Benchmarking report

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on parenting support **policies and programmes** in the Republic of Serbia

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BENCHMARKING REPORT ON PARENTING SUPPORT POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

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Foreword

Parenting is one of the most important, and indeed, the most challenging roles we take on in our lives. All parents want their children to grow up healthy, loved and safe. In the absence of adequate support, it is far more difficult for parents to accomplish such a demanding and responsible role. To expect that parents should accomplish everything on their own, means to ignore the complexity and importance of their role in children's development and exercising of children's rights.

This publication represents the outcome of our joint desire to provide a continuous, accessible and high-quality support to every parent and caregiver in Serbia.

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to all partners, practitioners and decision-makers whose knowledge, experience and enthusiasm, contributed to the development of the Benchmarking Report on Parenting Support Policies and Programmes in the Republic of Serbia, and to all the parents who placed their trust in us.

We owe special thanks to the *Parenting for Lifelong Health (PLH)* team, especially to Siân Long and Saara Thakur, for their commitment, inspiration and invaluable professional support during our joint journey towards strengthening parenting support systems.

We are also thankful to our colleagues from the UNICEF Global Headquarters in New York, and especially to Stephen Blight, Senior Advisor for Child Protection and Christine Kolbe-Stuart, Child Protection Specialist, for their strategic and professional support, as well as for spreading belief that every child deserves a parent who feels empowered and supported.

We would particularly like to emphasize the **contribution of the National Team of Experts and Partners** who participated in the development of this Report — with appreciation to Sanja Miloradović, Prof. Mirjana Đorđević, Jelena Pešić-Zarić, and to the UNICEF Programme Team from Serbia: Dr. Jelena Zajeganović-Jakovljević, Mili Vuković Jovanović, as well as to Ivana Vojvodić, Stanislava Vučković and Bojana Jevtović.

Also, we wish to thank to the LEGO Foundation for their continuous support and joint commitment to building foundations for quality parenting.

We hope that the findings and recommendations presented in this Report will serve as a basis for further strengthening of policies and practices that recognize the crucial, underpinning role of parenting in the future of every child.

Abbreviations

CFC	Caring for the Caregiver
CSO	civil society organization
CST	Caregiver Skills Training
CSW	Centre for Social Work
DCU	Developmental Counselling Unit
EU	European Union
FCEI	Family-centred Early Interventions
LSU	local self-government unit
MMMH	Multilateral memorandum of understanding and cooperation in the field of prevention and protection of mental health of children, adolescents and young people
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoFWD	Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography
MoH	Ministry of Health
MoHMRSD	Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue
MoLEVSA	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs
PP service	school psychological and pedagogical service
SCTM	Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities
SP	social protection
Tool	National-Level Parenting Policy and Programme Benchmarking Tool
WHO	World Health Organization

In 2021, the World Health Organization, UNICEF and the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children issued a **policy call for national governments of all countries to commit to universal parenting support** to prevent child abuse and neglect. To help countries perform an objective and well-organized benchmarking of support policies and programmes, and determine their future actions to this end, in 2024, UNICEF Headquarters in New York developed the **Conceptual framework and benchmarking tool for parenting support policies and programmes at the national level**. This tool was used for the review and the preparation of the first national report for Serbia.

mapped and reviewed, data were collected on more than 20 different programmes and support platforms, and a series of consultative meetings and individual interviews were held with decision makers and experts working within the aforementioned support systems.

The first part of the report outlines the concept of parenting and parental care in Serbia, the goals of the review and the methodological framework. The second part of the report has been designed to present the practical implementation of each standard area, stating the findings and crucial recommendations as set forth by each segment of the standard.

RESUME

The main goal of the review is to enhance the systemic support at the national and local level, provide stronger and more comprehensive support to parents and thus improve the optimal development of children and youth. The findings, conclusions and recommendations of this report are expected to encourage a productive dialogue and meaningful contribution of decision makers, experts and practitioners in the field of child development and parenting, to encourage the scale-up of evidence-informed support programmes, interventions and activities developed for the parents and provide guidance to the decision makers to ensure that all parents have access to the basic information and parenting support throughout the available support systems.

The methodology involved the use of this tool, comprising a set of 12 domains and 12 standards with accompanying indicators that should enable an objective benchmarking of parenting support policies and programmes. The standards include: laws and policies, leadership and coordination, evidence-informed programmes, life-course and multi-level approach, how to reach users, scale and sustainability, use of platforms, workforce, financing and data monitoring. In accordance with the methodology, more than 40 strategic and normative documents were

In accordance with the standards specified in the tool, the findings showed that there was no special (overarching) strategy in the Republic of Serbia that would present the Government's commitment to parenting support as the main goal. However, desk analysis and interviews with relevant actors showed that there are multisectoral documents in place, whereby the Government or several ministries commit to coordinated support for children and youth and in which they recognize parenting support as a manifest aspect of that support. Also, certain strategies cover certain significant issues related to children, families or vulnerable groups and recognize the necessity of parenting support in their goals or individual measures. There are sectoral laws and by-laws with chapters or individual articles dedicated to parenting support, and in recent years, great progress has been made in key family-oriented policies. A quick review of the collected documents showed that at least 40 strategic and normative documents deal with parenting and parenting support to some extent, but also that the biggest challenge is that the mentioned documents, despite displaying no conflict among them, make no particular reference to each other. In this context, it is important to mention that some experts believe that perhaps it is not even necessary to have a single

document, but that instead, the existing documents could become more connected, and to have the strategic commitment of the State to deal with the topic of parenting more clearly recognized in different documents that complement each other.

