

Towards the development of Family Centres in Flanders

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The Government of Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, is working on a new legislative Act concerning the organisation of preventive family support. In this Act, the international model of family centres is put forward and adapted to the specificity of the Flemish context.

In this contribution, we present the Flemish approach of the concept 'Family Centre' (*Huis van het Kind*). What is it? What are its objectives? In the second part of the text, we examine building blocks that are important in the realisation of Flemish Family Centres.

Flemish Family Centres

Interprofessional collaboration

In Flanders and Brussels, a wide range of actors is deployed in the field of preventive family support, which is a great strength. However, it is found that (some) services lack accessibility due to a variety of reasons (e.g., no uniform and recognisable communication on the different services; too little integration of services; limited referring due to the fact that also for professionals some services are little- or unknown); this makes the support less “visible” for families and it makes it more difficult for them to find the support they need. Moreover, every local actor reaches only part of the (future) families with children and youngsters; it is not always clear if all services together are attuned to the local needs of all families and if gaps and overlaps in the services are restricted as much as possible. At last, expertise and support is spread out over different services; especially in more complex or challenging family situations this makes it more difficult to provide the support that is tailored to the needs of the family.

To further optimise family support services, the Government of Flanders highlights the importance of more and structural interprofessional collaboration in the field. Therefore, the Government of Flanders puts forward the Family Centres in the new Act concerning the organisation of preventive family support, which is in full development. Through the Family Centres, an instrument is provided to the local actors in which interprofessional collaboration is maximally stimulated. With this instrument, the Government wants to invite and challenge local actors to work together towards the provision of family support services in an integrated and accessible way and attuned to the local needs. As such, Family Centres in Flanders and Brussels are (will become) locally embedded partnerships between different actors and organisations that support (future) families with children and youngsters (aged 0 to 18 years).

Depending on factors such as demographic characteristics and the amount of services, organisations and partnerships that are already present at the local level, the local partners have to explore if it is preferable to construct their partnership at the level of a municipality, or rather at inter- or intra-municipal level. Furthermore, depending on the local situation, they can explore if this partnership can take shape by offering a set of services for families at one place (i.e., all services under the same roof) or at several places and/ or combined with outreaching services.

Preventive Family Support

Preventive family support aims at promoting the well-being of all (future) parents and families with children and youngsters by supporting them in the field of welfare and health, in order to realise maximum health and welfare gains for every child.

Preventive family support plays a crucial role. On the one hand because welfare and health are connected in this kind of support, just like they are connected in the daily life of the families. On the other hand because of its unique position in the course of life, ranging from the prenatal period and childhood to adolescence.

In the legislative Act, the Government of Flanders describes which kind of family support services should minimally be offered in a Family Centre. Minimally, it should organise preventive health care, parenting support, and activities that facilitate encounters and social cohesion.

- Preventive health care is the part of health care which takes up preventive tasks concerning the health of pregnant women, children and their family. Activities include, among other things, vaccination, the early detection of risks and health problems, health promotion, ...
- Parenting support consists of the support of persons responsible for the upbringing of children and youngsters. In Flanders, effort is done to offer parenting support in an accessible, empowering and non-stigmatizing way, based on the idea that it is normal to have questions about the upbringing of children. Activities include, among other things, the provision of information on parenting (individual or group-based), pedagogical advice, the stimulation of encounters between parents and children, practical support,...
- Through activities that facilitate encounters and social cohesion, the Flemish policy responds to the added value of social support as protective factor in parenting and family functioning on the one hand. On the other hand, it intends to create cohesion between families across socio-economic and ethnic-cultural boundaries, and to contribute to the fight against social exclusion mechanisms (see also the principles of “bonding” and “bridging”, Putnam, 2007).

In order to realise the abovementioned three pillars, a Family Centre may cover a variety of services. It always accommodate an infant welfare centre where preventive health care, follow-up of the development of the child and parenting and psychosocial support is offered by a nurse, doctor and volunteer worker during minimally 10 contact moments during the first three years of life. These infant welfare centres have a high accessibility, as approximately 96% of all families are reached minimally once (numbers from the annual report 2011 of Child & Family) and as they are nicely spread over Flanders and Brussels. Therefore, they consist of an important service to be offered in the Family Centres. Next to this infant welfare centre, a Family Centre has to provide minimally two other services. It may include services such as a (toy) library and a parenting shop (for more information on parenting shops, see Travers & Strynckx, 2012). It may also be the place where pre- and postnatal gym takes place, where young parents go for breastfeeding advice and parenting support, where lectures and workshops are organised, a place to play and to meet other people, ...

