomes, and social policy is slowly beginning to address these, as evidenced in such policies and paid parental leave and flexible working hours for parents. Nevertheless, in areas such as work/family balance and childcare there is continuous debate about the relative needs of parents and children (Biddulph, 2006). Another important issue is the relative balance between direct services, cash transfers and family policies such as parental leave, flexible working arrangements, etc. Countries vary widely not only in the amount they spend on family and parenting policies and interventions, but also on the relative distribution of these three types of policies (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007). There is little empirical data about the most effective mix of services, cash transfers and parent friendly policies (Katz & Redmond, 2009).

### *Corporal punishment*

In Europe one of the key driving forces behind the development of a coherent policy on parenting has been the attempt by the Council of Europe and many European governments to de-legitimise corporal punishment by parents. The main thrust of this policy has been to persuade governments to make legal changes (i.e. to ‘ban smacking’; Council of Europe, 2008b) and as a corollary of this policy the Council has strongly promoted ‘non violent’ or ‘positive’ parenting. The Council has published a number of monographs aimed at policy makers, practitioners and parents (e.g. Council of Europe, 2007; Council of Europe, 2008a; Daly, 2007). These publications link international human rights instruments – especially the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the European Convention on Human Rights -- with domestic law and parenting practices, arguing that corporal punishment can be seen both as a violation of children’s rights and also as an ineffective parenting strategy. In this respect the Council of Europe has been supported by the

UN itself, which has criticised countries who have not removed the right of corporal punishment from parents.

On the whole, Anglo Saxon countries have resisted the international pressures to make corporal punishment an offence, the exception being New Zealand which effectively banned corporal punishment in 2007 under the *Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act (2007)* ("The Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act ") ("The Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act ") ("The Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act ") ("The Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act ") ("The Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act ") ("The Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act ") ("The Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act ") ("The Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act ") ("The Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act ") ("The Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act ") ("The Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act ") ("The Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act ") ("The Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act ") ("The Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act ") ("The Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act ") ("The Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act ") ("The Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act ") ("The Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act "). This area of family policy has been contentious in Australia and many other countries for a number of years (Cashmore and de Haas, 1995). Australia's reports to the UN regarding the UNCRC have rejected the UN's concerns about the failure to prohibit corporal punishment (Attorney-General's Department, 2003), although the report points out that many states and territories have established a legislative standard of reasonableness, which was recommended by the *Model Criminal Code Officers Committee* (Attorney-General's Department, 1998). These countries have tended to take the view that although corporal punishment is not desirable, it is an invasion of family privacy to legislate against all forms of corporal punishment. This stance by governments tends to be upheld by the majority of the population (Gershoff, 2008) but NGOs and children's rights groups advocate strongly for a 'ban on smacking' (e.g. in the Australian context, Early Childhood Australia<sup>1</sup>, Australian College of Paediatricians,<sup>2</sup> The National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN<sup>3</sup>)).

This policy area graphically illustrates the tensions which surround the vexed issue of the degree to which governments should become involved in parenting practices. It also shows that policies which are uncontroversial in some countries have resulted in ongoing contentious disagreements in others.

### 3.5 Conclusion

This section has outlined the particular needs of certain groups of parents. Both fathers and grandparents play important roles in caring for many children, but their needs are often not adequately supported by policies which assume the primary caregiver to be the mother of the child. Although the special needs of parents caring for children with disability have been widely recognised, they are often not met by current policies and practices. The needs of

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/childrens\\_rights/croc\\_implementation/physical\\_punishment\\_and\\_children.html](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/childrens_rights/croc_implementation/physical_punishment_and_children.html)

<sup>2</sup><http://www.racp.edu.au/download.cfm?DownloadFile=A936CE93-2A57-5487>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.resources.napcan.org.au/p/559188/alternatives-to-smacking-children.html>

parents with disability have not been fully addressed in the parenting literature; both parents with disability as well as parents from CALD communities have suffered from stigma and discrimination and are not well served by mainstream parenting programs and policies. Sole and teenage parents have been the focus of prevention programs and policies that primarily aim to limit financial hardship.

Underpinning the needs and challenges of all these groups of vulnerable families (and other disadvantaged groups not discussed here) is that people in these groups are more likely to suffer from financial hardship and social exclusion. All of them have difficulty accessing mainstream services and they require specific targeted policies and programs to support their parenting.

The section also discussed some of the conceptual and practical challenges and tensions inherent in implementing a parenting policy framework and the reasons why parenting policy is still fragmented in terms of both the structural location in government and the content of the policies themselves.

## **4 Conceptualising parenting policy within the realm of family policy**

### **4.1 Comparative reviews of family policy**

After reviewing the importance of parenting in relation to child development and the needs of parents and subgroups of parents, we next turn to policies and government models of support. In this section we first consider how scholars and governments have conceptualised family policies and examine whether parenting policy is included as a subcomponent of family policy. We do this by outlining the primary components of family policy and discussing how Australia fits in to this breadth across each policy area. Information for this section was drawn from existing published studies and reports of family policies as well as from publicly available government documents. As the goal of this report focuses explicitly on parenting policies, we review the broader family policy arena in an abbreviated fashion, using this information as a framework in which to situate parenting policy.

In the next section, the most significant recent cross national comparative studies on family policy are reviewed. As this review will show, there is a relative absence of literature that looks directly at parenting, as opposed to family, policies. It is only recently that governments have explicitly focused on the task of parenting itself (other than in specific contexts of child abuse prevention) and then only in a few countries (M. Daly, 2007). There is virtually no information at all about the actual mechanics of parenting policy and how it sits within the machinery of government.

A review of major academic databases, Google scholar and numerous websites devoted to family and comparative policy identified numerous reviews that compare family policy across industrialized countries. Appendix 1 provides a summary of sixteen of the more recent comparative reviews. Most of these reviews focused on the type and structure of the welfare state in each country compared. The reviews also tended to emphasize the role that values play in devising the supports and services provided to carers and their children. For example, countries differed in the extent to which the state plays an interventionist role in the private sphere, as well as the cultural beliefs concerning the family unit. Some of these studies have assessed the efficacy of family policies in lowering poverty indicators, although little research has been conducted on family policies in non-OECD countries.

The extant literature in this arena indicates that nearly all governments have policies which target families in their central role of raising children. This host of policies typically function at a broad level and target family goals or behaviours such as provision of economic resources, support for parental employment, provision of education and protection of parental time at critical life points (O'Hara, 1998; United Nations, 2001; Vail, 2002). Family policies aim to support parents so that they can, in turn, support children. In other words, rather than take a direct role in the lives of children, governments have typically sought to facilitate parents' provision of a supportive environment for their children. It is also recognised that many public policies which are not directly targeted at parents or families (including transport, workplace relations, housing, agriculture, trade and environment) all have an impact on families and parents. Vail (2002) identifies four categories of government approaches to families: (1) a pro-family/pro-nationalist model which seeks to support and increase fertility levels (e.g. France); (2) a pro-traditional model which seeks to preserve traditional gender-based family roles encouraging male breadwinning and female child-rearing (e.g. Germany); (3) a pro-egalitarian model which promotes gender equality and

shared support for children (e.g. Sweden); and (4) a pro-family/non-interventionist model which is based on an idea of the self-sufficiency of families with targeted supports for families in need (e.g. the US). However these are ideal types and most countries have various elements of the different categories. Moreover, this work indicated that parenting policy, as a newly emerging arena, does not fit neatly into such categorizations.

The most important finding of the review of the comparative literature was that no research has yet been conducted to compare parenting policies across countries. As can be seen in Appendix 1, these studies examined elements of family policies, but none included parenting policy per se. Although parenting has become important to social policy in many countries, it appears that it is seldom explicitly recognised as an area of policy in and of itself. Rather, parenting policies are often spread amongst a number of different government departments and are usually a secondary component of policy areas focused on other priorities, particularly child health and education and parental labour force participation, but also criminal justice and other areas of social policy. Because of this dispersion of parenting policies amongst other social objectives and also due to the fact that some aspects of parenting are contested in contemporary society, policies towards parenting and the family can be in tension with each other. In fact few countries have explicitly mapped out what they expect from parents and what supports they will provide for parenting (Commission on Families and the Wellbeing of Children, 2005). Below we briefly review existing literature on broader family policy, denoting primary subcomponents of parenting policy and briefly comparing trends across our countries of interest.

## **4.2 Components of family policy**

As stated previously, family policy is a broad term used to describe a range of policies that aim to support families. These policies can:

- Support parents to provide economically for their children
- Help parents to balance the demands of economic productivity and care for children
- Provide basic resources for essential child services such as early child care and education
- Provide a safety net for economically disadvantaged children and families

Though the particular categorisation of family policies varies across countries and scholars, most governments provide: some combination of transfer and tax policies that offer income support to families with children; labour market measures designed to help parents balance work and family demands; and services for children and families. Some family policies include two additional components: legislation, such as divorce and marriage laws, which have clear implications for parents' roles and family environments; and services targeting specific vulnerable populations, such as those directed at victims of child abuse and neglect. The following sections will discuss the policy areas that are most commonly classified as family policy: transfer and tax policies, labour market policies and the provision of services.



## **Transfer and tax policies**

Nearly all industrialised countries have federal level transfer and/or tax policies that provide economic support to families with children. Overall, such income policies generally have a basic goal of providing economic resources to help parents meet the costs of raising children.

Tax policies can include regressive family tax credits, meaning that low-income families who do not pay taxes are not eligible for the payments. More universal and progressive payments are provided to families in countries such as Sweden, which aims to decrease the financial differences between families with and without children by providing additional support to families with children (Sweden Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2004). Other countries use transfer policies as a way of targeting disadvantage. Means-tested income maintenance payments, which target lower and middle income families, single-parent or single-earner families, are also included in this category (Gabel & Kamerman, 2006). Australia has introduced a combination of universal and targeted income transfer and tax policies such as family tax benefits and maternity payments (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), 2006a).

In recent years, there have been a number of debates concerning the behavioural and economic ramifications of some tax and transfer policies, such as those surrounding welfare payments and reform of the welfare system in the United States (Blank and Haskins, 2001). New policy developments in this realm have taken an interesting direction in recent years, as governments begin to mix economic and behavioural goals. For example, a number of countries, including Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, have recently instituted policy changes designed to use income maintenance programs for poor families as policy levers to encourage specific behaviours such as parental employment, child school attendance or immunisation programs (Blank & Haskins, 2001).

Beyond these rather narrow behavioural goals, transfer and tax policies do not directly target parenting behaviours. Rather, they are based on household production models arguing that parental economic support to children is an essential pathway through which parents influence their children's health and well-being.

## **Labour market policies**

The second component of family policies is those that relate to parents' work/life balance. These policies seek to help parents balance the competing demands of employment with the time demands of raising children (Kamerman, 2004). Such policies generally provide parents with either money or time, with the ultimate aims of allowing parents to spend more time with their children and maintain income during periods outside of the workforce. Policies such as paid parental leave seek to allow parents to exit or reduce their contribution to the labour market during times of particularly high care need, such as upon the birth or adoption of a new child or when a child is ill (Clearinghouse on International Developments in Child and Youth and Family Policies, 2007). These policies seek to support maternal and child health and parent-child connections by allowing new parents, particularly mothers, leave from work following childbirth or adoption or at times of family illness in order to devote their full attention to the care of their child.

