

## **Paths to Positive Parenting in Europe: contributions from recent multicultural research programs**

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*Abstract:* Parenting interventions are considered effective to promote wellbeing of children and families. Several types of parenting interventions are available in the literature, highlighting coexisting research lines. Some are in fact oriented to prevent or reduce child problem behaviors, others are explicitly aimed at improving children's positive development as well as parenting skills.

Basic concepts and some representative programs available in the European context will be summarized together with current efforts and developments. The paper will address goals and contents as well as effectiveness of parenting programs in European countries that are characterized by complexities and challenges. Choices underlining these programs and findings highlight the relevance of following diverse concurrent goals and integrating different perspectives in applied research programs.

*Keywords:* Positive Parenting; knowledge development, equity and inclusion, European programs

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## **Introduction**

Parenting educational interventions refer to activities that improve parents' knowledge about the development of their child, help in the acquisition of skills to strengthen the parent-child relationship and promote effective care to improve the child's health and the development of social and psychological skills over the life span (Hepburn, 2004). Numerous meta-analyses have shown that parenting affects many different aspects of a child's development and the quality and stability of family life, potentially modifiable environmental risk and protective factors related to children's development. Increasing the capacity of parents to raise their children can lead to the greatest long-term benefit to children, parents, families, and entire communities.

These interventions aim to positively influence the emotional, cognitive, behavioral and health-related spheres through the improvement of parenting skills and the parent-child relationship (Gardner and Leijten, 2017). Parental education is based on assisting parents in the assumption of effective skills and strategies (Leijten et al., 2018). It provides the opportunity for many children to benefit from positive parenting, which is essential for emotional well-being (Davidov & Grusec, 2006) and for children's resilience; for limiting damages caused by bullying (Bowes et al., 2010), family poverty (Flouri et al., 2015) or violence by intimate partners (Miller-Graff et al., 2016). Authoritative parenting practices come from setting limits, from non-coercive strengthening of rules and from promoting autonomy; they are associated with greater physical activity, a healthy diet (Lloyd et al., 2014), a greater scholastic commitment (Doctoroff et al., 2017) and better performance (Pinquart, 2016); to improve the cognitive and linguistic development of children (Miller et al., 2011), to prevent or reduce problematic problems and health-related difficulties (Van Aar et al., 2017).

Children with emotional and behavioral problems are often managed using medications or behavioral therapy, but in some countries, there is no structured parenting intervention to equip parents from different cultural backgrounds with adequate parenting skills to help these children. Masiran and colleagues recent literature search (Masiran, Ibrahim, Awang, and Ying, 2019) highlights the need to develop and implement effective multicultural parenting programs, and technology-based interventions that seem to provide several potential benefits, such as cost reductions, flexible hours and location, larger dissemination and involvement in different contexts.

Evidence of effectiveness in favor of parental interventions has pushed governments and international bodies, including the World Health Organization (WHO, 2010; Wessels et al., 2013). Additionally, the European Commission (Freitag et al., 2018) encourages their application at international level. By summarizing key findings from main programs currently available, this paper aims to describe choices and strategies as well as emerging themes in multicultural parenting programs in Europe.

### **Themes and challenges in parenting programs**

The analysis carried out in this paper will start from an already widespread program and then focus more on recently implemented as well as on recently developed programs with a specific attention to cultural variations and adaptations both in contents and goals designed for the participant population, as well as parent-developed goals based on cultural values and technologies used. It will also provide the opportunity to describe basic procedures common in most European programs.

### **Preventive and technology-based multilevel interventions: Triple P-Positive Parenting Programmes**

The Triple P-Positive Parenting Programmes are multi-level, parenting and family support strategies whose aim is to prevent severe behavioral, emotional and developmental problems in children by enhancing parents' knowledge, skills and confidence (Turner and Sanders, 2006). Topics relevant for everyday life management of complex behavior are addressed from a cognitive-behavioral perspective. These programs have a long tradition across the world and are well known in Europe, namely in Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

In most cases, these programmes have focused on high-risk families and evaluation has confirmed their effectiveness and efficacy. Triple P produces predictable decreases in child behavior problems, which are typically been maintained over time. Furthermore, several studies show that these improvements in child behavior are also paralleled by improvements in parents', particularly mothers' adjustment (Sanders et al., 2003). The results of some meta-analyses (Thomas and Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007; Nowak and Heinrichs, 2008) revealed, in fact, that the Triple-P improves parental warmth, reduces parental hostility,

increases parental self-efficacy and reduces parental stress in the small to moderate range. The effects vary as a function of the intensity of the intervention. Most versions of this programme are effective in reducing negative child behaviors.