It is important to emphasize that the Law on the Planning System has set forth that all strategies follow the structure that clearly defines which sectors are the owners of strategic tasks, the coordination process and will form the coordinating body, and who is in charge of monitoring the implementation of the strategy whose content is based on data and scientific knowledge, as well as the obligation that different actors participate in the development of the strategy, including those to whom the strategy is designated. Accordingly, the conclusion may be that, on the one hand, the structure of strategic documents is aligned with the standards offered by the tool, but, on the other hand, it is important to emphasize that reports on the monitoring of strategic activities are often not publicly available, so there is only little information about the degree of the planned implementation. Also, depending on the sector and the focus of a document, different actors are recognized as owners of coordination in this domain.

In addition, the findings show that the number of parenting support programmes has grown in recent years and that most programmes meet the requirements set by the standards, but that the policies provide less explanations. The programmes are predominantly accredited in one of the relevant systems, which provides some guarantee of their quality. However, for example, the requirement to adopt a life-course approach in the creation of parenting support programmes is not specifically recognized, but it is emphasized that the field of parenting implies a life-course approach to the extent that the baseline policy area requires a life-course approach; i.e., that, depending on the principal domain that a certain policy deals with, the focus is placed on parents of a certain target group or a child of a certain age. However, decision makers, professionals and parents in the country believe that one programme does not necessarily provide life-course access, but that it is important that there are programmes adding to each another, thus ensuring the continuity of service provision. In this respect, we may conclude that there is a clear understanding that not all children or all families have the same need for support and that support obviously differs in terms of intensity, but at the same time it is observed that this difference, although sufficiently visible, is not always explained nor is it followed by a clear terminology that would indicate to which level a certain programme or intervention belongs, and there are no integrated reviews to show what is missing. Another positive aspect is that the review showed that available parenting support programmes contribute to reducing stigma in different ways. Also, different 'platforms' have been recognized, i.e., the efforts made to ensure that the parenting support is present in institutions and services of various departments and that modern digital approaches are used to spread support, which should certainly be maintained. However, it is recognized that the systems do not reach the most vulnerable families who need this support the most.

It is worrying that there is currently no budgeted multisectoral strategy for scaling up universal parenting support and no comprehensive plan for the scalability of programmes of the confirmed quality. The review of the action plans and the statements of professionals testify that scaling is more often performed using donor funds, than from national or local budget funds, which is why the question of sustainability remains open. That is why the best practice examples of how to ensure the sustainability of programmes that have been piloted, evaluated and partially scaled are essential. In this respect, it is recognized that, first of all, local self-government units have the possibility to plan the parenting support and to finance it, based on national documents.

There is no national strategy designed for the development of human resources, that contains standards for qualifications, training or remuneration for the workforce in the field of parenting activities; but on the other hand, individual strategies that focus on some other topics recognize the importance of the competence of professionals, while at the sectoral level, competences are most often laid down in rulebooks.

A fully integrated and agreed system of indicators that would enable the monitoring of progress towards universal parenting support is not recognized, but there are initiatives and partially implemented data collection systems. With regard to strategic documents, there is a defined responsibility for data collection and an agreed system of indicators for all activities provided for in the strategy, although the tools and participatory research are not explicitly specified, and reports on the monitoring of strategic activities are often not available. On the other hand, each sector has its institutions responsible for collecting data at the national level on the implementation and effectiveness of interventions in the areas covered by the system, that is, the official producers of statistics from different systems. Accordingly, the data on parenting support are available only to the extent that they form a part of the official operating programmes of institutions within the system.

The recommendations of this report follow the findings that clearly focus on the segments of parenting support that need to be developed and enhanced, making reference to the relevant legislation, institutions, working bodies or support measures that are recognized as vital for further elaboration of the parenting support topic.

It is recommended to develop a national plan that will unify the currently fragmented but adequately set goals, measures and activities aimed at providing the parenting support addressed in different documents. Additionally, it is proposed to ensure that measures and activities from different strategies that are recognized as relevant are included in the legislation, if not already, in order to underpin the certainty of their implementation. It would be good to consider the enactment of a more comprehensive law, e.g., of the Law on Children, with the Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography seen as a leader and coordinator in the field.

It is believed that the establishment of a single meta-registry of all parenting support programmes and initiatives would significantly facilitate planning, further scaling and financing of the existing programmes, including the recognition and development of areas that are not sufficiently covered at present. The meta-registry would contain the most important information about the programmes and observe the requirements of the standard. Also, standardized tools for collecting relevant data should be developed and implemented in order to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of programmes at the national level and to exchange data between sectors for the purpose of better planning and efficient organization of services according to existing resources.

Widely available free basic support for all parents is advocated (e.g., through a maternity hospital and polyvalent outpatient service) as one of the possible ways to ensure a large coverage from the very beginning and create opportunities for even the most vulnerable parents to be included in basic (universal) support, and then in additionally needed targeted or intensive programmes. It is recognized that it is important to develop a communication strategy that will offer adapted ways of communicating and informing different target groups of parents and that will ensure direct communication with the most vulnerable families at the local level. Further development of already recognized credible digital platforms such as “Bebbo” mobile application and “I Protect You” is encouraged.

Consideration should be given to developing a national strategy that would highlight the importance of investing in human resources and training professionals to increase access to parent support services and ensure appropriate resource allocations for program implementation. In addition, the proven successful joint training of professionals from different departments should be continued, which will ensure that families on the way through different departments and in contact with different professionals receive the same basic key messages, that professionals use the same language and develop their attitudes in the same direction.