Each of the comparison countries in this review have parental leave policies mandated by central government which requires employers to allow new parents to take leave from

employment for a specified length of time while still retaining the right to return to their position. It is notable that only Australia and the United States do not provide federal funding for parental leave. While Australia has until recently had a one year unpaid leave policy (Australian Government, 2005), but the 2009-2010 Budget announced an 18 week paid parental leave policy to be introduced in January 2011 (Australian Government, 2009). The policy in the United States is more limited, providing only 12 weeks of unpaid leave. In addition, restrictions prohibit access even to this limited leave for approximately 50 per cent of American workers (Clearinghouse on International Developments in Child and Youth and Family Policies, 2007). On the other hand, Sweden has a parental leave scheme of up to 18 months, with the first year paid at 80 per cent of wages; the United Kingdom's parental leave is for 18 weeks, with the first six weeks paid at 90 per cent and the later 12 at a flat rate. More than half of the comparison countries have flexible work policies, allowing parents to take paid or unpaid leave for reasons such as child illness (Clearinghouse on International Developments in Child and Youth and Family Policies, 2007).

As noted, many countries' parental leave policies include wage replacement and hence can be seen to be economic support policies. However, the principal goal of such policies is to encourage continued labour market attachment while at the same time allowing parents adequate amounts of time to spend with their children. While such policies encourage parents to devote time to the care of their children, they do not address the quality of care provided by parents to children. Moreover, while they may provide individuals with the time or money to facilitate parenting, they are not concerned with the nature of parenting itself.

### **Service provision and support**

Provision of support services for families and children includes a broad spectrum of policies such as educational services, housing, health care and more targeted services for specific family needs. In the realm of family policy, the most commonly discussed services in this arena are early childhood education and care. Such policies either provide universal or means tested tax benefits or payments to parents to help pay for child care, or directly fund child care/early education services which are then provided free or at reduced cost to children (OECD, 2006; Vail, 2002). The goals of early childhood care and education policies overlap with the goals of the policies discussed previously; they aim to help parents meet the economic costs of caring for children and to support parental employment. These programs also have more direct impact on child development by supporting children's psychosocial and cognitive development and helping to prepare them for formal education (Waldfogel, 2007).

Child care benefits are highly diverse across countries. Some policies target children from birth and continue until early adolescence; others focus explicitly on the preschool years, targeting readiness for formal schooling. Many policies require the use of services in order to access benefits; others are universally provided to parents regardless of parental employment or use of child care services (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2006b; Vail, 2002). For example, Sweden offers public full day child care centres at a nominal cost or for free (Clearinghouse on International Developments in Child and Youth and Family Policies, 2007). Canada has a rather limited direct payment which is offered to families of all children under six regardless of whether they attend child care (although the province of Quebec recently instituted a direct subsidy system leading to universally available very low cost care; Government of Canada, 2007). In contrast, Australia provides quite generous child care payments that vary by family income (Organisation for

Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), 2006a). Indeed from 1 July 2008 the Australian Government increased the payment of the Child Care Tax Rebate from 30 per cent to 50 per cent of care costs. Other areas of service provision, such as public primary and secondary education and health care are nearly universally provided (with the notable exception of the United States, which provides federal support for health care only for low-income families, children and the elderly). Overall, policies regulating service provision and support share a commonality in that they once again rarely target parenting directly. Child care benefits as well as supports such as health care or housing subsidies aid in the provision of services to children. Indeed, one can argue that child care subsidies and federally run programs support the maintenance of high quality child care programs, hence providing developmentally supportive and stimulating care to children. However, they do not have as a central goal aiding parents themselves in providing supportive and stimulating care.

### **4.3 Summarizing the need for comparative information on parenting policy**

In summary, there are a wide range of policies that target families and parents. Despite the breadth of family policies, it is notable that very few policies focus explicitly on the task of parenting itself. Policies targeting parents' money, time and access to resources such as child care may have the intention of improving parents' financial and emotional capacities and thereby have indirect effects on the quality of their parenting and on children's healthy development. However, such policies do not directly seek to support or alter parents' provision of supportive, stimulating, and appropriately demanding parenting to their children. This indicates a substantial gap in the literature around comparative parenting policy, supporting the importance of the current study. Given the heightened interest of governments in the role that parents play in promoting positive child development and creating human capital, understanding how governments currently seek to enhance and support optimal parenting is an important policy question.

In the next sections, we assess how our comparison countries conceptualise and implement policies directly targeting parenting. We first assess global issues of how countries define parenting policy and the underpinning philosophies. We next review specific goals of parenting policies and then discuss government structures and legislative strategies which underlie their development and implementation. We consider obstacles to the fulfilment of policy goals concerning parenting and conclude with considerations for how Australia might move forward in developing its parenting policy agenda.

## **5 Parenting policy in different countries**

### **5.1 Parenting policy philosophy**

The first question addressed in this study was the extent to which countries had developed a formal framework or philosophy that was used to guide parenting policy. The findings revealed little evidence of either; most countries lacked a formal and cohesive parenting policy framework that served to define policy goals, direct legislative and service resources, or serve as a blueprint from which policy progress could be assessed. Many countries acknowledged that parenting policy is an area that the government has explored, yet governments appear to have failed to adopt an overarching policy philosophy or framework. As such, the family policy agendas in most countries under study included a range of targeted policies developed to serve a variety of rather narrow purposes (e.g. child protection, anti social behaviour, poverty reduction) or subgroups (e.g. programs targeting adolescent parents) but that lack a cohesive unifying framework or set of explicit universal goals for parents and families.

There was, however, diversity in this arena. As noted above in existing reviews of family policy, parenting was sometimes mentioned as a component of broad conceptualizations of family policy. All countries noted specific policies or resources targeting parenting, although these were not framed within an overarching philosophy or policy framework. There were a variety of models in how countries defined and approached parenting and family policy. Some countries, most notably Canada, treat family policy as a provincial issue and therefore the federal government has very limited involvement in this policy area. Sweden, in contrast, has specific philosophies regarding family roles and children, but not a system of explicit goals or policies supporting parenting. Ireland is in the process of developing a philosophy of parenting policy. Discussed in greater detail below, Ireland has developed government documents defining quality parenting and delineating the governments' broad goals for supporting parenting. A cohesive set of policies and programs to enact these goals are still under development.

In Australia, responsibilities for policies and programs to address parenting issues are shared between the Federal and State governments. Although there are a number of programs to support parenting and families, there is no specific government philosophy or overarching policy framework, either at the federal or the state level. Nevertheless like many countries in this study Australia has become much more active in this area over the past decade. In the past parenting and family life were generally considered private matters, with services and advice being provided largely by local NGOs or religious organisations unless children were reported to the child protection system. However there has recently been much more policy attention focused on parenting and family support, with a range of programs being implemented by the Federal and State governments. Overall the approach in Australia has tended to be to provide relatively generous cash transfers and tax credits to families, whilst spending relatively less on direct services and programs than other OECD countries (Katz & Redmond, 2009).

The one country that could be characterised as moving towards a unifying and holistic framework concerning parenting linked to a cohesive set of policy levers and programmatic

efforts is the UK<sup>4</sup>. The UK provides an example of a country that has declared a central government philosophy in relation to parenting and has developed laws, policies, and programs to enact this framework on the local level (see UK Case Study below). With the exception of the UK, and Ireland which is emerging in this arena, other countries have yet to develop an overarching framework or philosophy concerning the government's role in supporting parenting.

### **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**

Having noted the lack of overarching frameworks and goals regarding parenting in most countries, it is important to note that a few countries mentioned the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as a general frame guiding their philosophies toward children and families. This framework, however, has not been used to develop explicit parenting goals or policies in most of our countries of study. Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989, the UNCRC spells out children's basic rights: the right to survival, to develop to the fullest, to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation and to participate fully in family, cultural and social life. The UNCRC also sets standards for children in the areas of health care, education and legal, civil and social services. Countries that have ratified or acceded to the UNCRC have committed to these rights and standards before the international community (UNICEF, 2009).

All of the countries studied, with the exception of the United States, have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. And yet few seem to use it as an explicit framework for their child, family or parenting policy or even purposely follow it. The United States stakeholders emphasized this in their interviews - that other countries have signed onto the UNCRC yet do not fully implement its guidelines and standards through policy interventions (US Interview, 2009). The interviews with the other countries showed that while the UNCRC is widely known, it is seldom used specifically as a document for policymaking in the parenting domain. Two exceptions are Ireland and Sweden.

### **Emerging frameworks: Ireland**

Ireland is one of the countries to assert that the UNCRC underpins its parenting programs (Ireland interview, 2008). The Irish government has specified its priorities for supporting parents through both services and information to the general public on how to parent effectively. In the past, Ireland lacked explicit and comprehensive policies relating to children and families. The government was hesitant to intervene in family issues because traditionally this was seen as the domain of the Church rather than the State; government focused mainly on reducing child poverty. Services were patchy, uncoordinated and focused on poor citizens (M. Daly & Clavero, 2002). Since ratifying the UNCRC, Ireland has built upon the guidelines within this document to develop a philosophy of parenting. In 2002 the government published a document entitled *Investing in Parenthood* which specifies the country's priorities for supporting parents. The document, developed by the National Conjoint Child Health Committee, the Supporting Parents Subcommittee and several government agencies, detailed

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that a new government was elected in the UK in May 2010. This coalition government has signalled its intention to greatly cut back on public services, and to reduce ring fenced allocations of money. It is not yet clear to what extent this new policy direction will impact on the various parenting policies and programs mentioned here.

how the government currently supports parents and proposed specific recommendations for implementing an enhanced strategy through legislation and services.

One of the recommendations developed and implemented in Ireland was the publication of a series of booklets entitled *Parenting Positively*. Parenting positively is defined as “understanding each child as a unique individual and knowing how to communicate your love effectively...it is about listening, understanding, praising, encouraging and being a good role model for your child” (2007, p.2). The introduction to *Parenting Positively* explains to parents why the government is providing information to parents on how to parent:

Throughout human history, people have lived in small, close-knit communities, but today not all parents have relatives nearby to support them and give guidance in child-raising. In some ways we intuitively know how to make good and wise decisions about parenting, but sometimes the stresses and mixed messages of the world can make it difficult. Therefore, we need to take every opportunity to learn more about what it takes to parent effectively (p.1).

The booklets cover general parenting skills, as well as how to deal with specific complex issues such as divorce, death, and bullying.

### **Alternate models: Sweden**

Sweden is a country which does appear to have a clear philosophy underpinning its family policies. However it does not explicitly include parenting within this philosophy. Sweden’s family-related policies are longstanding, created in the 1930s in response to a declining population and low fertility rates. Legislation was drafted with the purpose of creating structures to encourage family life and parental responsibility. Most notable of these structures are generous paid parental leave policies for mothers (and more recently for fathers) and Swedish Child Care Centres, which provide free early education to children as young as one year for the entirety of an extended work day. These structural supports form part of a generous financial policy to support parents in Sweden. However, the focus is on maintaining the Swedish population and supporting the economy of families with children (Swedish Interview, 2009). The goal is not to support the quality or efficacy of parenting per se, but rather to help support working adults’ ability to blend child rearing and employment and to support gender equality.

