**Governing ‘New Social Risks’:**

**The Case of Recent Child Policies in European Welfare States**

# Study Design and Methodology

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## Research Questions and Definitions

The study is guided by four main questions:

1. What are the aims of parenting support and what is the underlying view of the role of parents?
2. What services are being offered on the ground?
3. What are the factors driving the developments?
4. What are the implications for services, policies, providers and parents and families?

In order to answer these questions, empirical research was conducted focusing on the nature of parenting support in practice and how those involved conceptualise, deliver and plan it. The study paid particular attention to the range of services that fall under the umbrella of ‘parenting support’, the perceived objectives and recipients, and the ways in which actors at local and national levels interpret, adapt and critically regard provision.

These lines of enquiry were designed to flesh out the substance of parenting support as a field of policy and identify its influence on the way in which parents, families and the state are depicted and positioned vis-a-vis each other, specifically in relation to respective responsibilities for child-related outcomes. A key aim was to examine the theory and practice of parenting support at local and national levels in order to assess the extent of variation within England and compare England to the other three countries which are partners in the study (France, Germany and the Netherlands)..

### Definition of Parenting Support

There are a range of existing definitions of the field of parenting support. Sometimes these focus on provisions oriented to improving outcomes for children; sometimes they are trained on outcomes for parents; and sometimes they target both (see Moran et al 2004). A useful definition is that used by Barlow et al (2007: i) for their evaluation of Sure Start in England:

*‘services which aimed to enable parents to enhance their parenting. These included formal and informal interventions to increase parenting skills, improve parent/child relationships, parenting insight, attitudes and behaviours, confidence in parenting and so on.’*

This definition encompasses a mass of measures and programmes. Given that the field shades easily into other areas, it seems especially important to be even more precise, which means setting out some minimal conditions around the definition of what is to qualify as parenting support. We suggest the following three:

* parents are the first-line target and the focus is on how they approach and execute their role as parents especially in regard to how they relate to and interact with their children;
* parenting support is organised in the form of services (rather than through cash support, tax allowances or leaves for example);
* the focus is on the parent’s resources (defined broadly to include information, knowledge, skills, personal and social resources, material resources) and child-rearing competencies with the intent – through support, information, education and/or training - of increasing parents’ resources and competence.

The phenomenon involved, then, can be defined as: organised services/provisions oriented to supporting parents in their role as parents by giving them access to a range of resources that serve to increase their competence in child-rearing. Using this definition there are certain provisions or fields that would not qualify as parenting support. Child care is one such field because while, it affects the arrangement of parenting, its primary objective is not around the execution of parenting. In the same way, child protection and welfare is a somewhat different domain from parenting support in that it has as its main focus the well-being of the child. The latter, of course, can never be separated from the parent-child relationship and it is true that child-welfare measures are likely to target the parents’ resources as well. But parents are not their usual starting point. The underlying point to emphasise here is that, while parenting encompasses child welfare and other objectives, what is at stake is something slightly different: the raising up of the figure and practices of the parent as a focus of intervention for the purposes of how they carry out their parenting activities. Doubtless there are risks in trying to demarcate the fine line between services for parents, children and families but it is important for heuristic purposes to follow a clear line of analysis as otherwise one risks sweeping together measures that are quite different.

## Methodology

Given the study’s purpose and leading interests, a qualitative methodology was mainly followed. However, overall, the study employed a mixed methods approach incorporating area-based case studies, key informant interviews and documentary analysis (of relevant policy documents as well as academic literature).

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### Area-based Case Studies

One of the main aims of the study was to put together a picture of parenting-support provision at a local level. Given the rather small scale of the study, it was decided to adopt a case study approach whereby areas or regions would be studied in detail for both their provision and the views and experiences of providers. The areas were selected on the basis of three criteria: low-income, breadth of parenting support service provision, and type of administrative unit. The low income criterion was used since it was felt that provision would be most likely to be concentrated on such areas. The breadth of the service offer was important to capture the diversity of parenting support. The third criterion – type of administrative unit – enables an investigation by different local administrative units. Two specific areas were selected. One is a low-income borough of London, and the other a low income area within a County Council.

Area A is one of the largest of London’s 32 borough councils where, aside from small pockets of high-income groups, family socio-economic status is low[[1]](#footnote-1). It is also one of London’s most ethnically heterogeneous boroughs with residents from over 170 different countries of origin. In 2010, for example, 70% of births were to mothers born outside of the UK, principally from Poland, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. The borough is also home to a long-established British Asian community comprising Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus from various parts of South Asia. Aside from a multiplicity of linguistic and cultural traditions, Area A is diverse with respect to duration of residence, social integration (as indicated by service use) and current physical and social mobility.