The report on the development of parenting support policies and programmes in Serbia, thanks to an international tool, provides a comprehensive overview of the situation both at the level of policies and at the level of individual parenting support programmes and initiatives, and offers a number of possible options for their improvement. The methodology recommends that this procedure is repeated after three to five years, so that decision makers, professionals, parents and other stakeholders can oversee the developments in this important area in an empirically based way.

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INTRODUCTION

Parenting and care for parents in the Republic of Serbia

Decades of research have continuously shown that a child's developmental journey starts with their parents and caregivers.[1] Parents are the primary, most important and most consistent contributors to a child's development and well-being. During early childhood, parents have the largest impact on shaping the present and future of their children.[2] The child's long-term physical and mental health, future social skills, self-confidence and capacity to learn and thrive will largely depend on whether, and to what extent, the care provided by parents and caregivers is nurturing and responsive, and on how responsibly and lovingly they care for the child.

Modern parenting takes place in an era of dynamic, constant changes that are making parenting roles more demanding and complex, and where parents are subject to public scrutiny of their parenting competencies. To fulfil their role responsibly and in line with the child's needs, parents need specific knowledge and skills. Information about available services and rights that support and improve childcare is also important. They also need support for achieving their own well-being, which has a significant impact on their overall parenting competencies. When parents are supported in their parenting role, their self-confidence and self-efficacy grow, along with the knowledge and skills needed for more adequate childcare, and all this improves the well-being of both parents and their children.[3] Experiences

1 In this document, the term parent shall refer not only to the biological parent or legal guardian but also to other caregivers responsible for the child's daily care.

2 UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, Parenting Support Framework for the Early Years, UNICEF ECARO, Geneva, 2024.

3 Ibid.

of practitioners working with children and families, combined with scientific and theoretical knowledge, clearly show that it is in the best interest of children to pay special attention to their parents and caregivers, which means that adequate development of the parenting functions of children's caregivers is equally important for children's adequate upbringing.

However, looking at support policies, parenting is not always explicitly recognized. In practice, family support is very often equated with parenting support. Although these are two closely related areas of support that are based on similar goals, and both are defining and influencing the circumstances of children's upbringing in multiple ways, family support and parenting support are two distinct policy areas.[4] Family support (family-friendly policies) has a broader scope and includes rights, services and other activities aimed at improving family functioning and creating conditions for raising children and carrying out other family activities within a system based on supportive relationships and formal (financial) and non-formal sources of support. It has a very broad meaning and may include services across various systems — health care, education, social protection, family law, etc. Parenting support aims to improve parenting competencies, attitudes and behaviours towards children and represents a set of services organized to provide parents with diverse resources that increase their awareness, knowledge and skills on parenting-related issues across all areas relevant to the proper growth and development of children.

Another area that parenting support is often equated with is child protection. The field of child protection focuses on risks and protecting the well-being of the child. Parents and parenting support are not in focus. Professionals are interested in the parent's relationship with the child only when they believe the child's well-being is at risk. On the other hand, both parenting support and child protection deal with the parent–child relationship, with family law measures aimed at protecting the child's well-being focusing on the parental resources for parenting. That is why it is important to bear in mind that, although parenting support interventions share the same goals as child protection interventions (improving the child's well-being and developmental outcomes), the difference between parenting support and child protection lies in putting the parental figure and their parenting resources at the centre of the intervention.

In the Republic of Serbia, care for parents is divided between several support systems: health care, education, social protection, family welfare and youth care systems. The health care system is the first to establish contact with parents, initially through the care for pregnant women, then through maternity wards, visiting nurses and regular paediatric check-ups. In this sense, it can be said that the health care system is the first to 'see every parent and every child', and that it plays a key role in the early identification of both developmental risks in children and the parents' need for additional support. Visiting nurses have a unique opportunity to monitor and support the family in their home immediately after birth, up to the age of 2. Their work focuses on building skills for responsive and playful caregiving (emotional bonding between parents and the child through play, accepting the child and the parenting role, understanding the child and monitoring the child's behaviour and needs), as well as on laying the foundation for responsive care and building a stimulating environment by supporting responsive feeding, talking to the child, reading with the child and first play activities of the parents and the child. If the child has developmental difficulties, exhibits developmental delays or there is a recognized need for additional support to the child and parents due to various circumstances, the visiting nurse service and the paediatrician can refer and connect the parents first with the developmental counselling unit (DCU), but also with other appropriate community-based support services, if there is no DCU in the community. From the child's birth, the family law protection is present in the life of a family with a child, primarily through family-friendly policies and improvement of living conditions that enhance the ability of parents to fulfil their parenting role.

Parents of children in the preschool education system already have the experience of establishing a support network and contact with relevant professionals. Kindergartens can take a leading role in parenting

4 Pečnik, N., Dobrotič, I., *Usluge podrške roditeljstvu u Hrvatskoj: Potrebe roditelja i postojeći programi* u Socijalno-demografska reprodukcija Hrvatske, Centar za demokraciju i pravo Miko Tripalo, Zagreb, 2019.

support from the nursery age and can work with families participating in kindergarten programmes, but also with families from the community, particularly during periods of transition from family to kindergarten. Then, following the child's path, practically until adulthood, schools develop various forms of cooperation in line with the needs of both the family and the curriculum, and the criteria for planning and implementing certain forms of cooperation are based on partnerships. The psychological and pedagogical service at the school (the PP service) has both a direct role of supporting parents and the possibility of helping parents by informing them about relevant departments and services from other sectors that can provide better targeted support to parents in line with their needs.