In Sweden explicit policies regarding children are linked to the rights outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Sweden’s current child policy objective is that “children and young people are to be respected and to have opportunities for development and security and also for participation and for influence” (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2008). While this definition is clearly directed at the rights and needs of children, it also acknowledges that parents bear the responsibility for meeting these needs. The Swedish government further acknowledges that families form the fundamental structure for society (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2008).

With policies supporting parents being strictly financial in nature and policies supporting children focused on the rights of children, Sweden lacks any policies explicitly supporting parenting despite the fact that its family-related policies are the most generous in nature among the countries under study. The focus of Sweden’s policies and supports are on

children, demographics and gender equality rather than parenting. Arguably, Swedish Child Care Centres provide far more holistic care to children than any other government-provided child care in the world, but services are targeted at children not at families or parents. In short, while the Swedish model provides the largest framework of policies benefiting children and parents, it does not explicitly aim to support parenting.

## **5.2 A Cohesive Parenting Philosophy: Case Study of the United Kingdom**

Standing in contrast to the other countries under study, the UK provides a model of a country that has developed a specific philosophy relating to parenting with explicit goals and priorities. The UK has moved forward to implement this philosophy with multiple steps through a coordinated legal and service structure. The UK stands out for the manner in which these policies, specifically targeting parents, were rolled out as a package of economic and service supports and work from a model of universal services with a preventive focus.

The UK parenting policies originated in the late 1990s with several separate actions by the government focused on family support. In 1997, a Ministerial Group on the Family was established and a “Supporting Families” green paper was published in 1998, which set up the National Family and Parenting Institute and funding for a national parents’ helpline. Funding for 66 parenting programs, developed and implemented locally, began in 1999. These “Sure Start” centres house parenting education, family support, employment advice, childcare, and health services all in one location and have been expanded to nearly every community in the UK (Family and Parenting Institute, 2007).

In 2003, in response to a very public case of social services failing to intervene in a situation of child maltreatment, the UK Treasury and the Department for Education and Skills published the *Every Child Matters* green paper (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2003). This green paper proposed strengthening preventive services, but also argued that child protection services could not be separated from policies to improve all children’s lives. The government suggested that children, families, communities and public services should be responsible for and working together toward five key outcomes for children: good mental and physical health, safety, enjoying and achieving in life, making a positive contribution and economic well-being.

The UK philosophy asserts the critical role of parents in achieving these child outcomes. In turn, the government is seen as having a potentially vital role to play in supporting parents’ efforts and, specifically, in fostering parenting skills. Parenting is described as having “a strong impact on a child’s educational development, behaviour and mental health” (DfES, 2007, p.39). Like Ireland’s, the UK philosophy defines a positive parenting style and parental engagement in children’s learning as critical influences in a child’s life. A parent’s aspirations for their child, involvement in their child’s schooling and relationship with their child are seen to have direct impacts on their child’s cognitive development, literacy and numeracy skills, school achievement, behaviour and relationship with their community. The *Every Child Matters* green paper argued that policy relating to parenting was lacking and insufficient in supporting British parents in raising healthy children (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2003).

The green paper laid out a universal vision of positive outcomes for children which eventually became the bedrock of the UK policy toward children and parents through passage

of the Children Act 2004. Similar to Ireland, the UK justified its changing policies relating to children and families as a response to changing societal conditions, including demographics and risks, as well as a greater understanding of the early influences on child development. Currently, the UK policies supporting parenting are comprised of universal parenting services, targeted parenting services and structural changes within the government. Universal policies include a national parenting hotline, parents' information meetings at key transition points in children's lives, programs to involve parents in their children's schools, fathering support and efforts to strengthen parents' understanding of their child's development. These universal services are provided at the local level in a coordinated manner. Examples of local services provided to parents through universal national policies and programs include access to a Parent Support Advisor at their child's school, information sessions around the time their child enters primary and secondary school and access to Sure Start Children's Centres (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2007). In addition to these universal services, a range of targeted programs have been rolled out, focusing on groups of parents at higher risk. Targeted parenting services include home visiting programs, parent education programs, family group conferencing, family mediation and stress and relationship counselling. Targeted services are again provided at the local level but directed and organized through federal policies.

In addition to the provision of specific services, the *Children Act 2004* also delineated greater organizational structure at the national level in the UK. The Act laid the groundwork for appointing the first Minister for Children in 2003 to oversee federal and local efforts to support children and families. In conjunction with this, a range of isolated children's and family support services were brought under the umbrella of the Department of Education and Skills (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2003).

Following publication of the *Every Child Matters* report, the UK government in 2004 put forward the *Choosing Health* Report (Department of Health (UK), 2004). The Report contends that parents play a central role in improving their children's health and that timely support for parents as their children grow up will lead to improved child outcomes as well as benefits for parents themselves. These supports should be targeted at both parents and should include the private and voluntary sectors as well as the statutory sector, to engage parents who would not ordinarily seek supports, to meet both the general needs of parents and the needs of those from disadvantaged backgrounds and to be widely accessible. Much of these supports have been implemented through the expanding network of Sure Start Centres (UK Department of Health, 2004).

Four characteristics of the UK vision for supporting parents, as delineated in the report *Every Child Matters*, have been critical to its success. These characteristics of success include a central government legislative structure, local provision of services, national funding fed through local grants and services and increased economic supports for parents.

The first critical underpinning of the success of the UK parenting policies lies in the legislative backbone. The newly developed parenting philosophy was quickly supported through a concrete legal structure delineated through the *Children Act 2004*. The Act was passed immediately following the publication of the green paper.

Secondly, the policies have been implemented on the local level through an explicit system of coordinated local leadership and service provision. While the services and programs are



integrated into the Department for Children, Families and Schools, every local authority was required to have a parenting commissioner and parenting support strategy in place by March 2007 to implement the strategy on the local level. In addition, Sure Start Children's Centres, which house many of the parenting support services, have been expanding rapidly to every community. Sure Start Children's Centres are funded through local authorities.

Thirdly, the UK policies have been rolled out with financial support. In 2005, grants for child and parent programs were combined into the Children, Young People, and Families Grant program and funding was provided for a national child index. The national child index is a government database that holds education, social service, healthcare, and contact information for all children under 18. In 2006, funding was provided for a pilot scheme of parenting courses in 15 local authorities, Parent Support Advisors were introduced in 20 local authorities and 600 schools, and a pilot intensive home visiting program for families during pregnancy through age two was started, with funding for 77 parenting experts and 1,000 frontline family workers. In 2007, funding was provided to every local authority to establish a parenting support strategy.

The fourth critical strategy for the success of the UK program is that the parenting supports have been rolled out in conjunction with related economic supports for parents that seek to decrease economic inequality and child poverty. Together, these notable policies, including extensive service and economic supports for parents, have underscored an exemplar system in the UK to support parents' efforts to successfully parent their children. Since 2004, the government has allowed parents of older children to request flexible working arrangements, paid maternity leave was extended to nine months, extended school days were made available to nearly all parents, the number of Children's Centres, which provide childcare, has increased dramatically and there was an increase in the Working Tax Credit.

The policy framework for parents is not only oriented towards support and financial assistance. The UK has also enacted a number of provisions which provide sanctions for parents who do not display adequate parenting capacity. Foremost of these is the *Parenting Order* which was originally introduced in *The Crime and Disorder Act 1998* and has since been supplemented by further legislation. A parenting order is a civil court order which compels a parent to attend parenting classes or counselling and to fulfil other requirements as determined necessary by the court. Parenting Orders are given in two main contexts: school attendance and juvenile offending. In the school context parenting orders are intended to improve a child's attendance or behaviour, e.g. by ensuring that the child arrives for school on time or that the parent attends regular meetings with the school. Orders usually last for 12 months. Non education-related parenting orders are administered by Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) and the courts where a child has been involved in criminal or anti-social behaviour. These orders often require parents to ensure their children do not engage in anti-social behaviour, mix with specific other young people or go to specified locations.

In summary, the effort to specify explicit parenting policies in the UK was conducted within a broader system of family policies which seek to support parents' economic stability, their ability to balance work and family and which also seek to improve the quality of parenting skills and home environments. They contain a mixture of support and advice services, financial incentives and punitive sanctions. Whilst most of the specific initiatives falling under parenting policy do have their parallels in the other countries under study, the UK is

the only country which has attempted to bring these together explicitly and to implement structural changes to the machinery of government to ensure a cohesive policy approach.

Despite the relative comprehensiveness and coordination of parenting policy in the UK, there has been a great deal of criticism of the policy on the grounds that it is still contradictory and also rather punitive (Morris & Featherstone, 2010). Perhaps this indicates that these tensions are complex and not easily resolvable. For example it is very difficult to separate parents who require support and assistance from those who are abusive and/or neglectful, and these families are therefore likely to be subject to conflicting and contradictory policies.

### **5.3 Family Policy Agenda**

While most countries lack a formal policy definition or philosophy which structures policies specifically targeting parenting, all countries have policies aimed at children and families. These policies range in the degree to which they are combined or separate, universal or targeted and preventive versus reactive.

#### **Coherence of policies**

It is evident from the responses to our study that policy coherence regarding families and parenting is the result of a concerted governmental effort to achieve explicit and defined goals related to families. The Swedish model, detailed above, was implemented in response to the specific governmental goals of maintaining population and economic productivity in combination with family life. The UK policy was implemented in response to a goal of ensuring coherency in the policies supporting parents. Many of the actual policy actions were expansions of much smaller, targeted programs to create a country-wide, universal system. Ireland appears to be clearly progressing towards coherence in parenting policies. After developing an explicit national philosophy and set of goals regarding parenting, Ireland now intends to progress in creating legislative and service systems to achieve their goals.

Standing in contrast, the United States, Canada and New Zealand offer a multitude of policies relating to children and families, but these policies are piecemeal, not unified by a coherent framework or set of specified goals. For example, New Zealand's family policy agenda combines efforts to improve early child care, improve literacy, increase support for low-income parents and improve maternity care (Key, 2008). Unlike in Sweden, the policies in New Zealand are being developed to serve various goals. As in Sweden, New Zealand's goals serve children and families, but do not include a specific focus on parenting. There have been small, gradual efforts in these countries to coordinate services in order to better serve children and parents, however, unlike in the UK, there have been no overarching laws enacted specifically for the purpose of coordination. For the United States and Canada, efforts toward policy coordination have been more frequent and productive at the state and province rather than the federal, level. As with most of the other countries under study, Australia has a range of policies and programs for improving parenting and supporting families, but these do not yet represent a coherent philosophy, policy framework or government structure. There are programs funded by both federal and state governments.

