

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UNICEF Europe and
Central Asia Regional Office

Parenting Support Framework for the Early Years



Parents are the most important determinant of their child's development and well-being.

The care that a parent provides in the first few years of a child's life shapes that child's cognitive ability and physical and mental health over the course of her lifetime.

Despite widespread recognition and scientific evidence that there is no one more influential to children's development, data show a lack of support for parents during their children's critical formative years. This results in children across Europe and Central Asia lacking the nurturing care they need for optimal development. A quarter of children under 5 in the region lack the adequate stimulation and responsive care at home. And while most parents in the region say that they do not believe in physical punishment, more than half of young children in Europe and Central Asia are violently disciplined at home, a practice known to have negative and sometimes lifelong consequences on children's health and well-being.

Parents usually want to do the very best for their children, and to do so they need a range of services and support. Enabling environment and access to

information, resources and quality services across health, education and social welfare sectors are key to the network of support parents need.

When parents receive support for their own well-being, they are more likely to provide supportive, nurturing care to their children.

Parenting support is understood, implemented and experienced in different ways across Europe and Central Asia. Parents from marginalized groups, such as families of children with disabilities and developmental delays, those living in poverty, and families from Roma communities and other minority ethnic groups, are often excluded from parenting support services or do not have the ability to access them in the first place.

This is why UNICEF has developed a conceptual framework for parenting support, to guide countries in developing effective policies, programmes and services that place parents - and their individual needs - at the core.

The Parenting Support Framework for the Early Years represents a unified vision of multi-sectoral support for parents (from pregnancy to eight years of age). By outlining key entry points, strategies and delivery platforms across different sectors, the Framework aims to bring together stakeholders and strengthen the quality of parenting support across the region.

**“Support parents
with kind words. With
encouraging words.”**

– Mother, Kyrgyzstan,
Bebbo Parenting Survey, 2023

**“Sometimes, a
smile is enough.”**

– Mother, Serbia,
Bebbo Parenting Survey, 2024



Parenting behaviours

Parenting behaviours can be grouped into three overlapping categories, each of which is necessary to provide a child with nurturing care:

- **Caregiving**
- **Support-seeking**
- **Self-care**

Parenting support interventions should consider all the above – empowering parents to provide responsive care, raising awareness about the services and support available (and how parents can access them) and guiding parents in prioritizing their own well-being.

The pyramid of parenting support

Not all parents and children need the same intensity and range of support. To meet individual needs, parenting support services should be delivered across three levels:

Universal parenting support

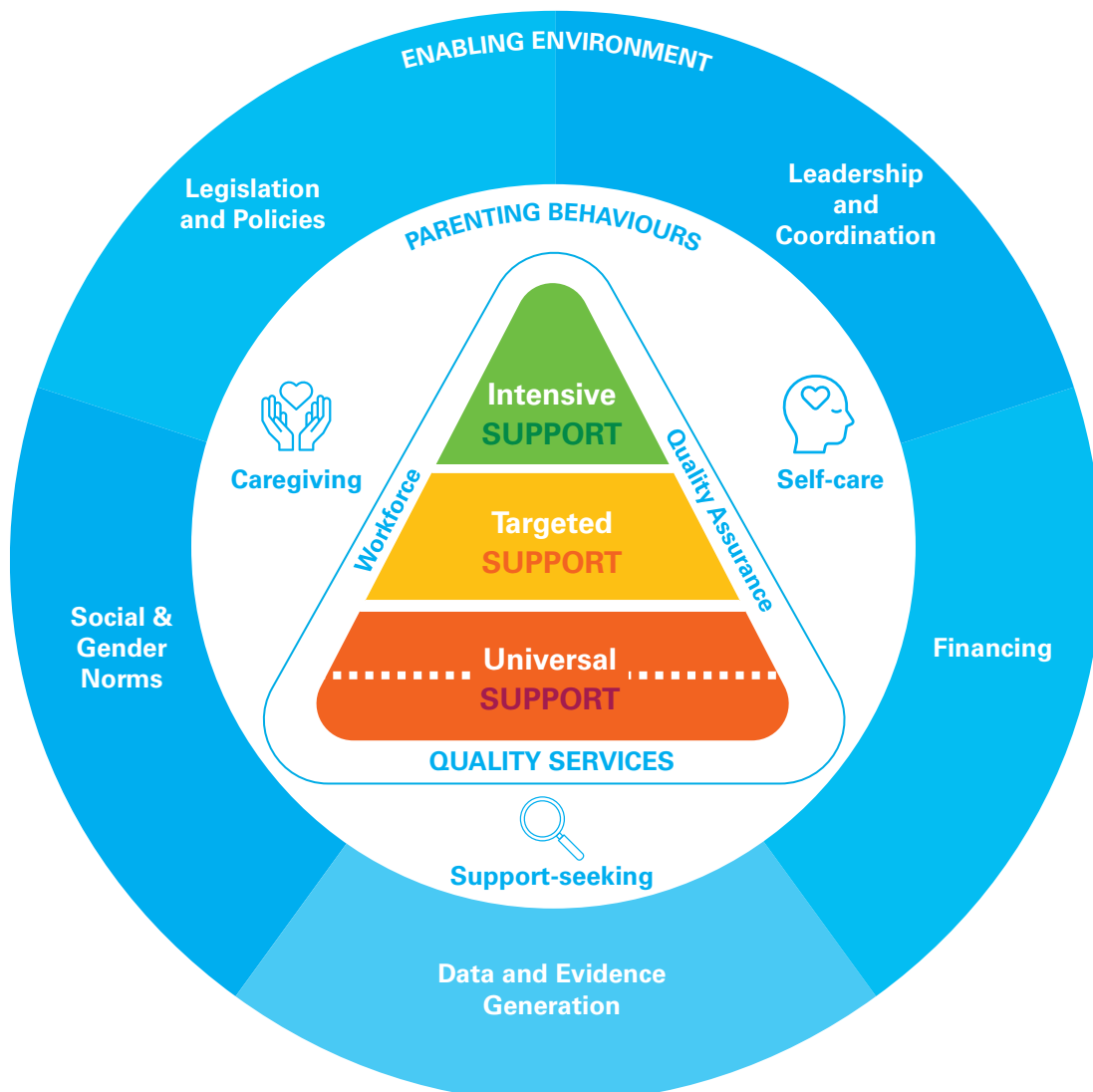
A broad preventive package of core support that is accessible to all parents and designed to be inclusive, non-stigmatizing and welcoming. It includes population-based information provision, as well as universal parenting support, which is integrated into routine services.

Targeted parenting support

Targeted interventions, tailored to families' specific needs or identified risks. Active outreach strategies may identify vulnerable or marginalized families and link them with services that match their needs and preferences.

Intensive parenting support

Intended for a diverse group of parents who may experience longer-term challenges to meet their complex needs – often involving intensive, continuous and coordinated support from across different sectors and services.



Strengthening quality services and enabling environment

To reach parents with support effectively, services need to be high-quality and inclusive, and complemented by a broader enabling policy and social environment.

Quality services

The success and effectiveness of parenting support services depend on their quality, what is being delivered and how it is being delivered. Services should be inclusive, accessible, affordable, gender-transformative, family-centred, informed by evidence and social and behavioural change strategies.

The quality of parenting support is directly linked to the accountabilities, skills, approach and motivation of the workforce providing these services. Every service provider should possess core technical knowledge, skills and relational, communication and enabling competencies.

Enabling environment

Parenting support is best enabled by environments where supportive legislation, policies and coordination mechanisms are in place, where inter- and intra-sectoral roles and accountabilities are clearly defined and followed, and where policies and programmes are evidence-informed and backed by data. Family-friendly policies such as adequate parental leave, breastfeeding support, child benefits and affordable, accessible, quality childcare must be central to government, community and business policies. Funding also needs to be adequate and consistent, while social and gender norms must be conducive to the adoption of positive parenting practices.

Additional guidance

The Framework will be accompanied by operational guidance, which will provide information on how to assess the needs and gaps in parenting support, and how to use this information to inform strategic planning for parenting support programming across multiple levels in the future.

“There is no infrastructure to make parenthood easier: There is no content in the media on this topic, there are no available psychologists, doctors in hospitals do not provide moral support but try to blame you instead, society demands too much and men do not help.”

– Mother, North Macedonia, Bebbio Parenting Survey, 2024



For every child
Whoever she is.
Wherever he lives.
Every child deserves a childhood.
A future.
A fair chance.
That's why UNICEF is there.
For each and every child.
Working day in and day out.
In 190 countries and territories.
Reaching the hardest to reach.
The furthest from help.
The most left behind.
The most excluded.
It's why we stay to the end.
And never give up.



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July 2024