Some families need more intensive support for establishing contact between the parents and child, accepting the child and parenting role, to ensure a safe, nurturing and stimulating environment for the child. This group of families includes families who are beneficiaries of rights and services in the social protection system. When a child is raised in extreme poverty, when there is no stable parent or the parent cannot or does not know how to respond to the child's developmental needs, when the child is physically or emotionally punished, exposed to domestic violence, neglected or abused, grows up in an unsafe family environment with frequent conflicts, when there is long-term unemployment of the parents or challenges related to the mental health of the parents, where the child or parent is a person with disabilities, the child suffers continuous stress and his or her development may be permanently impaired. Such unfavourable conditions are often the consequence of parents' inability to cope with complex situations faced by them personally or the entire family.

Also, the increase in the number of single-parent families in recent decades is a very significant and visible change in the organization of family life. The most prominent and most documented problem of single-parent families is material deprivation, which manifests as financial and housing deprivation and which often hinders or prevents a parent from exercising their parenting role responsibly and enabling the safe and secure development of children in the family.

For complete, adequate and timely care for parenting capacities and competences, it is quite clear that it is particularly important, on the one hand, to intensify the cooperation of all the aforementioned systems and develop missing procedures for better connecting the services provided by different systems to parents, while on the other hand, it is necessary to have continuously available support for all parents and children starting from the prenatal period, which would be a part of the regular systemic care for the well-being of all families in the country.

The approach of continuous support for all parents has been proven to be the most effective way to provide the highest quality timely care for all parents and to be a key form of prevention and timely intervention for families facing complex and multiple difficulties, i.e., those in need of intensive support for parenting skills, for establishing an emotional bond between parent and child, accepting the child and the parenting role. This approach is known as the 'universal progressive approach'.

Mechanisms for benchmarking parenting support

Although there are strong arguments for investing in parenting support, a World Health Organization (WHO) survey estimated that only around 25 per cent of countries globally have established parenting support programmes that reach all those in need.[5]

One of the particularly important aspects of parenting and one of the key responsibilities of parents is child-rearing and disciplining. It is concerning that the results of numerous international studies indicate that although most parents say they do not believe in the effectiveness of physical punishment, they still frequently resort to violent child-rearing and disciplining. Therefore, it is very important to prevent, in a timely fashion, the serious negative consequences of violent upbringing patterns on the child and his or her later development and life. International findings are confirmed by national research

5 World Health Organization, *Global Status Report on Preventing Violence against Children*, WHO, Geneva, 2020.

too: the Serbia Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey — MICS (2019), Adverse Childhood Experience Study (ACE Study) (2019), and Research on Child Disciplining at Home in Serbia (2020). The results of the Serbia Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey — MICS (2019), conducted by UNICEF in cooperation with the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, clearly indicate that although 90 per cent of parents agree that physical punishment should not be used, one in three children aged 3–4 is still subjected to physical punishment. Data also show that more than half of children, and as many as 60 per cent of children aged 2–4, do not have the support of their fathers in playing and learning.

In line with the aforementioned global findings, in November 2021, WHO, UNICEF and the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children launched one of the most robust initiatives in this field, issuing the Policy Call[6] to national governments to commit to a minimum package of parenting support with universal coverage. Such an approach would ensure a dramatic reduction in the incidence of child neglect and abuse, or violence against children, and consequently it would lower the life-course costs in terms of associated social, health and mental health outcomes.

The consulting team of the international organization Parenting for Lifelong Health (PLH), engaged by UNICEF Headquarters in New York, developed the Parenting Policy and Programme Benchmarking Tool (hereinafter: the Tool) for assessing the development of parenting support policies and programmes at the national level. The existing version of the Tool is currently being piloted in five countries: Mexico, Serbia, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates and Zambia.

The Tool is the first evidence-informed comparative framework designed to help identify strengths and opportunities in the area of parenting support policies, facilitate strategic prioritization and enable monitoring and measuring progress. The assessment itself is based on an analysis of the current normative framework and is supplemented by a series of interviews, focus group discussions and workshops with professionals working in the field of support to children, young people and their parents across all systems families interact with.

By piloting this tool, Serbia has the opportunity to ensure a detailed analysis of the state of play in parenting support and plan next steps in this area based on the data obtained. The findings of the benchmarking of policies and programmes for parenting support and care for upbringing of children and young people in Serbia will make a significant contribution to the process of developing a national intersectoral plan of action for supporting the implementation of the 'Call for Action of the Government of the Republic of Serbia: Support to Early Childhood Development' (2018) to ensure optimal conditions for the development of each child and society as a whole.

6 Office of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children, World Health Organization and UNICEF, Universal parenting support to prevent abuse and neglect: A policy call for national governments, 2021, (Also available in Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian and Spanish here).

OBJECTIVES OF THE ANALYSIS

The analysis aims to provide an **assessment of the development of parenting support policies and programmes in Serbia**.[7] The **main objective** of the conducted analysis is strengthening the systemic support on the national and local level for empowered and comprehensive parenting support to ensure optimal development of children and young people, prevent their abuse and neglect, promote and improve mental health and well-being of children, young people and their parents, improve parenting competences and self-efficiency, as well as the demand from parents and caregivers for quality systemic support that responds to their priority needs in a timely manner. The **specific objective** of the analysis is to obtain relevant data for making evidence-informed decisions on further development of parenting support policies and scaling up relevant parenting support programmes, with the ultimate goal of achieving universal coverage.