## **Preventive versus reactive policies**

A second distinguishing dimension of parenting policies relates to the extent to which the philosophy of policy making is reactive or preventive in nature. The UK, Sweden, and Ireland, countries that have all taken steps toward coherency and coordination, have government policies that acknowledge the role the government can play in supporting and investing in parents. Policies in these countries have a more universal and preventive focus, arguing for the provision of information, services and programs for all parents, with a view to enhancing the wellbeing of parents and children supporting stable families and decreasing inequality. In contrast, the United States, Canada and New Zealand primarily implement targeted policies and programs, taking a reactive approach of intervening in or supporting parenting only in cases in which a safety net is deemed necessary. Australia is in the process of moving from a reactive towards a much more proactive and preventive policy. There are a number of early intervention initiatives which have developed over the past decade. As in many countries, Australia has a universal nurse home visiting system. However other interventions such as child care and family support vary by state. South Australia, for example, has a universal comprehensive home visitation program and New South Wales has a universal program *Families New South Wales* which contains a number of components, including a roll out of Triple P as a universal program.

## **Targeted policies**

In addition to diversity in the arena of policy coherence and focus, there is also significant diversity in to which policies addressing parenting and broader child and family issues are targeted or universal. All countries have universal or near-universal policies designed to support parents financially (e.g. tax credits) and most have universal policies supporting the balance of employment and childrearing (e.g. paid parental leave, subsidized or free child care). Yet, with the exception of the UK, there is a notable dearth of universal policies designed to support parenting. Ireland has laid out universal goals regarding parenting, yet at this time has limited policies and universal services underlying these new goals.

In short, there are very few examples of universal policies and programs targeting all parents. Rather, in most countries, parenting policies are limited to laws and programs that are targeted at specific subpopulations. The scope of these populations ranges from children with disability and disabled parents, to teenage parents and low-income parents. In all of these cases, the implicit goal of the policies is to support parents who may face particular constraints and challenges in meeting the needs of their children. However, the approach, structure and extent of the policies differs between individual countries for a variety of reasons due to need, available resources and the history of the policy approach in that country to the particular issue.

## **Parents with disability**

While all countries have policies designed to assist disabled people in various realms of their lives (e.g. economic support, employment support, educational access), these policies do not address the role that some people with disability play as a parent.

In the United States, 15 per cent of all families include a parent with a disability (**Through the Looking Glass, 2008**). Disability policies, including income supports, workforce assistance,

health care and other social services, are designed to help disabled individuals function independently in society. But functioning independently does not explicitly include raising children. Supports available to individuals with disabilities do not assist them with the extra challenges they may face in their role as a parent with a disability. Furthermore, disabled parents often fear seeking the services and supports available through disability policies because of concerns that exposing their needs to social service providers may make them appear unable to parent their child and open them up to the possibility of child removal (UK Interview, 2008).

The United Kingdom and the United States are the only countries under study that have taken initial steps toward addressing the challenges of disabled parents. The UK's approach is the Family Pathfinder Programme, a pilot program currently in 15 local authorities that aims to link adult and child services with a whole family approach. The Pathfinder Programme came out of a 2007 cross-governmental review on families with multiple and complex problems, including families where one or more parent had a disability. The review, headed by the Social Exclusion Task Force, highlighted the role of adult services in promoting the well-being of children. The Pathfinder Programme was proposed to combine services for parents with services for children and attempt to better consider the parental roles and responsibilities of the adult clients (DCSF, 2008b, UK Interview, 2008).

In the United States, the federal government has funded a three-year, \$1.5 million grant through the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research to establish a National Center for Parents with Disabilities and their Families. The goal of the Center is to oversee research on parents with disabilities and provide consultations, trainings and publications for parents with disabilities, their families and service providers. The priority areas identified include custody and parental evaluations, family roles and personal assistance and interventions with parents with disabilities (Through the Looking Glass, 2008).

### **Parents of children with disability**

The majority of services for children with disability and their parents occur in the education and health care systems in all countries. Very few are focused on parenting per se. In terms of supporting parents of children with disability, countries tend to directly offer parents respite and the special health care services that their child needs either in the home or at school, or to offer parents financial support to subsidize the costs of these services.

In Sweden, most children spend the majority of their time starting at age one in a child care centre, so the focus is on improving the education and health care services for children with disabilities in these centres. In the United States, many children with disabilities are eligible for health care services through the Medicaid program which often includes respite for the parents (Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Service, [www.cms.hhs.gov/](http://www.cms.hhs.gov/), 2009). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal law providing early intervention services for children under the age of two and special education services for children ages 3-21 (US Department of Education, 2009). Services and supports through Medicaid and IDEA vary widely across the United States as the federal programs are implemented differently in each state and IDEA has traditionally been underfunded on the federal level. The UK has a similar approach, outlined in the 2007 document *Aiming High for Children with disability* (Department of Health /Department of Children Families and Schools (UK), 2007), of providing federal funding for respite care for parents, increasing the

quality and availability of childcare options for working parents of children with disability and requiring local authorities to integrate services, ensure that services are accessible and involve parents in shaping local services (UK Interview, 2009).

New Zealand and Ireland also offer children with disabilities services in schools but they take a different approach in supporting these children outside of school. New Zealand provides a payment to all parents of children with disability instead of direct health care services. The Child Disability Allowance is meant to assist parents in paying for the extra costs associated with raising a child with disabilities (Ministry of Social Development, 2009a). Ireland provides all children with disabilities a Child Trust Fund account. The account is an investment account which belongs to the child and cannot be accessed until they turn 18 years old. The government annually contributes to this account and recently increased the annual contribution (HM Treasury, 2009).

Australia is similar to the United States and the UK by taking an active role in providing support for parents of children with disabilities through services in the home and at school. In general, the Australian government has recognized the need to take a collaborative appropriate to assisting children with disabilities and viewing the child and their family holistically FaHCSIA provides a number of funded programs for these families including:

- My Time – Program for parents and carers of young children with a disability at risk of isolation. Gives parents chance to socialise with others who understand the caring role
- Helping Children with Autism Package – provides support for families caring with a child with a diagnosis of autism from 2-7 years old. Support provides \$6,000 per annum for therapies, access to early days workshops and playgroups who have specialist support people available for advice.
- Outside School Hours Care for Teenagers with a Disability – provides quality care for teenagers 12 to 18 years old with a disability.
- Respite for Carers of young people with severe or profound disability – provides immediate and short term support for carers allowing them to choose the type and frequency of care, designed to meet unmet demand and unplanned need for care.
- Family relationship services for carers – family mediation and counselling services around future care of family member with a disability. Resolve conflict and centre for discussing concerns.

In short, while a variety of services are offered to parents of children with disability across all of our countries of study, these supports only rarely directly target parenting quality or parenting skills.

### **Teen parents**

Ireland, New Zealand and the United Kingdom all have central/federal-level parenting policies targeting teenage parents, who are recognized as needing specific help in acquiring skills to parent their children and in continuing their own healthy development to become

productive members of society. Support programs for teen parents aim to combine services for the teen parent with parenting support for the child.

In Ireland, the Teen Parents Support Programme (TPSP), run by the Department of Health and Children, supports teen parents until their children are two years of age. Social service providers assist parents on a one-on-one basis and also refer them to other services. The goal is to help the teen parent to combine their responsibilities as a parent with completing their own development as a teenager. Paternal involvement is encouraged, although a specific effort is not made. Currently, there are eight TPSPs in Ireland (Ireland Interview, 2008).

New Zealand has a similar program for teen parents run through the Ministry of Social Development. The Teenage Parent Service Co-ordinator initiative is designed to coordinate and facilitate access to social services for teen parents. Rather than receiving one-on-one support, teen parents can take part in parent support groups which are focused on developing parenting knowledge and skills (Ministry of Social Development, 2009b; New Zealand Interview, 2009).

The UK published a strategy paper, *Teenage parents' next steps*, in 2007, which describes the specific strategy to assist teen parents. The paper states that services for teenage parents should focus on: ensuring that midwifery and health-visiting services provide tailored support for teenage parents, Children's Centres are reaching out to the most vulnerable teenage mothers, Targeted Youth Support services are helping teenage parents cope with the challenges of early parenthood, extra support is available for mothers aged under 18 who cannot live with their own parents, services are made more attractive to young fathers and young parents are assisted with their education, employment and training (DCSF, 2007; UK Interview, 2008). As part of this strategy, an intensive support program for teenage parents, the Family Nurse Partnership, is currently being piloted. It was adopted from the Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) developed in the United States. The nurse home-visiting program is designed to improve the health, well-being and self-sufficiency of young, first-time parents and their children. It involves weekly structured home visits by a specially trained nurse from early pregnancy until children are 24 months old. All first-time births to mothers 19 years and under are eligible (DCSF, 2008a; UK Interview, 2008).

The other countries under study have programs to support teen parents but they are provided by states or provinces rather than federal/central government. For example: the US federal government funds several teen parenting group homes through the Administration for Children and Families; most states have additional supports for teen parents; and the welfare program in states often have employment exemptions for teenage mothers who are still in school or completing their GED. Similarly, states and territories in Australia have financial and education supports for teen parents. For both of these countries, there is a vast array of services available for teen mothers, however these services vary across the country, are not comprehensive and do not create an explicit national strategy.

### **Low-Income parents**

All countries have policies to partially assist low-income parents in meeting the financial needs of raising their children. These income transfers occur through both reducing the taxes low-income families with children pay and by providing additional monetary and in-kind benefits. Benefits vary in their scope, time-limits and eligibility requirements.

Canada, for example uses financial benefits as its primary support for parents. The National Child Benefit Supplement (NCBS) and the Working Income Tax Benefit provide monetary benefits to working parents in an amount that varies depending on their annual income and the number of children in the family (Canada Interview, 2009). For example, a family with an annual income below \$20,435 receives \$162.08 a month from NCBS and \$83 a month from the Working Income Tax Benefit (Canada Revenue Agency, 2009).

Low-income parents in Canada also receive monetary assistance through the Employment Insurance (EI) system. The EI system is primarily known for delivering up to 50 weeks of paid parental leave during a child's first year of life, only 15 weeks of which must be used by the biological mother of the child. The leave is paid at a rate of 55 per cent of the recipient's insurable earnings up to \$39,000 a year, for a maximum benefit of \$413 a week. For low-income parents, there is a supplement to EI, known as the Family Supplement, which provides additional benefits. Families with net income below \$20,921 are eligible for the full supplement, which delivers a maximum weekly benefit of \$35.45 for a family with one child under age seven, provided that the total EI payment does not exceed the maximum weekly rate of \$413 (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2009).

An example of a country that provides non-monetary parenting supports to low-income families is New Zealand's Family Start Program. Family Start is targeted at all at-risk families, although it is provided primarily in low socio-economic areas. The program aims to improve health, education and social outcomes for children, improve parents' parenting capability and practice and improve the overall well-being of families. This is done through providing information and access for families to social services, coordinating services and funding across government agencies and communities, and promoting and funding programs to support families and prevent domestic violence (Ministry of Social Development, 2009b).

### **Promoting responsible fatherhood in the United States**

Across the countries under study as well as across particular subpopulations, this project has found a general lack of universal parenting policies, with a few exceptions. The lack of a universal parenting policy may be seen as reflecting an assumption by government that most parents inherently have the skills necessary to be a successful parent. Only in situations where there is a disability, a lack of resources or a lack of cultural assimilation do most governments seem to feel the responsibility, or the right, to tell parents how to parent. One interesting exception to this is the federal effort by the US government to address fatherhood.