Area B is an area of approximately five square miles situated on the outskirts of a high-income city in the south of England. It is located in one of the largest counties in England and governed by the County Council. Formerly a council estate and retaining a considerable stock of social housing, this neighbourhood is considered one of the poorest and most socially deprived in the county.[[2]](#footnote-2) Consequently, it has attracted both policy attention and investment on the part of the local government, businesses and the voluntary sector. Levels of in- and out-migration are low, and providers working in the area consider it a strong and somewhat inward-looking community where collective memory and traditions are retained. While most residents are white and of British origin, the numbers of Eastern European, Asian and African residents are growing in this and neighbouring areas.

The areas are similar in some respects. For example, each local government has responsibility for an equivalent number of families that meet the criteria for inclusion in the Troubled Families programme[[3]](#footnote-3) (850 in area A and 820 in area B). But there are significant differences also. Each local government has a particular history of decision-making and organisational development to support provision to parents and the services available to parents are not the same (although they overlap).

One limitation to the study posed by the selection of these two areas is the inability to investigate the forms and structures of parenting support offered in other parts of England, including rural areas. There are other limitations also, not least the inability to generalise to overall provision of parenting support in the country as a whole. That said, the decision to examine two case studies provides rich evidence and enables a detailed analysis of provision as well as a basis for comparison.

### Interviews

Key informant interviews were selected as the research method for their ability to provide insights into the dynamic nature of policy development, application and interpretation, and how these processes map against broader processes of social change. Interviews, in the form of structured conversations, were conducted with three groups of respondents: expert policy commentators and observers, service providers, and local and national decision-makers. Each was seen to possess different types of knowledge and experience in regard to parenting support. The aim was to triangulate the information obtained from each so as to get a rounded understanding of how the purposes and functions of parent-focused interventions are viewed. People were approached by letter/e-mail and a follow up by 'phone if necessary.

Experts were defined as those who have an engagement in the field in either a research or advisory/planning capacity. Some 14 such experts were interviewed between April and December 2013 They comprise eight academics, three senior members of advocacy organisations and three heads of national (provider) organisations The academics had a background either in psychology, social work, social policy or education. They were considered as ‘experts’ not just because of their academic background but because they had experience in either advising national government, establishing structures to guide the provision of parenting support at national level, and/or evaluating parenting support initiatives, including parenting programmes. They were chosen on the basis of a list compiled by the research team of such experts nationally. All those approached – except one – agreed to be interviewed.

The second group interviewed were providers. The central criterion for selection here was current engagement in the delivery of parenting support in either of the two case study areas. A sample list was drawn up to include those who engage directly with parents and those who manage services in the two areas. The respondents from each area were selected to match in role and seniority. All agreed to be interviewed, except two. In all, some 16 interviews were conducted with providers, eight in each of the two areas chosen for study during the latter half of 2013. Within the total group, 10 are local government employees, and six work for voluntary organisations. In terms of training, 12 have a professional background in social work, psychology, teaching or health, and four are volunteers and have minimal training.

Decision-makers at national and local government level were the third group of respondents. The purpose here was to gain insight into the policy and planning of parenting support and identify the changing motivations for investment in the field as well as trends in the form and nature of provision. The sample was chosen to represent both decision makers in the two study areas as well as those at national level. A list was also drawn up of relevant interviewees. It was much more difficult to secure these interviews as compared with the other two groups. Of the 21 approached, 11 people declined or did not respond. Most of these are senior political figures or civil servants with previous or current national responsibilities for children and families in the departments of education and local government. Of the 10 interviews conducted in the first half of 2014, four were with senior national figures, namely civil servants and service leaders from the health sector and a Member of Parliament from the political opposition. Their willingness to participate is consistent with the relatively new and under-explored promises attached to parenting support in the health sector, as compared to its history of rapid expansion within the social and educational sectors under the previous government. The remaining six interviewees were civil servants in the local government of each case study area responsible for delineating and financing the offer to resident parents. All currently work in a decision-making capacity in social services, education and health sectors, or have roles designed to straddle these.

Using a core set of questions agreed across the inter-country teams, an interview guide was developed for each set of respondents. In all, 39 interviews[[4]](#footnote-4) were conducted with 40 respondents (14 experts, 16 providers and 10 decision-makers) between April 2013 and June 2014.

The face-to-face interviews were carried out with respondents either in their place of work or at the Department of Social Policy and Intervention at the University of Oxford. The choice of location was based on respondent preference, comfort and convenience. Interviews lasted approximately one hour. A digital voice recorder was used to record the conversation with the signed permission of the respondent. Field notes were written within a short period of each interview. The interview recordings were downloaded onto a password-protected secure server. All interviews were anonymised and assigned a code number. No identifying information (e.g., names and addresses) was stored with the interview files, and identity records, such as signed consent forms, were kept separately from other interview material. Verbatim transcriptions were made (by a professional agency) and checked by the interviewers prior to and after transcription.