The findings, conclusions and recommendations from this report are expected to:

- **prompt the discussion, productive dialogue, considerations, actions and responsibility** among decision makers, experts in the field of child development and parenting, practitioners working with children, young people and parents, and other relevant stakeholders **to ensure harmonized national parenting support policy and relevant approach to parenting informed by scientific evidence**;

- **promote scale-up** of evidence-informed support programmes, interventions and activities intended for parents;

- **guide decision makers towards ensuring conditions for all parents** to have access to basic information and parenting support through all available support systems, **and that parents who need it can receive** more focused and intensive family-friendly support (**universal progressive approach**);

- that periodic repetition (every three or five years) of the analysis using the same methodology enables **measuring the progress in the development and implementation of parenting support policies and programmes at the state level**.[8]

7 The assessment will be conducted using the Tool developed by Parenting for Lifelong Health (PLH) hired by UNICEF Headquarters.

8 The authors of the benchmarking tool for parenting support policies and programmes designed it as a tool for self-assessment within a single country, rather than as a tool for cross-country comparison.

METHODOLOGY

The Parenting Policy and Programme Benchmarking Tool was used to assess parenting support policies and programmes in Serbia.

The tool used for assessing the degree of development of parenting support policies and programmes provides operational definitions of key terms and concepts and thus enables a common understanding of the meaning of the terms used in the tool and in the process of (self-) assessment of the development of parenting support. This tool is aligned with the Parenting Support Framework for the Early Years developed by the UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, and is supplemented with concepts and definitions from other relevant UNICEF documents.

One of the first steps of the consultants who conducted the analysis in Serbia before adopting the terminology used in this tool was to make a comparison with the terminology used in official documents, the professional community and the scientific research context in Serbia and determine if there are significant discrepancies.

The analysis and communication with stakeholders also used definitions categorized as 'alternative definitions'.[9]

The Tool can be used as a first step in creating a national-level road map for achieving universal access to parenting support programmes, while stakeholders can use the report as an important resource for identifying both strengths and weaknesses of planned and implemented support for parents. The self-assessment process is to be repeated regularly, preferably in cycles of three or five years, to measure progress and update plans.

The Tool offers a set of 12 domains and 12 standards[10] with accompanying indicators or checkpoints (49 in total), which should enable objective measuring of the current state of play for parenting policies and programmes in a certain country. The Tool was

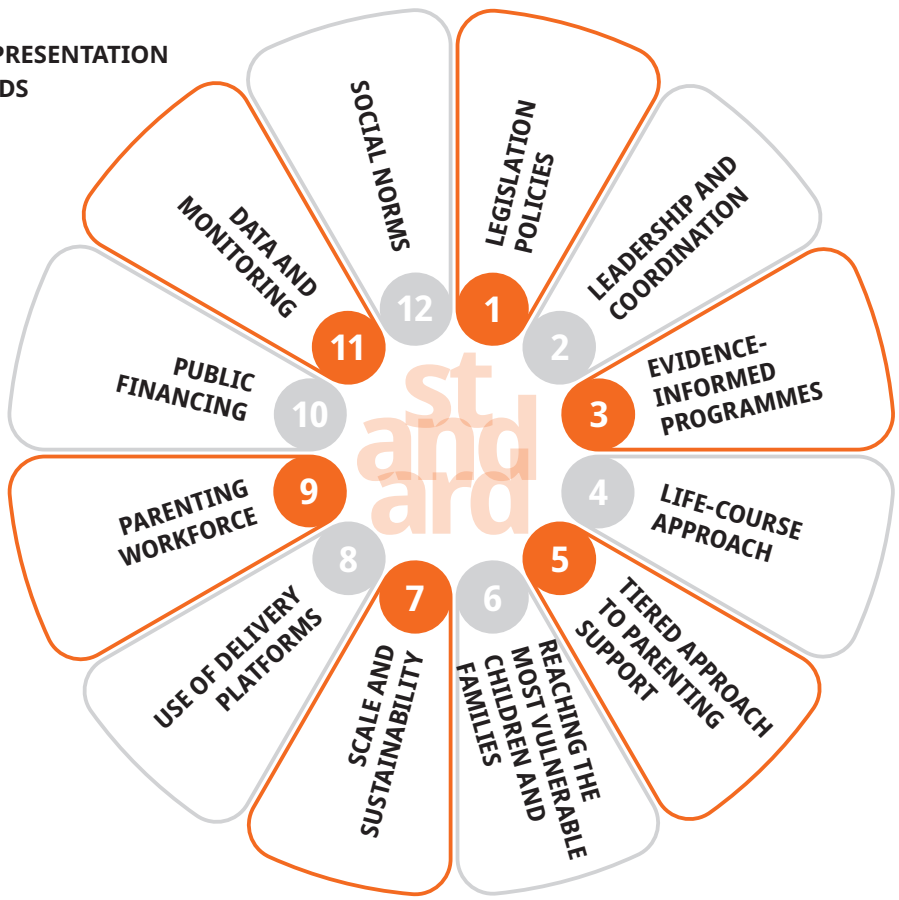
9 All used definitions related to terms and concepts in the Tool are provided in Annex 1.

10 The entire tool is available in Annex 2.

designed as an interactive self-assessment tool to enable policymakers, experts, practitioners and other stakeholders to systematically review and assess the current situation in the field of parenting support policies and programmes. The assessment is done at the level of each indicator (49) and each standard (12) using a four-level rating: 1 — not in place; 2 — some elements in place; 3 — most elements in place; 4 — all elements in place. Thanks to the way the Tool is defined, this enables the participatory identification of strengths as well as gaps and weaknesses in the current state of parenting support.