These interventions provide several potential benefits, such as cost reductions, flexible hours and location, and widespread reach. For example, they use a public health approach to dissemination, which is greatly facilitated using several forms of media and technology such as *podcast* (Morawska et al., 2014), tv episodes or interactive online courses (Sanders et al., 2012). When given the option of in-person or self-delivered Triple-P interventions, most parents chose self-delivered methods (Metzler et al. 2012).

Although more frequently implemented in Europe, research actions are still needed insofar studies on efficacy of the *Triple P* are limited in the number of samples included, follow-up and registered trials (Coyne and Kwakkenbos, 2013; Eisner et al., 2015; Marryat et al., 2017).

### **Acting on children behavioral and emotional difficulties: The Incredible Years parenting program**

The Incredible Years (IY) parenting intervention is based a social learning theory. It was developed in 1980s to address child behavioral and emotional difficulties and enhance positive life outcomes. Parents as well as teachers and children are targets of the program.

*Theoretical background.* The theoretical background includes cognitive social learning theory, Bandura's modeling and self-efficacy theories (Bandura, 1986). It is well known and implemented both in Nordic European countries (Norway, Sweden and Finland), in Nederland and Denmark, UK and Ireland, but also Mediterranean countries (for instance, France, Greece and Portugal).

There are several levels of actions according to the degree of risk of the specific population of interest. Similarly, there are different curricula for parents of children of different ages aimed at emphasizing different parenting skills. The BASIC parent program is known as having the highest value as prevention intervention.

*Themes addressed.* The BASIC Incredible Years parent program (Webster-Stratton, 2001) entails groups of 8 to 15 parents for weekly 2-hr sessions.

According to the version adopted, it consists of 12 to 18 sessions. A collaborative group-based model characterizes the program aimed at enabling parents to recognize their skills, empowering them to identify effective strategies to achieve their goals, in ways that fit with their own family context and values.

The BASIC program covers several topics: play, coaching of social, emotional and academic skills, praise and rewards, effective limit setting, and handling misbehavior (e.g., ignore and time-out techniques). Videotaped scenes on examples of parent-child interactions and discussions about set and parent-initiated topics as well as brainstorming, role-plays and homework assignments support practice of newly learned behavior.

*Resources and materials* A collaborative approach in which parents are the expert on their own children. Parents are guided to set weekly goals and to read the book; are encouraged to practice at home and have weekly telephone contact with another parent from the group.

Program fidelity is monitored by videotaping all sessions and discussing them in biweekly supervision meetings. Checklists are completed after each session, and parents filled out evaluation forms every week, and at the end of the program.

It uses a group format that emphasizes parents' common issues rather than individual difficulties; it explicitly respects cultural differences; explores and addresses possible cultural barriers to the intervention content (Webster-Stratton, 2009).

*Efficacy assessment and results.* Fifteen randomized controlled trials on the Incredible Years parenting program have been conducted in Europe for a total of nearly 1800 participants. Parenting practices, children's mental health, and parental mental health were estimated. Children's conduct problems and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms improved, while emotional problems did not.

Moderate effect sizes have been shown (McCart et al., 2006; Weisz & Kazdin, 2010). Multiple studies show that Incredible Years reduces disruptive behavior up to several years after termination of the intervention (Jones et al., 2008; Posthumus et al., 2012). It has also been shown that it improves parenting behavior and reduces child behavior problems in families from different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds (Kim, Cain, & Webster-Stratton, 2008; Reid, Webster-Stratton, & Baydar, 2004; Scott, O'Connor, et al., 2010).

The IY parenting program improves the aspects of family well-being that it is primarily designed to improve, that is parenting and children's conduct problems. It also improves parent-reported ADHD symptoms in children. The program does not improve children's emotional problems or parental mental health (Gardner et al., 2018).

As shown in Leijten (2017) recent analysis of programs carried out across Europe, IY seems to primarily affect children's oppositional and aggressive behavior toward parents, rather than children's aggressive behavior toward other children, reduce oppositional behavior, rather than hyperactivity. The use of positive parenting practices such as praise, incentives, and consistency are considered crucial in the Incredible Years program. Benefits and possible harms of the Incredible Years parenting program refer to parental mental health (i.e. depressive symptoms, stress, and self efficacy).