The effort to promote responsible fatherhood in the US has corresponded to increased attention in both scientific and policy circles to the importance of fathers in child development and family stability. The dramatic transformation of social norms concerning gender roles, associated with increases in maternal employment, non-marital childbearing and divorce, has highlighted two issues: (1) the prevalence of non-resident fathers and their limited involvement (both financial and emotional) with their children; and (2) both resident and non-resident fathers' limited number of quality interactions with their children that do not live up to ideals of the "new father" as one who shares care responsibilities with mothers.

Prior to 2006, the US recognized or sought to support the importance of the father role through a number of projects in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) targeted at either improving existing programs to better include fathers (e.g. increasing

involvement of fathers in Early Head Start), targeting specific problem areas (e.g. educating new fathers to reduce infant mortality rates or reduce family violence) or ensuring that fathers are contributing financially to their children's upbringing. On February 28, 2001, President George Bush issued a statement of his determination to make fatherhood a national priority. He said that the federal government should go beyond simply enforcing the economic role of fathers to enforce their emotional commitments (The White House Briefing Room, 2001). The proposed new federal commitment would "improve the job skills of low income fathers; promote marriage among parents; help low-income fathers establish positive relationships with their children and the children's mothers; and enlist the potency of faith-based and community groups that are closest to the needs of, and can provide the most direct support to, fathers and families" (HHS, 2002).

Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives were signed into law in February 2006 as part of the 2005 Deficit Reduction Act. The law included a one-time appropriation of US\$150 million to support healthy marriages of which up to US\$50 million could be used for responsible fatherhood programs. Overseen by HHS' Administration for Children and Families, 226 five-year grants were awarded on September 30, 2006. The Fatherhood Initiative grants went to national and community organizations to develop and implement programming and to researchers for evaluation of services (HHS, 2006). As an example, one of the national grants awarded went to the National Fatherhood Initiative. The US\$1 million grant is currently being used to fund nationwide public education through the media and internet and to develop and provide fatherhood educational programs to public and private local organizations (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2008).

In short, fatherhood initiatives in the US have created explicit goals of targeting fathers' parenting of their children. Rather than a specific national policy lever, this policy approach is seeking to expand information concerning the efficacy of a variety of media, educational and service interventions designed to improve fathers' parenting involvement and quality. It remains to be seen whether these efforts will result in more universal programs or proscriptive legislation or policies.

After discussing the philosophy and content of countries' policies regarding parenting, we next turn to a focus on structural issues, considering first the political structure and government leadership of parenting policies and then the legislative processes which underlie the policies.

#### **5.4 Government structure of parenting policy**

Results from our analysis indicated notable similarities in how the countries under study structure and implement their programs and policies relating to parenting. All countries have one lead government agency or department which contains the majority of their parenting related policies and supports. In all cases, the major focus in this lead department is not on parenting but rather encapsulates a broader portfolio. The policy portfolio of the lead department often covers families, children or education (see below for examples from our countries of interest). Although countries all have one or more central government agency overseeing policies related to parenting, it is important to note that all countries also have varying amounts of their family policy agenda spread out over numerous other agencies and departments. Several countries also have an official or body outside of the lead department and separate from the government who is specifically focused on children.



Many policies relating to families and children are actually implemented on the local level with great variety in how these policies are envisioned and legislated. Countries fall along a continuum between a centralist (national/federal government) system and a localist (local authority or state government) system. Sweden, New Zealand and Ireland are examples of countries where nearly all policy is created at the national government level. These countries do not have any coordinated system for policies to trickle down to the local level or to be legislated and implemented at the local level only.

In the middle of the continuum lie Australia, the US and the UK, all of which have a system where the majority of the legislation and funding originates at the national level, but where states and local governments (or NGOs) have the responsibility for implementing programs. Within the overall national federal agenda, localities play a significant role in accessing resources and designing programs and services to comply with the federal agenda. In these countries, there can be great variability across states and localities concerning how policies are implemented. This can be the result of the design of the policy (if the policy is designed to be tailored to the needs of a particular community), of the financial structure of the policy (when there is no specific policy provided and only financial resources, states have a great deal of flexibility in designing their own policy to meet the intended goal) or of serendipity (if the policy is implemented differently in different communities because of varying degrees of existing structural resources, financial resources, and local expertise).

At the localist end of the continuum, some countries have little in the way of a universal agenda or control over the policies implemented and funded at the local level. Canada is an example of a country where the federal government makes little effort to implement a universal agenda nor are the Canadian provinces required to report to the federal government on their policies or programs. This system leaves the federal government with limited oversight, knowledge or control over parenting and family policies. Below we detail the government structures across our countries of study.

## **Ireland**

Ireland is an example of a country where policies are universal in nature and are made at the federal level before being implemented locally. The Department of Social and Family Affairs houses the majority of family policies and coordinates financial support to vulnerable families in the form of social welfare payments. The Department includes the Family Support Agency and the Office for the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2009).

The Family Support Agency was established in 2003, in consultation with stakeholders, with the mission of promoting the fundamental importance of families and family life for individuals, communities and society generally. The Agency brings together the programs and services that support families locally and also provides nationwide family mediation service and supports, promotes and develops the provision of marriage and relationship counselling, provides other family supports and oversees the Family and Community Services Resource Centre Programme. The Agency has a responsibility to undertake or commission research, to advise, inform and assist the Minister on family issues and to promote and disseminate related information. The Agency members are appointed and have expertise and experience in the fields of family and community services, counselling, family mediation, research and family law (Family Support Agency, 2009).

The Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) was established in 2005 to improve the lives of children under the National Children's Strategy and bring greater coherence to the development of policy and delivery of services for children. The key role of the OMCYA is to support the Minister in implementing the National Children's Strategy and the National Childcare Investment Programme (2006 – 2010) and to develop policy and legislation on child welfare and child protection and implement the Children Act 2001 (OMCYA, 2009).

As do several other countries, Ireland also has an Ombudsman for Children (OCO) established in the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002. The OCO works to support children's and young people's rights, give children and young people a voice in government and speak on behalf of children in relation to current laws and proposed policies (OCO, 2009).

### **Sweden**

Sweden is another example of a country where nearly all policymaking is done at the federal level but local municipalities are still in a strong position when it comes to implementing policy. Sweden is similar to other countries in that nearly all related policies are the responsibility of the Department of Health and Social Affairs, with various other policies housed in the Department of Education and the Department of Justice. Since 1993, Sweden has had a Children's Ombudsman appointed by the federal government. The Ombudsman's duties are regulated by law, the Children's Ombudsman Act, and are aimed primarily at promoting the rights and interests of children and young people as set forth by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Ombudsman does not supervise other authorities and, by law, may not interfere in individual legal cases. The Children's Ombudsman submits a report to the Government each year which addresses the state of children and young people in Sweden and suggests reforms and bills for legislative changes (Sweden Interview, 2009).

### **New Zealand**

New Zealand's main governmental department focusing on family, children and youth issues is its Ministry of Social Development. The Department is responsible for government-funded financial supports for families, parenting programs and children who are in the care of the government. In addition, the chief executive of the Ministry of Social Development has responsibility to promote the interests of young people between the ages of 12 and 24 through the Ministry of Youth Affairs, a sub agency of the Ministry of Social Development. Other family support services can be found in the Department of Labour (policies relating to work/family balance and paternity/maternity leave), the Ministry of Health (health promotion and education and related support services for children and families) and the Ministry of Education (children's education). There has been some effort recently to encourage joint work among these separate departments. The Social Sector Forum of Chief Executives of the Ministries of Health, Education, Social Development and Justice recently have been working together on areas of common interest such as encouraging good behaviour and respect for others among children and young people (New Zealand Interview, 2008).

Since 2003, New Zealand also has had a Children's Commissioner who is independent of government. The Office of the Children's Commissioner advocates for the best interests of all children and young people in New Zealand and looks to ensure that their rights are respected

and upheld. The Commissioner is responsible for promoting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and working to see that children and young people have input into issues that affect them (Office of Children's Commissioner, 2008). Also in 2003, New Zealand established a Families Commission independent of the government. The Families Commission's responsibilities are to encourage informed political debate about families, increase public awareness and promote better understanding of issues relating to families, help develop government policies that serve the interests of families and encourage research on issues relating to families (Families Commission, 2009).

## **United Kingdom**

The UK is an example of a country in the middle of the continuum between a centralist style and a devolved style of government. While universal policies are envisioned and legislated on the national level, they are nearly all implemented on the local level. In comparison to the US, another country that lies in the middle, there is far more coherence between localities in implementing policy and far less policymaking at the local level. However family and parenting policy is increasingly being devolved to the four nations which make up the UK (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) and much of what follows applies only to England.

The UK Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), formerly the Department for Education and Skills, has lead responsibility for children and families (DCSF, 2009a). Within this department, there is a Minister for Children, Young People and Families who is responsible for parenting policies. At the local level, as of 2007, every locality was required to have a Commissioner of Parenting to implement the government's parenting policies. In 2005, a separate Children's Commissioner for England was appointed, followed by appointments of Children's Commissioners for Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. The Commissioners' roles are to promote the views and interests of children and young people, rather than to safeguard their rights (DCSF, 2006).

The UK is similar to the rest of the countries under study in that, despite great efforts at coherence among its policies relating to children and families, policies are spread among a number of departments. The Department for Work and Pensions is responsible for child poverty, welfare to work conditions and child maintenance payments, although there is also a Child Poverty Unit run jointly with the DCSF. The Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (formerly the Department for Trade and Industry) covers employment law including parental leave. The Department of Health shares responsibility with the DCSF on issues such as child health and wellbeing and child development in infancy. The Home Office and the Youth Justice Board have a significant role in parenting policy as it relates to youth crime and anti-social behaviour (UK Interview, 2008).

## **United States**

The United States is a further example of a country that lies in between a federal system and a local system for designing and legislating policies relating to children and families. Both states and the federal government have a fair amount of legislative and financial power in implementing policies. On the federal level, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) is the sole entity focused on child and family policies. It plays the active government role for hotlines, information, websites and the promotion of themes relating to parenting

such as parents matter, parent-child communication regarding risk behaviours, educational materials and resources (ACF, 2009). Policies legislated by Congress and the President are often administered by the ACF.

There are also various other funding streams spread out across numerous federal government bodies including: the Department of Education; National Institute on Drug Abuse; the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; and the Internal Revenue Service which houses tax policies. Many of these separate funding streams and programs are targeted at specific at-risk populations. Regardless of where the program is housed, there is little coordination across programs. In most cases, national data systems do not indicate which families or children are receiving services across agencies. Additionally, the federal government tends to provide funding and broad direction for policies, which are then implemented in various different ways by the 50 individual states (United States Interviews, 2008).

On the state level, many states have their own departments implementing federal government programs as well as Children's Cabinets or other coordinating bodies. States also have the option to implement policies relating to families on their own initiative as long as they are able to finance them or are able to receive a waiver from the federal government to use funds meant for another purpose.