The areas and the relevant standards for each domain are based on a set of principles coming from international human and child rights frameworks, the global parenting guidelines of UNICEF, WHO and other frameworks on parenting and nurturing care for early childhood development in the Europe and Central Asia region. **These 12 standards cover key areas which, when in place, create the conditions where governments, in cooperation with partners from civil society, development agencies and other stakeholders, can scale up parenting programmes and interventions to universal coverage, leading to positive outcomes for children of all ages.**[11]

FIGURE 1
GRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION OF 12 STANDARDS



11 The tool is aligned with the Parenting Support Framework for the Early Years developed by the UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, https://www.unicef.org/eca/reports/parenting-support-framework-early-years.

So, relevant stakeholders in a given country use the Tool to assess **whether and to what extent parenting policies are in place**, whether national-level policies recognize the importance of universal parenting support, whether and to what extent parenting is addressed in **sectoral laws and by-laws**, and whether **coordination** of all measures and activities related to such support policies and programmes is in place and how it is organized.

The Tool calls for examining whether **support policies and programmes are informed by science and evidence**, and whether they adequately reflect the national and local context. The Tool guides the relevant stakeholders (self-assessors) towards reconsidering the extent to which a **life-course approach** is present in parenting support policies and programmes, i.e., whether the different needs of parents are monitored depending on the age of the child, but also on the characteristics of the caregivers themselves (e.g., specific needs of older parents or parents who are themselves adolescents, people with disabilities). One of the standards serves as a reminder that policies should be defined in such a way that they have developed **strategies to reach the most vulnerable**, often marginalized groups of parents, reach those who have numerous and complex needs and who may not be able to get the necessary support on their own. In line with this, one of the standards focuses on checking whether the parenting support system is organized to use all possible opportunities (**different platforms**, related services, adequate information) to ensure parenting support is 'close' to parents and sends coordinated messages and guidance. Also, **social norms** are specifically reviewed, to see whether and to what extent existing policies recognize and define harmful practices, while promoting those that encourage positive and responsible parenting.

As the entire tool is based on the premise that we should aim for universal parenting support, it is reviewed whether parenting support interventions and programmes are clearly categorized into universal, focused (targeted) and intensive and whether all these levels are present (**tiered approach**).

Particularly important is the standard that indicates the necessity for parenting support to be provided by trained providers, i.e., that **there is a strategic approach to the development of human resources in this area**, as well as allocated funds, and that there are competency standards that various professionals and paraprofessionals in the area should meet.

Several standards raise the **question of financing**, that there are checks whether and to what extent support programmes are recognized in the budgets at the national and local level, and whether there is continuity in financing, without which there is no sustainability and scalability, nor the possibility of reaching the principle of universal parenting support. There is also the question of whether to aim for financing only those programmes that have proven to be successful, which also involves the standard that examines the existence and functioning of the **systems for data gathering and assessing the success of existing support programmes based on data**.

According to the methodology proposed by the authors of the Tool, the assessment conducted with this tool includes:

a) *Identifying key stakeholders that will participate in the assessment process.*

b) *Establishing a working group for monitoring the assessment process.* This can be a part of an already existing working group or a working group established for this purpose, depending on the context in the country.

c) A *review of standards* to ensure that there is a common understanding of how definitions of standards apply in the country and to agree on the use of nationally appropriate definitions, while ensuring that they still remain consistent with global definitions.

d) *Mapping the current context of parenting support* in the country:

- Desk research of the literature to find information on policies, services and content, scope and coverage of different types of programmes and interventions against the

12 standards, then complete a draft version of the benchmarking tool supported by findings from the desk research to be reviewed by key stakeholders.

- Comprehensive mapping can include the following participative activities: workshops with key stakeholders; desk review of literature together with interviews with key informants; regular participative stock-taking of the progress by the working group; participative meeting for stock-taking and reaching a consensus on final assessment as part of the planning process in the country. In some countries, the process can be conducted on the national/federal level and selected subnational contexts.

e) *Presenting the results of the assessment* in the national report that can be used for ongoing planning and/or advocacy.

The methodology selected by the team of consultants in Serbia, in consultations with the UNICEF office in Serbia, UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia and through regular exchange of experience between consultants and pilot countries and the Tool authors is the following:

a) Adapting the text of the Tool to the terminology and context in the Republic of Serbia:

The Tool was translated to Serbian by a translator, and then adapted with the help of a team of selected consultants, so that it fits within the context of the Serbian language and the usual professional terminology. The UNICEF office in Serbia and professionals in the field of parenting and care for children and young people were consulted in the process of adapting the translated text.

b) Establishing a working group for monitoring the assessment process:

Members of the Working Group for monitoring the implementation of the National Programme for Improving Early Childhood Development (multidisciplinary, multisectoral), established by the Minister of Health in 2021, took over the task of the Working Group for monitoring the assessment process.

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Members of this intersectoral working group, which brings together representatives from the sectors of health, education, social protection and family welfare, UNICEF, the scientific community, creators of important ongoing support programmes for children and families, and parents' associations, were presented with the Tool, the methodology proposal and the workplan for preparing the national report in May 2024.

c) **Mapping of the current parenting context in the country** involved desk research and a participative process with key stakeholders:

- *Desk research*: The desk research took place in two phases: in May and June, with a greater focus on early childhood development; while in the additional mapping conducted in July 2024, the focus was shifted to parenting of young people. The process involved: mapping of secondary sources of information (legislation, websites of ministries, policy documents, accreditation bodies for training programmes); desk research of the literature to find information on policies, services and the content, scope and coverage of different types of parenting programmes and interventions; and completing the list of documents and parenting support programmes in accordance with the information and recommendations obtained through interviews and focus group discussions.