The IY parenting program meets criteria for a well-established evidence-based intervention (Menting, Orobio de Castro, & Matthys, 2013). Effectiveness has been also shown for ethnic minority families with recent immigration backgrounds (Gardner & Leijten, 2017). As several authors suggest, research is needed to test whether there are ways to make Incredible Years more effective and accessible for families and service providers by developing innovative delivery systems and by systematically testing for essential components of parenting interventions.

### **Developing knowledge and awareness of people's rights: the ELPIDA project**

ELPIDA is a two-year project ending in Autumn 2019 and aimed to improve the quality of life of persons with intellectual disability (PWID). It is aimed to provide family members and parents of PWID with necessary skills and knowledge in order to make them feel more confident and competent to provide support and empowerment to children of all ages with ID.

*Theoretical background.* The proposed framework is based on the United Nation Convention on Rights of People with Disability (2008) and hence aimed at a full implementation of rights of people with disabilities; guarantee quality of life, lifelong learning, adult education.

*Needs Analysis.* A literature review and a pilot study were carried out to investigate the parents' real training needs and interests to ensure that the content

of the modules meet parents' needs and interest and to inform the axes for the development of platform resources. Disparities across European countries emerged as well as the need of developing specific knowledge.

*Themes addressed.* Table 1 provides a summary of topics addressed and goals for each module.

<i>Module 1 Human Rights</i>
Goal: it is important to know that human rights of people with disabilities are basic rights and freedoms that all people are entitled to regardless of nationality, sex, national or ethnic origin, race, religion, language or other status.
<i>Module 2 Communication</i>
Goal: helping learners to be engaged in their child's life in a more conscious way and to be able to live and work together with others.
<i>Module 3 Stress management</i>
Goal: knowing that short-term stress makes it possible to react and act well in those situations while long-term stress represents a threat to health, which among other things can resolve in depression, anxiety and chronic diseases. Families with a child with intellectual and developmental disabilities, often have a higher long-term stress level.
<i>Module 4 Transition to adulthood</i>
Goal: the module contains suggestions and knowledge on how to make transition to adulthood successful and what contribution the social support system can make for young adults experiencing even more difficulties
<i>Module 5 Sexual Health</i>
Goal: The module aims to strengthen parents (and others) competence to talk with people with intellectual disabilities (ID) about sexual health, as well as to provide autonomy and self-knowledge to people with ID.
<i>Module 6 Ageing</i>
Goal: provide information about aging, as well as practical support in health, psychological and social issues are needed in order to promote well-being and quality of life in elderly people with intellectual disabilities

*Table 2. Modules and topics addressed in the ELPIDA program*

*Resources and materials.* ELPIDA supports his goal offering a distance learning and developing a multilingual, free-to-use e-learning platform. The most important output of the project is an e-learning platform offering 6 interactive educational modules of training in English, Greek, German, Dutch, Norwegian and Portuguese.

*Efficacy assessment and results.* Questionnaires have created that users/parents completed online before and after undertaking the modules. The evaluation study was based on the acquired from registered users/participants (over 375 participants).

The high number of participants who had no previous training on the six topics (about 60%), confirms both the need for parent education but also the fact that the existing training programs do not cover all areas of interest. Participants indicated that the modules improved their knowledge significantly and that the newly gained knowledge will help improve their skills. They also indicated that they feel a lot more competent in supporting their child's needs; found very useful that it was available on an e-learning platform and that the information was presented in various forms such as texts, videos, activities.

Although preliminary, results seem to suggest that problems and needs are similar in all countries. There is a clear preference on issues regarding the safeguarding of human rights and this is evident both on the questions on human rights as well as in other questions such as those on transition to adulthood and ageing. The human rights topic is relevant for all participating countries, especially as regards independence and employment, respect of privacy, education and self-determination. Stress management techniques that parents with PWID might be less familiar with are low arousal and copying strategies.

### **Positive Parenting for Equity and Social Inclusion: the ESIPP program**

ESIPP, that is Equity and Social Inclusion Positive Parenting project, is a partnership of academics, professionals and parents, funded by the European Union, working to develop and evaluate the impact of providing such training.

Providing families with accurate information and training in effective approaches has been shown to increase family adaptation and acceptance, and improve personal, educational and social outcomes for individuals with autism and their families (Preece and Almond 2008; Green et al., 2010; Kasari et al., 2010).

*Theoretical background.* The less visible nature of autism can lead people, both outside and within the family, to make judging assumptions about parents and children seeing the child as disobedient and the parent as inadequate (Gray, 2002; Preece, 2014). This stigma experience can further reduce the sense of parental competence and self-efficacy (Dunn et al., 2001); furthermore, it can



induce families to withdraw from social contact, thus experiencing significant levels of isolation (Woodgate et al., 2008). Developing knowledge and competencies will impact social and work participation and in general quality of life experienced by parents. The level of knowledge and understanding of autism, as well as services and support for families, including parent education, are extremely variable, limited or non-existent in some European countries (Salomone et al., 2016).