## **Canada**

Canada is an example of a country at the anti-federalist/local end of the continuum in implementing family policy. The majority of Canadian family and child policy occurs at the level of the province. This leaves vast differences in services available to families across the different provinces. Most provinces have a Child Advocate or Ombudsman who is often empowered by legislation to monitor the province's child policy. Some also have a Council for the Family, such as the British Columbia Council for the Family, which develops services and provides resources on issues related to families (British Columbia Council for the Family, 2009). The two structures at the federal level which house family related policies are the Canadian Revenue Agency and the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development. The Canadian Revenue Agency is responsible for financial policies relating to families including the Canada Child Tax Benefit, National Child Benefit Bonus (an income-based payment to parents upon having a new child), the Spouse and Common Law Tax Credit and the Universal Child Care Benefit (Canada Revenue Agency, 2009). The Department of Human Resources and Skills Development is responsible for maternity and family leave benefits (HRSDC, 2009).

## **Australia**

Australia shares responsibility for parenting policy between the federal government and the states and territories. Until recently policy and programs relating to parenting and family support were generally considered to be the responsibility of the states, which have primary responsibility for child protection, child welfare and disability services. The federal government is responsible for all benefits and other payments to families and also for national policies around parental leave and child support. The majority of parenting and family support services are provided by NGOs who are contracted by governments to provide services. In recent years there have been a number of initiatives which have drawn the federal

government increasingly into the area of parenting and family support interventions. Firstly, a number of federal government programs have been instituted, most significantly the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy which had two iterations (2000-2004; 2004-2009). This has now been superseded by the Family Support Program which brings together a number of federal programs related to families. The federal government has also become more involved in parenting through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) which is a joint venture between the federal and the states' and territories' governments. COAG has recently implemented two new initiatives, the early years' framework and the child protection framework, both of which are intended to harmonise services between the states and increase the role of the federal government in coordinating national approaches. With regard to parenting policy itself, the department with direct responsibility for parenting and families is the Department of Families, Housing Communities and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) is responsible for early childhood and youth policy. Australia also has an Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) which is a government funded agency. Several of the states have children's commissioners but there is no national children's or family commission.

### **5.5 Legislative and evaluative processes underlying parenting policy**

It is logical that the legislative process strongly relates to the governmental structure of the countries under study. Nearly all countries use legislation to develop their policies. For countries with devolved structures, legislation may occur at multiple levels (e.g. federal, state/province and town). The federal government is often only able to direct policy through the designation and allocation of money to states/provinces. States/provinces can be left with a wide range of discretion in designing and implementing programs enacted into law at the federal level. For countries that are more centralist in nature, policy and legislation are developed at the central government level, although the implementation of policies through services and programs are often conducted at the local level. These countries also tend to adopt successful programs from other countries and implement them with or without legislation.

Similarly, there is variability in how policies and programs are evaluated. Some countries have formal systems of evaluation required by legislation or policy; others use more informal evaluation mechanisms; some provide little support or incentive for evaluation. Some countries import policies or program structures from abroad, whereas others, such as the US, tend to eschew replication of policies.

### **Specific Legislative Processes in Countries of Study**

#### **Sweden**

Swedish policy is developed through national legislation, often with the aim of supporting parental stability, responsibility and children's rights through structural supports. The overarching goal of the government to prevent a decline in the population drives the development of this legislation. Over the last 30 years, the government has had to adjust legislation because of changing behaviour. Decreasing marriage rates, increasing cohabitation and increasing divorce and separation have prompted the government to change legislation that previously only assisted married parents of children. Sweden also implements programs from other countries that have been found to be successful. In developing and implementing

its own programs, there is an increasing trend toward demanding more evaluation program efficacy. The Swedish Interview identified that there is often confusion on the local level about who is responsible for parent support programs implemented at the federal level.

The comprehensive nature of the Child Care Centres in Sweden reduces the need for many other resources for parents outside of the government. While the Centres are voluntary, nearly all parents utilize them. The Centres provide healthcare for children and also some support for parents through activities such as discussion groups (Sweden Interview, 2009).

### **New Zealand**

Policy in New Zealand also is developed primarily through central government legislation, which defines the contributions of individual government agencies in meeting the priorities stated in the legislation. Examples relating to parenting policy include the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1989 and the Adoptions Act 1955. After legislation is adopted, the individual programs are generally delivered by non-government agencies in the social services sector. There is not an explicit effort to evaluate program effectiveness.

New Zealand's Office of the Children's Commissioner and the Families Commission are autonomous agencies that advance the interests of children and families (OCC, 2009). In addition, there are a range of other non-governmental organizations with agendas that include an interest in parenting-related policies. These include Parents Centres, which provide parenting networks and associated infrastructure to support parents and their children aged 0-6 and also offer prenatal education and childbirth support (Parents Centres, 2009).

### **Ireland**

In contrast to other centralist countries, Ireland has limited legislation regarding parenting. Ireland has implemented several parenting programs without dedicated legislation. The programs were adopted from successful programs in other countries. Governmental agencies, including the Department of Social and Family Affairs and the Family Support Agency, implement the programs. Ireland points to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as providing the legislative underpinnings for implementing programs without a law behind them. As these programs have no dedicated legislation, there is also no explicit evaluation process. Non-governmental resources include mostly philanthropies such as the Atlantic Philanthropies and The One Foundation (Ireland Interview, 2008).

### **United Kingdom (England)**

Parenting and family policy in the UK is developed through central government legislation which often includes public meetings when major policy initiatives are under consideration. Although the national government creates the policy framework, it is largely the local governments which are responsible for implementing policies, setting local priorities and commissioning parenting services. There are 150 local authorities in England with social services responsibility (UK Interview, 2008). When the Children's Act was enacted into law, guidance was included for local authorities on how to enact the legislation locally. A specific publication, *Parenting support: Guidance for local authorities in England*, set out the requirements for appointing a commissioner of parenting support services, developing a local parenting strategy to inform the wider 'Children and Young People Plan' that each local

authority is required to create, and ensuring that appropriate services are put in place to meet the needs of all parents and provide them with information (UK Department of Education and Skills, 2006). In practice, the quality of services offered to parents varies on the local efforts. There are currently efforts to give parents more of a voice in the development of policy (UK Interview, 2008).

The UK evaluates programs by measuring key outcomes on a set of national indicators. The indicators relating to children and families include: the prevalence of breastfeeding at six to eight weeks from birth; children becoming the subject of a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time; obesity among primary school age children in Year 6; and the emotional health of children. These indicators are then used to assess the performance of local authorities.

As part of the Children's Act, the UK government established a non-governmental organization to ensure that parenting support policies and programs were evidence-based. The Family and Parenting Institute is designed to be a centre of expertise on family and parenting issues and to influence the policy-making process (The Children's Act, 2004). Also outside of the government, the National Academy for Parenting Practitioners seeks to improve the quality of parenting-related services by raising the standard and consistency of practice and disseminating the evidence from research (UK Interview, 2008).

## **United States**

Policy in the United States is developed through multiple streams, including federal and state legislation and state-level courts. Federal legislation often influences policy primarily through funding. That is, legislation may set goals or priorities, but the real mechanism for reaching such goals are funding streams which are provided to states or locales with requirements or guidelines as to the use of the funds. State courts play a role in influencing policy in that decisions on cases often define the role and rights of parents. There is variation in the investment given to evaluating or tracking how well a program actually improves child or family well-being. While there has been little interest in the past on rigorous evaluation, this seems to be changing (US Interview, 2009).

Outside of the government other organizations also play a role. For example, *Family Impact Seminars* is a series dedicated to providing information about families, though not solely families with children in the home. There are a multitude of other organizations that take an advocacy or partisan approach to families and parenting and that often conduct evaluation studies of policies and programs (e.g. Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council, both of which have a conservative orientation). There are also many research organizations that include parenting in their agendas (e.g. Child Trends) but this is often not the primary focus of these organizations. On the state and local level, non-governmental resources can come from states, towns, community groups and religious organizations. The amount and quality of services that these organizations provide varies widely across the country (US Interview, 2009).

## **Canada**

Policy in Canada is implemented on the federal level through legislation that sets forth tax policies impacting parents and makes modest-sized structural investments to the agencies and

programs within the provinces. These investments are meant to set the direction of child and family policy across the country by attempting to ensure that similar programs and services exist across all provinces. However, much of the policy development as well as most program and service development occurs at the provincial and local level. According to Canadian law, the federal government and the provincial governments are not allowed to report to each other, only to their constituents. Therefore, the federal government is not positioned to report about family policies implemented in provinces, outside of what the federal government delivers directly. As a result, there is no common reporting or evaluation framework (Canada Interview, 2009). There have been citizen-led initiatives to evaluate and improve programs (Social Developments Partnership Program, 2009). There are a variety of organizations outside of the government that advocate for and do research on a range of child and family issues (Canada Interview, 2009).

### **Australia**

Parenting policy in Australia is very largely developed at the federal level but programs are implemented by states and territories and NGOs. The federal government is responsible for all benefits and the majority of taxes, as well as the funding of education and community services which are implemented at the state level. Health funding is shared between federal and state governments, with the federal funding primary health care and the state funding hospitals. As in several other countries under study, Australian policy makers have increasingly responded to the idea of children as ‘human capital’ and investment in families as an important component of maintaining the wellbeing and cohesiveness of society. There is also concern about the fertility rate and a number of policies have been implemented to raise fertility. Although the overwhelming majority of resources are focused on tertiary interventions such as child protection, out of home care and juvenile justice, there has been an increasing recognition that early intervention is the most appropriate response for addressing a range of social issues. In addition, Australia is in the process of, for the first time, implementing ‘whole of government’ approaches to several policy areas, most notably social inclusion, which could potentially address several family related policies. Nevertheless programs and policies still remain rather fragmented and short term.

### **Summary**

The above sections show that most of the countries under study have similar objectives relating to parenting and family policies. Furthermore the majority of countries are moving towards more coherent policies and more centralised approaches to family policy. The idea that children can be seen as ‘human capital’ has increased government attention to parenting beyond merely policing child maltreatment and has particularly legitimised a range of early intervention policies and programs. However each country has developed these policies in accordance with its own policy traditions and government structures and there is no one model for incorporating parenting policies within the wider frameworks of children and family policies. Table 1 provides a summary of the levels of comprehensiveness of parenting policies and identifies the countries at each level. It is important to acknowledge, though, that countries do not easily fit into these categories and that policies are continuously changing, so the table should not be seen as definitive. For example, Ireland and Sweden are placed at a similar position on the continuum but have very different components. Ireland has begun to develop explicit parenting policies but does not have comprehensive programs. Sweden, on



the other hand, has very few programs or policies aimed specifically at parenting but has long had a comprehensive set of early intervention and family support programs and policies.