  The team analysed public policies, which are always intersectoral by their nature (strategies, programmes, action plans), followed by laws, regulations and by-laws from various sectors (health, education, social protection, family welfare and demography, youth and local self-government).[12] Document analysis is organized on two levels:

  Level 1. A rapid assessment of how important a document is for the field of parenting[13] aimed to make a first selection of the documents using the following classification without using the standards from the Tool:

  - *Important* for parenting support at *all ages and for a broader target group of parents*;
  - *Important* for parenting support at *some ages or focused on certain target groups*;
  - *Moderately important* for parenting support, including those with room for improvement and having greater importance;
  - *Not important*, but can and should be improved to increase importance.

  Level 2. Analysis of relevant documents and analysis of available parenting support programmes: a brief overview of the relevant strategic and normative framework, as well as programmes addressing parenting support, is presented in the findings of this document.

  Rapid assessment (level 1) showed that there are numerous documents and increasingly more programmes that address parenting support in different ways and at different levels. In line with this, a separate document was developed: 'Mapping — Detailed Analysis of the Strategic and Normative Framework and Available Parenting Support Programmes '. The document will include relevant parts from individual documents, as well as a more detailed analysis of individual documents in accordance with the standards provided by the Tool. In accordance with the available written sources, information provided by interviewed stakeholders and recommendations of the working group for monitoring the assessment

12 The list of reviewed documents is provided in Annex 3.

13 A rapid assessment of the document's importance to the topic of the report is provided in Annex 4

process, a number of active parenting support programmes will also be presented and analysed against the relevant standards. The Mapping will be an integral part of this report,[14] as one of the annexes, but it will also be used as a stand-alone report intended for policymakers, representatives of various sectors and researchers, as a comprehensive baseline study of parenting support policies and programmes in 2024.

- *Participative processes with key stakeholders*: there were contacts with various stakeholders, including parents of young children, individually or in groups, in person, online and in writing, always following a preliminary desk analysis of collected basic information on the topics to be discussed. Two validation workshops were organized. The first one was held in June 2024, in the middle of the data-gathering process. It brought together representatives of four ministries and had the task of presenting the analysis so far and complementing it with parenting support documents and programmes that were missing or were not recognized. Finally, on 26 March 2025, a workshop was held with the working group responsible for validating the process of drafting the national report, validating the findings and recommendations of the Report, as well as for the final assessment of the level of development of parenting support policies and programmes in Serbia (ratings 1–4).

For contact with informants and various stakeholders, the following were prepared: guides for individual and group interviews with questions that are differently focused depending on the stakeholder's sector or field of work,[15] written questions for different stakeholders with a request to answer them in writing and general scenarios for validation workshops.[16]

During the period of drafting the *Benchmarking Report on Parenting Support Policies and Programmes in the Republic of Serbia*, there were 4 individual interviews with representatives of the Ministry, 5 group interviews (with 15 informants), 1 focus group discussion with parents 13 informants) and 2 validation workshops.[17]

d) Drafting the "Benchmarking Report on Parenting Support Policies and Programmes in the Republic of Serbia".

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14 The document 'Mapping — Detailed Analysis of the Strategic and Normative Framework and Available Parenting Support Programmes' is provided in Annex 5.
15 Interview guides are provided in Annex 7.
16 Example provided in Annex 6.
17 List of interviews and other contacts provided in Annex 9.

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METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

The first methodological limitation for completing this task is the fact that the methodology itself is being piloted simultaneously with achieving the main objective of the analysis, i.e., the drafting of the national report, as it has not previously been applied or tested in practice.

The proposed tool, i.e., the methodology, is very complex and comprehensive and is not easily applicable in the context of countries that lack a unified child support policy and, consequently, a unified approach to parenting support. For this reason, during the implementation of the task, the team of consultants continuously had to adapt the existing methodology and develop a form of methodology tailored to the specific national context.

As the consulting team decided to expand the conceptual framework and operational definitions offered by the Tool with additional conceptualizations present in the national normative and scientific research context and use them equally in the analysis and communication with stakeholders, the translation and adaptation of the proposed tool to the national context required additional effort and time.

The Tool requires that the level of development of parenting support policies and programmes be assessed (ratings 1–4) for each standard and checkpoint by respondents during individual focus group discussions and interviews. Due to the extensive content of the Tool itself, as well as the informants' inability to provide a comprehensive overview (because they usually provided only information from the perspective of their respective sectors), this was not feasible in individual interviews; therefore, the rating process was conducted solely as a joint activity of participants during the final validation workshop, using an already prepared version of the report shared with participants in advance that did not include the ratings.

Another limitation in conducting the research in the Republic of Serbia was the insufficient differentiation between the concepts of parenting support, family support and child protection. Parenting support, i.e., the support in the form of counselling and direct support for parenting skills, is insufficiently recognized and not distinguished as a separate area, either in policies or in the opinions and assessments of most relevant stakeholders.

An additional limitation was the inconsistent definition of age categories for children and young people both in the normative framework in Serbia and in the analysed international documents: the period of early childhood varies across national documents; the age ranges for young people vary; there are certain variations within the age limits of adolescence, etc.

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to the Criteria for Ethical Review Checklist, the research design does not include elements that would require the involvement of an ethics committee.

The research adheres to all principles and standards arising from the scientific standards and scientific research ethics, and follows the principles of the *Code of Conduct in Scientific Research Work*.