Additionally, autism may be conceptualized differently across different cultures (Kim, 2012; Perepa 2014). Research-intervention programmes should be then developed in order to take into account cultural, societal and systemic differences between countries and populations.

*Need analysis.* An initial literature review (Preece & Trajkovski 2017) and a survey of parents (Preece et al 2017) were undertaken, as usual procedure in European projects, to evaluate potential models and content and to identify parental priorities regarding both content and delivery. The results of the survey suggested both the process and content of the parent training curriculum, materials and programme as well as diverse modalities to make it attractive for them and potential usefulness of involving other family members in such training, such as siblings (25%) and grandparents (10%). Several potential barriers to participation in training were identified, such as work responsibilities, childcare issues. There was strong interest in weekend training and was preferred by almost 60% of families with high variability across countries. This clearly suggests that different delivery models were required across the countries in order to make the program more effective.

*Themes addressed.* A 12-hour parent education programme and locally differentiated training materials were developed for use in the three countries.

The final curriculum is differentiated as appropriate to the local setting, and additional training modules, developed to respond to local needs and preferences (see Table 2).

<i>Module 1 Introduction to autism</i>
Goal: provide a basic understanding of autism spectrum disorders and help parents understand their child's uniqueness, resources and difficulties. The activities highlight the knowledge that parents can already possess about the autistic condition and offer the possibility of integrating more carefully how autism appears in their child.
<i>Module 2 Practical strategies to manage behavior</i>
Goal: develop the awareness of the different types of visual structure, that is, on the environment, on timetables (what to do and when), on work systems (how to learn a complex task by dividing it into individual visual steps), on visual instructions (objects, photos, images and words) and train parents in using visual programs.
<i>Module 3 Managing sensory sensitivities</i>
Goal: understand how sensory differences can affect behavior; learn strategies and develop tools to cope with the impact of child's sensory sensitivities. Parents take part in activities that increase their knowledge and encourages the development of a sensory profile of the child and the use of strategies able to respond to the sensory needs of the child.
<i>Modulo 4 Exploring communication</i>
Goal: explore the development and purpose of communication; understand how the conditions experienced can affect expressive and receptive communication; learn strategies to support communication and its development. Parents can put non-verbal strategies into practice.
<i>Module 5 - Positive approaches to social development and interaction</i>
Goals: develop an understanding of differences in social skills; understand how the development of game skills support a successful social interaction; explore practical strategies that support their development. Parents learn how to use everyday materials (mirrors, objects, games) to encourage social interactions, how to enter the world of child's interests.
<i>Module 6 - Understanding and managing challenging behaviors</i>
Goal: explore determinant and identify practical strategies for preventing, managing and reducing challenging behaviors. Parents use knowledge developed in previous sessions to develop practical strategies.

*Table 2. Modules and topics proposed in the ESIPP program*

Three additional modules were developed, addressing respectively:

Nutrition- develop awareness of conditions (sensory, social and communication difficulties) that can have a negative impact on a balanced diet and meals; learn practical strategies are then explored to address the identified issues;

Sleep- explore the impact that anxiety, physical differences, exercise and diet can have on sleep; learn strategies such as changing the bedroom environment, the bedtime routine, the easing of anxiety and the development of relaxation to deal with problems related to sleep;

Puberty changes- develop parents skills in addressing emerging needs related to changes in sexuality and personal care.

*Resources and materials.* The training materials were differentiated according to the version of the program and delivered to the families who attended the courses. The focus of the experts involved was on the identification of content to be addressed; effective teaching methods, in terms of design, time, duration and number of sessions; country specificity in terms of cultural aspects as well as services available and expectations.

*Efficacy assessment and results.* The project has been evaluated using a combined process and outcome evaluation methodology using quantitative and qualitative methods (Royse et al., 2015). Data have been collected asking participants to complete pre-training, post-training and follow-up questionnaires and a family quality of life scale, the CarerQoL (Hoefman et al., 2014).

Focus groups with local training team in each of the participating countries provide thoughts about the content and process of the training, their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the training and its impact and issues regarding differentiation of the training with respect to materials, training process and style, training team issues. Reflective diaries have also been completed by all trainers.