**Table 1: Continuum of parenting policy implementation**

Level	Policies	Structures	Countries
None	No coherent parenting policies – some local short term programs	No parenting policy in central/federal government	
Low	Some central/federal policies e.g. parental leave, baby bonus and funding for local programs but no overall policy	Policy fragmented and not articulated, blurred boundaries between national and local/state government	USA, Canada
Moderate	Some centrally funded policies and programs aimed at parenting or groups of parents. Initiatives being developed for universal approaches, pilot projects initiated. However parenting policy itself is not articulated, being part of broader family or children's policies.	One government department or agency takes the lead and begins to engage other relevant departments.	Australia, NZ,  Ireland, Sweden
High	Overarching policy articulated by government, backed with a range of specific policies and programs aimed at all parents and vulnerable groups. There is an explicit parenting policy agenda documented by government.	Whole of government approach sanctioned by central agencies, led by one department. Formal agreements between national government and states/provinces	UK
Comprehensive	Policy brings together not only explicit 'family' and 'parenting' policies but includes consideration of impact on families of all public policy including transport etc. Families have direct input into new policy development.	Central/federal government and local governments actively collaborate to implement family friendly policies. There is a family/parents advocate outside of government.	

## 5.6 Obstacles to developing and implementing parenting policy

Underlying the legislative processes in the countries are philosophies, structures and resources which can either facilitate or undermine the actual development and implementation of parenting policies. Combinations of these mechanisms that undermine the development and implementation of parenting policies create obstacles which partly explain

the differences in parenting policies between the countries. These obstacles can shift with demographic changes, changes in public opinion, exchanges of the political party in power, variations in the economic climate and singular events which grab the attention of the public and, therefore, policymakers.

Several countries cited the ideological tension between children being a public good versus a private good as a hindrance to the development of parenting policy. The role of parents may be perceived as important and programs themselves may be seen as effective, but government intervention into parenting and the implementation of related programs are viewed as interference in private life and a threat to personal freedom. Parents are seen as having an inherent right to raise their children and to be deserving of the freedom to parent as they see fit, unless they prove unable to do so. In the US in particular there is philosophical resistance to government involvement in family life unless something has gone “wrong” in a family. The general presumption is that parents have both the right and the responsibility to raise their children. If parents show they cannot raise their children, they generally have to give up all their parenting rights (United States Interview, 2009).

Philosophical resistance to parenting policy also comes in the form of tension between labour supply objectives, gender equality and what is perceived to be a ‘good’ childhood. Rising female employment rates call for policies targeted at young children, however in some cases the best care for young children is perceived to be the care of their mother. In Canada, philosophical resistance to government involvement in family life is strongest in relation to policies targeting children under the age of six. While Canada’s policy makers rhetorically understand the importance of the early years from an epidemiological standpoint, programming for children under the age of six meant to support families while parents work appears ‘institutional’ in the eyes of many Canadians. Child care policies, while needed, are viewed as less adequate for children whose parents work than mother-care, although there is no other obvious alternative (Canadian Interview, 2009).

Philosophical objections to parenting policy often result in targeted reactive policies focused on high-risk groups of parents, rather than broad universal prevention programs. While universal parenting policies may be seen as an encroachment on parents’ rights, targeted interventions to help parents and children who face greater challenges are viewed as a more appropriate government role. These challenges include financial struggles, teenage pregnancies, disabilities affecting both children and parents and issues affecting ethnic minority and migrant families. Ireland cited that the majority of parenting policies were interventions that only targeted parents after there was a problem instead of intervening earlier when the problem could be avoided (Ireland Interview, 2008).

Even when there is no philosophical resistance, implementing a vast array of targeted policies can create an obstacle to implementing more universal policies because of limited resources. In the UK, and to a lesser extent Australia, it is widely accepted that help is more effective earlier rather than later for at-risk families. But the difficulty comes when crisis services take up a significant part of limited budgets, leaving little for investment in preventive services (UK Interview, 2008). A welfare, rather than a rights-based, approach to services can dominate, creating a barrier to the development of parenting policy. A further obstacle arises when there are too many separate targeted programs, resulting in vulnerable families and communities being subject to a range of different interventions, some of which are

overlapping or even contradictory. NGOs are also put in the position of having to apply to multiple funding sources with different requirements and reporting mechanisms to finance their programs. In recognition of this issue several countries, including the UK and Australia, have created mechanisms at the local and central government level to ‘join up’ family support programs, and also to vastly reduce the number of hypothecated funding streams.

Separate from the philosophy of a country, the government structure and typical legislative process can help or hinder the development of a parenting policy. Countries that have a more centralist government structure appear to have an easier route to enacting parenting policy. For example, in the UK, the *Every Child Matters* legislation was developed, supported and expanded on the national level. Implementation occurred on the local level, but the overarching policy was country-wide. Countries like Canada, Australia and the United States which have a federal structure give states and provinces great flexibility in how they choose to implement national policies. Furthermore, states and provinces often develop and implement policies and programs on their own to meet the needs and requests of their particular population. This creates a dynamic where there is great resistance to broad universal federal policies meant to target the entire population.

A further conceptual challenge to parenting policy is the relationship between parenting, families and children’s policies. In most countries, parenting policies are spread across children’s policy, family policy and policies aimed at gender equality. Children’s policy is aimed at improving the wellbeing of children, enhancing their rights as citizens or controlling their behaviour while family policy is aimed at increasing fertility, improving labour market participation and (in the USA) strengthening marriage. In many countries parents are not seen as a separate group with their own needs and policy structures. It is not clear whether there could or even should be a separate ‘parents’ commissioner’ like the children’s commissioners in most states, whether children’s commissioners should widen their priorities to include parenting or whether a completely different structure would be appropriate. The relationship between parenting, family and children’s policy is still evolving in each country and it is not clear that a separate high level parenting policy structure will be viable in the long term in every country.

Across countries, a common barrier to developing and implementing parenting policy is a lack of financial resources and uncertainty on the best use of available resources. Parenting policy is sometimes perceived to be a ‘luxury’ rather than a necessity and therefore the philosophical and political will to implement parenting policies tends to be reduced during periods of economic adversity. Even in a strong economic climate, there is uncertainty concerning whether money spent on parenting policies could be better spent on tangible goods for needy parents. Several countries went further to say that the difficulty in efficiently evaluating parenting policy programs leaves room for criticism of their effectiveness and of how well they are actually meeting the needs of parents.

The UK provides the best example of a country that has overcome these barriers to implement a parenting policy. Before *Every Child Matters*, efforts that sought to comprehensively address parenting issues were met with a combination of the obstacles just described. Philosophical resistance, a focus on targeted policies and a desire to make the best use of available resources allowed for the implementation of only small targeted pilot programs. It was the death of a child from neglect, a child who had repeatedly come into

contact with social services that had failed to intervene, which provoked public outrage and drew attention to the need for significant policy change. Soon after this tragedy, a policy to combine services for families and address issues facing all parents was signed into law. It met with little opposition. While the policy addressed all parents, the focus was on preventing extreme cases and, in this way, the policy was perceived as both targeted and universal. The UK provides an example of how a singular event can grab the attention of the public and allow for policy change despite ever-present barriers.

## 6 Conclusion

This literature review and data collection on parenting policies has provided an overview of why parenting is important for children and the reasons why governments are becoming increasingly involved in developing policies around parenting. In delineating parenting policy from the broader umbrella of family policy, the former was defined as policies and programs which seek to support parents in their role of providing supportive, consistent, quality parenting to their children. Our review determined that little has been written on parenting policy and there have been few comparative studies, although there is now a reasonable body of comparative literature on broader family policies. Our data collection and analysis determined substantial variability in philosophical and policy systems of parenting policy, from coherent to scattered, across our countries of study.

Our results suggest that in most countries studied, governments generally have not sought to define the specifics of how parents should parent their children. It is possible that this is because governments see parenting and what happens within families as private and outside their purview. Or it could be that governments see parents, and particularly mothers, as somehow innately or automatically qualified to provide appropriate and supportive environments for their children, with the exception of relatively uncommon situations of child abuse and neglect. A third possibility is that governments may not view the quality of family processes or parenting as important. Meeting children's basic needs for food, shelter and care and providing for their safety and education (the later for societal economic ends) may be goals that governments see as essential. How parents distribute economic and social resources and the quality of their interactions with their children may be seen as relatively unimportant beyond extreme cases. Finally, it may be that, given limited resources and numerous competing demands, governments have chosen to target policies and programs to populations in need, such as families at risk of abuse and neglect, adolescent mothers and poor parents, but with the primary focus on outcomes for children rather than the wellbeing of the parents themselves.

Our analysis also indicated that parenting policy is a policy arena that may be in a period of notable expansion and growth. Results from our country studies indicate that some governments (e.g. the UK and Ireland) are creating holistic philosophies or frameworks defining positive parenting or delineating characteristics of parenting which are optimal for child development. To date only the UK has taken the next step of creating a system of government, legislative and programmatic resources to enact this philosophy in a consistent and universal manner across the country. Yet parenting policy remains vulnerable and in both the UK and Ireland the aftermath of the global financial crisis has been a retrenchment of state interventions and support. Parenting policy has been pared back along with a range of other family support and early intervention programs.

In other countries, the philosophy is less clear or universal, the system is more piecemeal, or the targets are narrower. However, there is reason to believe this is changing. Essentially all countries have government agencies that are primarily responsible for parenting and child issues, encapsulated within a broader agenda of child and family policies. Although responsibility for family policies is often spread across numerous government agencies, many countries have recently begun appointing Commissioners or other government or non government bodies as overseers of children's rights and resources. There appears to be

acknowledgement that greater coordination and a more cohesive framework to approach parenting would benefit policy making and the provision of services.

All governments appear to have some policies and programs targeted at vulnerable groups of parents, particularly disadvantaged parents and teen parents. However, the limited literature in this area confirms that in most countries these policies and programs tend to be fragmented and short-term, and there is little evidence of a strategic approach by governments to the issue. In some cases, however, these targeted services are supplemented by less intensive universal services such as parenting helplines, websites and other information portals.

Beyond this scattered approach, there appears to be indication of growth in some countries towards more general or universal principles and goals. Many countries, for example, are beginning to create policies or programs to support the importance of fathers in childrearing. Positive parenting – that is, the use of rewards and praise as opposed to corporal punishment – is encouraged in some manner by many governments, even when they have not taken specific steps to ‘ban smacking’. Governments also encourage parents to take a much more active role in their children’s education.

On the other hand, parenting and family policy more generally are viewed with scepticism by many policy makers in the countries under study, and parenting is still seen as a ‘soft’ area of public policy subject to cutbacks and changes in difficult economic times, and also subject to sudden changes of policy direction resulting from new governments or media attention. This problem is exacerbated by the still embryonic state of the research evidence base in this area. Most of the robust evidence derives from a small number of interventions, and there is very little evidence for the more strategic multi-level approaches which are now considered best practice.

Several countries identified with this tension between focusing on the immediate financial needs of parents, or on their skills as parents. Financial policies, often time-efficient and tangible, were seen as in direct competition to parenting policies that do not have fast, or guaranteed, results.

Overall, however, only the UK has created a coherent set of principles and goals supporting the importance of parenting and the role of the government and the community in promoting positive parenting across all families. Other countries have far to go to emulate such a coordinated and universal system.