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### Documentary evidence

The analysis focused on a range of service- and policy-oriented literature produced by decision makers and organisations providing services to parents and families in the case study areas as well as nationally. The purpose was both to analyse provision and contextualise the findings. At the level of service provision, comparing the content of brochures and timetables for previous and current services provided evidence of current trends in provision as well as stated future directions.

Interviewees were rarely well-versed in the amounts being spent on various forms of parenting support. Thus, two requests for information on trends in the financing of parenting support were made to government through the Freedom of Information facility. One yielded information on how local government allocates budgets to a spectrum of services offering parenting support, conditions on their expenditure, and on the content of routine data collection on parents, children and families conducted by these services. The second provided data on national spending to date on the CANParenting trial, money allocated for its third year, and the government’s intention for the final phase of the trial.

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### Data Analysis

The interview narratives were analysed using a ‘thematic framework’ approach (Ritchie et al., 2003). Data management/analysis was assisted by the use of Excel spread sheets and the Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software NVivo 10. All transcripts and field notes were searched both manually and by examining the nodes emerging through NVivo. The analysis was therefore ‘grounded’ in nature. The process of analysis comprised three main stages:

Step 1: All interview material was coded in NVivo 10 using a loose frame of substantive themes as a starting point and then sub-dividing these codes and adding new ones, where required, to capture the information accurately. These themes are:

1. The understandings of parenting support and the underlying parenting concept;
2. The trajectory of the development of parenting support;
3. Use of evidence-based philosophy or practice in guiding policy or provision;
4. The menu of parenting support services on offer and the significance of parenting programmes within this;
5. The characteristics of service provision:
   1. extent to which there is an emphasis on parenting skills, parent-child attachment or other rationales
   2. understandings and integration (or not) of diversity (including gender, class, ethnicity, sensitivity to minority cultures etc) into provision
   3. how parents are recruited (for parenting support as a whole, and for specific flagship parenting programmes)
   4. the bodies of knowledge used by service providers
   5. the evidence gathered (by the professional/organisation) whereby progress is evaluated and the criteria of ‘success’ applied
6. The interconnections between different services;
7. Sources of knowledge, evidence and learning;
8. Perspectives on broader social change and the future development of the domain of parenting support.

Step 2: Whole transcripts of interview narratives were examined to identify explicit use of the idea and practice of parenting support, the understanding of its driving forces and respondents’ orientations, both functional and philosophical, towards its practice. Specific attention was paid to the language used by respondents to describe and justify parenting support, and to areas of contradiction, debate or tension. Key points from each interview narrative were manually clustered and recorded in layers on a series of mind-maps corresponding to the core research questions:

* Philosophical and ethical roots of parenting support;
* Definitions of the aims and functions of parenting support;
* Drivers of parenting support;
* Depictions of the role of parents, children and the state;
* Continuity and change in thinking and practice.

This exercise revealed both consistencies and variations within and between groups of respondents, as well as allowing connections to be made between their assessments of the field, including its evolution, and the philosophical positions they articulated.

Step 3: Emergent findings from the second step were further explored and substantiated by applying the framework matrix technique to the coding structure produced in NVivo during the first step. This technique allows the researcher to select several related nodes (for example, on understandings of evidence and use of knowledge) and examine material on these topics from a particular group of respondents. A grid is generated in which each cell represents the intersection of a case and thematic node, and the researcher can either examine all material coded therein, or generate an interpretive summary with digital links to the original for quotation purposes. A series of framework matrices were developed to examine variation within and between the perspectives of providers from the two case study areas, and between those of providers, experts and decision-makers.

**References**

Barlow, J. et al. (2007) *Family and Parenting Support in Sure Start Local Programmes*, July 2007, NESS Research Report 23; DfES; HMSO.

Moran, P., Ghate, D., & van der Merwe, A. (2004). *What Works in Parenting Support? A Review of the International Evidence.* London: HMSO.

Ritchie, J. and Lewis, J. (2003) *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*, Second Edition. London: Sage and National Centre for Social Research.

1. In area A 21.3% of children are eligible for free school meals as compared to a national average of 16.3% (Department for Education 2014). Eligibility criteria include parental receipt of income support, job seekers allowance, assistance from the National Asylum Support Service and an income of less than £16,190. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The 2011 census shows unemployment rates of almost 6% in Area B as compared to under 2% for the majority of the County. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. National eligibility for the Troubled Families programme is based on the co-presence of children’s exclusion from school, youth offending and adult receipt of benefits. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For reasons of availability, one interview was conducted with two senior decision-makers simultaneously. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)