As evidenced in the report (Pierce et al. 2017), preliminary results are based on five cohorts of 335 parents, almost 80% of parents surveyed across the three countries wished to receive in parent education. Almost all respondents felt that attending training improved their understanding of autism and that it has had a positive impact on their family life in terms of improved child communication (90%), ability to predict their child's behavior and their ability to respond to concerns and comments from the broader family (80%).

A significant increase in parental happiness was evidenced in the Carer QoL answers as well as improvements in everyday life evidenced in communication and improved management of sensory and behavioral issues. Parents also reported that attendance provided opportunities to meet other parents and reduced social isolation

## **Positive parenting programs: summing up thoughts and future directions**

Programs described here suggest a series of thoughts relevant for the multicultural European context. First of all, the paper provides an overview of how positive parenting programs can be applied as an integrated, theoretically consistent, multilevel system to entire communities, how they can strengthen the science and practice of the approach and show some possible future directions.

In all the programs described, parents are being asked to actively participate and contribute to training activities. However, models of family-professional relationships can differ between countries, and the level of parental involvement with professionals can range from very distant to very close. It is in fact clear from the analysis outlined, that there is high interest in the topic, but equally clear that there are many barriers to successfully providing it, and that training must be appropriately locally differentiated. Research and implementation programs on multicultural parenting can produce a comprehensive integrated view and highlight the relevance of effective multicultural parenting programs. With the growing number of racial and ethnic minorities, more research should be then dedicated to interventions tailored to vulnerable populations from both psychosocial as well as cultural point of view.

Cultural adaptations exist in many forms and are well researched (Bernal and Domenech Rodriguez 2012): research with technology-based interventions should consider adaptations beyond hiring diverse actors to better serve diverse communities. Technology-based interventions are confirmed as ideal means of addressing such disparities, especially given the widespread access to technology. These findings should serve as a guide for future programs. Specific areas that may be of interest include cost-benefit analysis, differential effectiveness across populations, predictors of success in technology-based interventions, and the effect of adding a coaching component to the intervention.

Moving to a methodological level, the analysis has shown the usefulness of basic choices underlying research programs in EU, such as a need analysis and involvement of external experts during the development of the programs, which in particular may turn out to effectively support the ecological validity of these programs.

On a theoretical level of analysis, more traditional frameworks together with more recent international developments sustain the goals and the priorities addressed in the parenting programs described. To reduce disruptive child

behavior both behavioral strategies and social learning theory have been used to develop parenting interventions (Gardner et al. 2019). More recently the United Nations rights declaration has been chosen as supporting principle in developing parents' knowledge and expertise, as shown by the ELPIDA project. Finally, more recent projects, as ESIPP, the 2030 Agenda and the goals identified and adopted by the assembly of the United Nations in September 2015 for sustainable development (United Nations, 2015) are common ground and orient the actions with the aim of guaranteeing health and wellbeing to everyone and at any age (Goal 3); provide quality, fair and inclusive education and learning opportunities for all (Goal 4); reduce inequality within and between nations (Goal 10); promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, guaranteeing everyone access to justice, and creating efficient institutions, guaranteed and included at all levels (Goal 16).

As regards issues addressed in the programs, it seems that old themes and new issues are at the core of the interests. Hence, old goals ( behavior regulation) and new themes (see ageing and transition to adulthood) seem co-exist with new visions and lenses and for people wellbeing, and, more specifically, in our case, for parents facing challenges in their role. Paths in the next future are going towards integrating perspectives, referring to different models and approaches according to the specific needs of families and conditions of vulnerabilities experienced can be an effective choice in order to guarantee their quality of life and their children successful growth.

*A message for stakeholders.* Partners of the projects underline that rights-based education can provide people with disabilities and their families with more knowledge to be able to claim their rights, greater autonomy and the ability to make decisions and more support in all areas of life. Although they are still involved in refining the curriculum and materials in response to feedback and in developing guidelines regarding parent training, some preliminary indications have been developed and proposed, as usual in these programs, to stakeholders. In the reports, for instance, they underscore the relevance of sustaining and developing parents to improve the quality of life of people with an autism spectrum disorder and their families; offering practical solutions and strategies to help families and people with autism to face the challenges that arise during their lifetime; developing and delivering training and curricula for parents in specific social and cultural contexts, including within Europe itself; guaranteeing the

sustainability of the projects started through adequate resources and the development of skills by local trainers.

Finally, extending across Europe the training to a wide range of professionals, including teachers and educators, is expected to be the best way for providing support to people with vulnerabilities and their families, coping with the family stress that managing vulnerabilities condition produces, that is... for dealing with access to rights and promote quality of life.

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