There is still a great deal to be learned about effective policy making in the parenting area. Some of the innovations implemented in the UK such as local parent’s commissioners and universal access to parent training have not been evaluated. Furthermore there are still a number of tensions regarding the actual content of parenting programs, and little is known about the relative effectiveness of different approaches, and about the interaction of different types of policies – cash transfers, family policies and service interventions – and the optimal combination of these approaches.

With regard to structural matters it is clear that a ‘joined up’ approach is essential so that policies towards parents provide, as far as possible, a consistent message and coordinated programs and supports. Yet exactly how this policy should be structurally organised is still a matter of debate. It is not clear that structures which work well in one national context would

easily translate into other contexts. This is especially the case where there are different tiers of government. In addition, policy is easier to coordinate in the UK than Australia, for example. The UK has a department of Children, Families and Schools which incorporates all children and families' policies other than health and benefits, whereas in Australia these policies are spread amongst at least three federal government departments. Thus it is important that each country should develop policies and structures which are coherent with their particular circumstances. The literature and the interviews conducted for this research clearly point towards the value of a comprehensive policy framework for parenting, both because this would provide a more coherent message to the key stakeholders; parents, employers and policy makers themselves, and because it would simplify the policy making process if there were clear governmental structures related to developing parenting policy. Nevertheless it is still not clear how comprehensive such a policy should become. In many of the countries under study there is still a huge reluctance for the state to be seen to become more involved in family life than is necessary. Thus there does not appear to be support for ever-increasing state intervention in private family matters.

However there is not necessarily a contradiction between a coherent family policy and maintaining privacy for families. A coherent family or parenting policy does not necessarily imply a policy that is more interventionist. Rather it implies that there is greater clarity and transparency for families (and for policy makers) about what are the expectations of parents, and conversely what are the duties of the state towards parents. This may or may not take the form of an explicit compact or statement, but it should be explicit from government communications with parents what is being offered and expected.

Furthermore, despite the reluctance of governments to become involved in family life, policy appears to be shifting in this direction by default. For example attempts to address new risks to children such as obesity and mental ill health almost inevitably require governments to take actions which involve, at the minimum, advice and information to parents on how to better parent their children, and often require more direct interventions from government agencies or at least government supported NGOs.

Thus the overall direction of policy appears to be moving towards more policy involvement in parenting and family life, and this report provides some insights from different countries as to how this policy can be better coordinated and framed in order to maximise effectiveness whilst minimising the tensions between the various strands of family policy.

## Appendix 1: Summary of recent comparative reviews

Author(s)	Year	Countries	Policies/Issues	Aims/Conclusions
Kamerman and Kahn	1997	Great Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States.	Family policy including laws, regulations, benefits and programs.	The study explores the historical evolution of family policy in the context of political developments. Attention is given to the political model, interests, advocacy or pressure-group actions that have shaped family policies to highlight the similarities and differences between each country.
Kaufman et al.	1997	Denmark, France, Federal Republic of Germany, German Democratic Republic, Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland.	Family laws, divorce, social policies for lone parents, gender and policies, father involvement, and which models of the family are encouraged, or discouraged.	The book studies the interaction of political, economic, and demographic factors in the changes to the family unit, and the policy responses to them. Differences between nations are explained as reactions of rational actors to various values and institutional structures.
Gauthier	1998	Most OECD and Western countries including Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand and the United States.	Family policies	The book analyses changes in family policies by looking at the social and demographic changes undergone by families, as well as the political ideologies that influenced these policies. It identifies some commonalities in the development of family policy across countries, but underlines more distinct models.
O'Hara	1998	Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States	Cash transfers (e.g. family allowances and tax relief); services for families (e.g. child care and home visiting programs), legislation (e.g. marriage and divorce laws), labour market measures (e.g. maternity benefits and parental leave); and public services (e.g. health and education)	The study describes how eight countries developed their policies for families and children, focusing on the values and ideas that led to the development of divergent strategies.
Forssen	1999	OECD countries	Quality of family policy systems	The aim of this study is to compare family policy legislation and family policy outcomes. The quality of family policy systems is measured by comparing child poverty rates, social assistance dependency, infant



Author(s)	Year	Countries	Policies/Issues	Aims/Conclusions
				mortality, birth rates and other indicators of well-being.
Drago et al.	2001	United States and Australia	Family allowances, Child Benefit, Child Care, Tax Rebates.	This paper offers a historical perspective on work/family issues, and investigates the policy gap in both countries. Similarities can be found in the rise of family diversity, delayed/denied childbearing, and gender inequality. Yet, Australia has more family-responsive policies, more part-time opportunity for mothers, greater employees' coverage. The US has a more egalitarian division of housework, and gives prevalence to corporate-sponsored family policies.
United Nations	2001	Ireland, Malaysia, Mauritius, New Zealand, Norway, Panama, South Africa, Trinidad and Tobago	Family policy including childcare, counselling, social services, income maintenance.	The report describes the national institutions responsible for developing and/or implementing family policies and programs, and details the priorities and key elements of their national family program. The study finds that while family policy is defined in various ways, its components entail laws, regulations, benefits and programs that are designed to achieve specific objectives for the family as a whole, or for its individual members.
Daly and Clavero	2002	Ireland in comparison to other European countries.	Cash payments for families with children, Support of lone parent families, Family-related taxation, Reconciling work and family life, childcare, Family support services.	The purpose is both to identify the most significant changes which have been made in Europe and to compare developments in Ireland with those in a selected number of other countries through an historical perspective. It also examines some of the impacts associated with family policy (i.e. effects of policy on family poverty, the redistribution of income, fertility rates and the employment participation of mothers).
Henricson	2009	All European Countries (review of other studies)	Family Policy	In depth review of nine comparative studies of family policy and discussion of a further twenty. Focused on Europe but several of the individual studies include countries

Author(s)	Year	Countries	Policies/Issues	Aims/Conclusions
				outside Europe.
Hetherington et al.	2002	England, Scotland, Ireland, Australia, Belgium, France, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Italy, Greece	Policies and programs for parents with mental health problems. Focused on the interface between adults mental health and children's services and policies	The study highlighted the differences between English speaking and Continental European countries. English speaking countries tended to be more risk averse and focused on child protection whereas Continental countries were more holistic in their practice and policies.
Kaufmann et al.	2002	Denmark, France, Federal Republic of Germany, German Democratic Republic, Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland.	Family laws, divorce, social policies for lone parents, gender and policies, father involvement, and which models of the family are encouraged, or discouraged.	This book develops the issues raised in the first collaborative volume (see Kaufmann et al. 1997).
Vail	2002	Canada, United States, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Australia, Japan	Values behind family policy; Paid maternal/parental leave; family allowances, childcare; tax policy, policy outcomes.	The report analyses family values in six countries. It also studies society's different level of support for collective action over individual responsibility in influencing government support to families. It finally devises four models to categorize the values and approaches taken by industrialized countries.
Henneck	2003	United States, Japan, Germany, Italy, France, Scandinavia and France	Support for working mothers, universal benefits and reduction of child poverty.	This paper looks at how industrial nations changed or failed to change their social policies in response to the change in the traditional family unit. It investigates how family policy effectively influences low child poverty rates and changes attitudes in the housework about childbearing.
OECD - Babies and Bosses series	2003-2007	OECD countries	Childcare provisions, paid parental leaves, tax benefits, welfare benefits, family-friendly work environment	The series makes recommendations to the OECD governments on how to reconcile work and family life, with the central concern of increasing women's labour force participation without further falls in the birth rate. It encourages a larger number of affordable childcare places, increase in the amount of paid leave, and recommends cuts in welfare benefits for lone mothers.

Author(s)	Year	Countries	Policies/Issues	Aims/Conclusions
Bradshaw and Hatland	2006	European Union	The impact of family policy on mothers' employment.	Compares across countries to understand the origins and nature of welfare states and to observe achievements and outcomes.
Baker	2007	New Zealand and Canada	Child care, Child benefits, family tax benefits.	Both countries are below the OECD average on many social policy indicators. In both countries, recent improvements in benefits continue to be counteracted by rising living costs, relatively low wages, more part-time jobs and less job security.
Guo and Gilbert	2007	OECD countries.	Family policies from 1980 to 2001.	The study notes that there is a growing convergence among policy reforms in welfare regimes toward emphasis on privatisation, targeting of benefits, promotion of work and individual responsibility.
Olsen	2007	Canada, United States, Sweden.	Income Security, Family Policy, Health Care.	Concludes that the welfare states in the three nations remain distinct, while acknowledging some broadly similar trends and new developments.
Clearinghouse on International Developments in Child and Youth and Family Policies	2008	23 Industrialised countries.	Parental leave, early childhood education and care, school aged children, youth, lone parents, work and family life, family allowances, tax benefits, child support, income transfers, housing.	This organisation provides cross-national, comparative information about the policies, programs, benefits and services available in the advanced industrialized countries to address child, youth, and family needs.

## **Appendix 2: Data collection instrument**

- Does your national government have a definition of parenting and/or family policy and if so what is it?
- How is parenting policy articulated and/or formalised by your government?
  - What are the structures at the national government level that are explicitly aimed at supporting parenting or families?
  - Are these structures housed together, or spread over numerous government departments or units?
  - Does the country have particular structures for coordinating parenting/family policy, either within government (e.g. a unit, policy branch, etc) or outside of government (a commissioner, ombudsman, etc)?
- Are different, broader children's and/or family policy agenda drawn together to express a cohesive approach to parenting? If so, how?
- What mechanisms and institutions underpin the development and implementation of parenting policy? For example, how is parenting policy covered by legislation?
  - Does it have dedicated legislation or is it underpinned by more diffuse legislation/convention? For example, the Convention on the Rights of the Child or another Human Rights framework.
- Are there significant quasi-government or non government bodies who are devoted to advancing parenting or family life (e.g. parenting/family institutes, family commissioner/ombudsman, or similar)?

### ***Key elements of a parenting policy***

- What is the underpinning philosophy or rationale for the significant policy/policies or programs?
- Are there attempts to bring together such policy areas as family support, family tax credits, child support, work/family balance, paternity/maternity leave under a unifying banner?
- Are there explicit policies or significant national programs aimed at supporting or advancing:
  - Fathers and fatherhood
  - Poor parents
  - Parents with disabilities
  - Ethnic minority or migrant parents

- Teenage parents
- If so, what are these policies and programs? Can you please send us documentation on them?
- What are the major debates around parenting or family policy in your country at present?

### ***Parenting Programs***

- Has your national government implemented parenting programs in support of its policies? If so, what are they?
- Are they universal (i.e. available or potentially available to all parents) or are they targeted at specific groups of parents?
  - If so which groups?
- Were these programs developed in your country or were they adapted from programs in other countries?
- What sectors of the community are parties to the policies or programs?
- Do the policies or programs incorporate reporting and evaluation mechanisms?
- What are the difficulties in the development and implementation of a parenting policy or program?

### ***Overall***

- Do you believe that these policies/programs adequately support parenting?
- Are there areas of parenting that you believe are not adequately supported by current policies/programs? If so, what are these areas and how could they be better supported?
- In your view are parenting/family policies coherent or are there significant contradictions/tensions in current policies?
- How do you think the policies or programs in your country compare to those in other countries(if known)?

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