In sum, when it comes to the subject of family support services offered in a Family Centre in Flanders and Brussels, it is a necessary condition that the three pillars (namely, preventive health care, parenting support, activities to facilitate encounters and social cohesion) are present and it is a sufficient condition that – next to the infant welfare centre – two other services are frequently provided.

Building blocks for Family Centres in Flanders

It is clear that the concept of Family Centres is not new. The implementation of Family Centres in Flanders and Brussels fits in with the international evolutions which aim at co-operation between actors that work for (future) families with children and which has shown to result in positive benefits for

children, their parents and family (e.g.; Kekkonen, Montonen, & Viitala, 2012; Warren-Adamson, 2001).

Furthermore, the concept is also not new in Flanders and Brussels. Several initiatives which come close to the idea of a Family Centre already exist in Flanders and Brussels. By means of the new Flemish Act, the Government of Flanders wants to provide a regulatory basis that further stimulates actors in the field of preventive family support to work towards the provision of integrated, easy accessible services that are tailored to the local needs in order to reach maximal health and welfare gains for each child.

The following building blocks are important elements in the realisation of Family Centres in Flanders.

- Cooperation

The Family Centre must not be started from scratch. First and foremost, it is a partnership between actors that support (future) families with children and youngsters. It is therefore mainly an organisational concept which does not necessarily refer to one physical place. Maximum accessibility of the family support services must obviously be aimed at, but can be realised in many different ways starting from a partnership. In order to fully respond to the local reality, the Flemish legislative Act does not specify in which way this must be realised.

Providing services through a partnership is not always self-evident, but offers a lot of opportunities. It results in an added value, on the one hand for the families, on the other hand for the actors, which obviously also indirectly leads to an added value for the families themselves.

Values for the families include, among other things:

- an increase in the accessibility of the provision, since the Family Centres make themselves known by using a universal name and logo ("Huis van het Kind");
- an increase in the usability, since this universal name reflects a set of services which is geared to the local needs and in which families may find different meanings, depending on their momentary needs;
- an increase in the acceptability of the provision, certainly for families living in a socially vulnerable situation, since the Family Centres are open to *all* (future) families with children and youngsters and therefore do not stigmatise (Tunstill, Blewett, & Meadows, 2009);
- an improvement of the geographical spread of family support services in Flanders, since the aim is to realise Family Centres throughout Flanders.

Values for the actors include, among other things:

- more opportunities to share and develop expertise, which results in an increase in the competences of the actors;
- identification of the gaps and overlaps in the family support services, which allows for reflection at the local level on a different/more efficient way of using resources, and for a better reporting to policymakers;
- easier access to complementary service provision and easier referral to partners in the network;
- as a result of the better referral, the exchange of competences, the increase in expertise, the elimination of overlaps in the provision, bringing together resources (e.g. announcement, infrastructure, reception, ...), every single actor involved may realise efficiency gains.

- Local embeddedness

With the Family Centres, the legislator wants to offer an instrument to local authorities and initiatives to develop preventive family support. Local differentiation is a priority in this context, as it is the only way to respond to local needs and local reality. For instance, the needs of families, the presence of actors and organisations, ..., in the countryside differ from those in the cities. The way the Act is developing, allows local differentiations and even encourage it by stating that the services should be attuned to the local needs and by stating that the Family Centres should get shape in alignment with the social policy of the local authorities.

- People-centred care

For (future) parents and families with children and youngsters, it is desirable that they can turn to the Family Centres for a *diverse* set of services. The integration of different services makes it possible to offer a continuum of support to families that can be maximally *tailored to their unique needs*. Family needs should be met on the basis of an *integrated* approach, taking into account the context a family lives in.

In the legislative Act *user participation* is put central, as this is an important condition in realising easily accessible services that are tailored to the local needs and as this is important in the realisation of people-centred care.

The Family Centres want to focus particularly on the reinforcement and the *empowerment* of (future) families with children and youngsters. This implies that the different services recognise and reinforce parents and persons responsible for the upbringing of children in their role and is therefore in line with the expertise of the parents themselves and activates them to look for solutions themselves. Within the preventive family support, prevention therefore has a double meaning: promoting positive strengths and reinforcing children and their families on the one hand and avoiding risks and preventing problems on the other hand.

- Progressive (or proportionate) universalism

The service provision in the Family Centres should be open to all families. Every child and parent should have the opportunity to meet other families, to receive support and enrichment. This also implies that they should not have any difficulty in reaching the Family Centres and that the services should be maximally accessible.

In the Family Centres, a continuum of services should be provided. Next to the universal service that is for example provided via the inclusion of the infant welfare centres in the Family Centres, a complementary provision of services, also ranging in intensity of support, should be developed as well, which is tailored to specific needs and/or specific families, including families living in more vulnerable situations.

With this starting point, the Family Centres also position themselves as players in the fight against child poverty. A diversified set of services, “underpinned by policies improving the well-being of all children, whilst giving careful consideration to children in particularly vulnerable situations” is presented as a good practice at the international level (European Commission, 2013, February 20, p.2). Furthermore, studies show that this approach has positive effects on the perceptions of vulnerable families, as parents perceive this way of service provision as less or not at all stigmatising (Tunstall et al, 2009).

In Flanders, various good practices are available which make the family support services accessible to families living in more vulnerable situations, such as cooperation with experts by experience, outreaching and working with volunteers and professionals from diverse socio-economic and ethnic-cultural background.

- Interaction between formal and informal support

Within the field of family support it is an important goal to provide the support as closely as possible to the living environment of the family. Not only formal support - provided by professionals - plays a role in that respect, but informal support occupies a prominent position as well. Therefore, informal support is an integrated part of what is regarded as support by families.

Within the domain of preventive family support, informal support is partly provided by volunteers who commit themselves with a view to social cohesion and the creation of unity within a society. For individual families, the commitment of volunteers often means an important source of parenting support (and in a broader sense: family support) because volunteers can often respond in a more flexible manner to the questions and needs of families (which includes providing practical support, lending a listening ear, playing with the children, ...).

However, informal support can be provided by professionals as well. For instance, the professional network may focus on the creation of conditions allowing families to develop and reinforce their social network (e.g. playing and meeting initiatives). It also implies that professional service provision must not ignore the important function which the social network may have.

Care and service initiatives in Flanders are organised by actors with different backgrounds, by authorities, non-governmental organisations, by liberal professions but also by civil society organisations and even by parents themselves. We want to see that same diversity reflected in the Family Centres, in order to make the most of the reinforcing interaction there may be between formal and informal support.

- Support and innovation

The Act attaches great importance to quality and competent professionals. In order to realise this, an expertise centre for parenting support is provided, which will be assigned to gather, enrich and disseminate knowledge and expertise with regard to upbringing and parenting support.

Next to this expertise centre for parenting support, in Flanders several other expertise centres are working on themes such as preventive health support, health promotion, innovation in the early years, ... Also these expertise centres are crucial to enrich the development of the Family Centres.

Conclusion and challenge

With the new Flemish Act concerning the organisation of preventive family support, the Government of Flanders wants to focus on a facilitating and stimulating regulation towards more and structural interprofessional collaboration with the aim to optimise the support for (future) families with children and youngsters. Next to the focus on cooperation, other important building blocks to (further) realise Family Centres in Flanders and Brussels are local embeddedness, people-centred care, progressive universalism, interaction between formal and informal support, and support to professionals and innovation. The challenge in Flanders and Brussels, in the period to come, is to realise the added value of this concept, both for families and for professionals. Therefore, the Act must provide a stimulating regulatory basis. Next to this, we invest in supporting and facilitating the sharing of knowledge, expertise and good practices that can be found in Flanders and Brussels. In this way, the Government of Flanders wants to succeed in the realisation of Family Centres, as an instrument to optimise family support in Flanders and Brussels.

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