To ensure that the human rights of participants are protected from any form of violation, due attention was paid throughout the research to the observance of the following ethical standards:

- **Informed consent**: Official invitations to participate in interviews and/or focus group discussions were sent to professionals, to which they voluntarily agreed by providing documented consent.[18]
- **Confidentiality of information**: Following their consent to participate in interviews and/or focus group discussions, professionals were additionally informed that the data and content of the discussions would not be disclosed, and that the report would be prepared at the level of a summary analysis of the content after the interviews and focus group discussions.

18 An example of the informed consent is provided in Annex 8.

FINDINGS

The current normative and institutional framework of parenting support (policies) and parenting support programmes in the Republic of Serbia

In line with the planned methodology, based on desk research and contacts with stakeholders, a list of documents was compiled, and a rapid analysis indicated that at least 40 documents (strategic and normative documents)[19] address parenting and parenting support to some extent. It was assessed that five of these documents are important for parenting support across all ages of children and young people and for a broader target group of parents; nine documents are important for parenting support, but they focus only on a specific age group or a specific target group. One part of the documents was not recognized as important and was not analysed in detail, except when it was believed that they need to be improved in order to be more focused on parenting. On the one hand, these data indicate that there is interest and concern on the part of the State for parenting support, but on the other hand, that the care and support are fragmented, not coordinated and not specifically highlighted and emphasized. Parenting support is rarely among the key objectives of strategies, sometimes it appears among the specific objectives, and more often it is found among individual measures or is specified in the activities within action plans. Within the normative framework, parenting support is more frequently recognized in by-laws than in laws. This approach to the topic is met with dissatisfaction in interviews with representatives of the academic community and professionals who focus specifically on parenting support. Due to the high degree of fragmentation in the approach, they do not sufficiently recognize even the existing, present elements of parenting support policies.

The sectors primarily addressing parenting are the health sector, social protection sector, family law protection sector and education sector, and they address the issue in different ways, but always partially, within a selected

19 Parenting support programmes were not assessed, they were only listed.

area of child or family protection. When it comes to intersectoral strategies, in addition to the dominant presence of these sectors in drafting, coordinating and implementing strategies addressing the topic of parenting, the sectors of youth, human and minority rights, interior affairs and justice are also noted. Institutions such as the Protector of Citizens and the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality also play a significant role, as do representatives of civil society organizations and the target groups themselves. The Council for Child Rights is recognized as a potential overarching coordinator for both child-related policies and parenting policies; however, the analysed documents and interviews with relevant stakeholders indicate it is currently inactive.

Two strategies among those analysed are the most focused on the topic of parenting: the *Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence 2020–2023*[20] and the *Strategy for the Encouragement of Childbirth* from 2018.[21] Since they address support to parenting of children of all ages and a broad target group of parents, they have the greatest potential for a universal progressive approach to parenting support, as recommended by the Tool.

The *Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence for the period 2020 to 2023*, with the Action Plan for 2020–2021, which has expired (there is no information about a new strategy being developed), is the strategy that most comprehensively recognizes the importance of parenting support for children of all ages. It is based on contemporary scientific approaches to child upbringing and care, and primarily on protecting children from all forms of violence (abuse, neglect and exploitation), and it specifies already evaluated successful parenting support programmes and the plans to scale them, and advocates for expanding to new areas of parenting support. One of the 11 priorities of this strategy is 'Support to families for the development of parenting competencies', and two measures of the first objective of the strategy are specifically related to the topic of this report. Unfortunately, there is no record of its implementation. In addition to family-friendly policies, the *Strategy for the Encouragement of Childbirth* from 2018[22] also defines measures that are directly related to strengthening the parenting role competencies. It defines a special objective of the strategy — reducing the psychological cost of parenting — and two specific objectives directly address parenting. It recognizes the need for both universal and targeted, as well as intensive, parenting support programmes, and the needs of parents from vulnerable groups. It is more focused on family planning support and on the needs of parents for parenting support during early childhood. It is more dedicated to implementing family-friendly policies than to strengthening parenting. It has been noted in interviews that stakeholders do not recognize or mention this Strategy as relevant, despite the rich content it offers in the area of parenting support.

Three rulebooks from the education system, the *Rulebook on the programme of all forms of work of professional associates (in education institutions),* the *Rulebook on the programme of all forms of work of professional associates in preschool institutions* and the *Rulebook on the actions in the institution in response to violence, abuse and neglect*, were classified during the rapid analysis **as important for parenting support at all ages and for a broader target group of parents***.* Unlike the umbrella laws in education, which (as expected) do not have a deeper focus on parenting support, the mentioned rulebooks recognize 'working with parents or guardians' as one of the tasks of professional associates in both the preschool and school systems.

Then, there are strategies and normative documents **important for parenting support, but focused on certain ages or certain target groups**.

Documents important for parenting support **but focusing only on early age** primarily belong to the health system: *Regulation on the National Programme for Improving Early Childhood Development* (2016) and *Support to Early Childhood Development — Call for Action of the Government of the Republic of Serbia* (2018), with special focus on DCUs, polyvalent visiting nurse service, parenting school, Halo Beba app, which has evolved into the Bebbo mobile app; *Professional methodological*

20 Expired, but taken into consideration because it significantly addresses parenting.

21 Strategy duration not defined.

22 Strategy duration not defined.

instructions for conducting home visits of the polyvalent visiting nurse service to families with pregnant women and children (2024).[23]

The *Regulation on the National Programme for Improving Early Childhood Development* recognizes the well-being of parents as a requirement for optimal child development, recognizes the need and necessity for the education of all parents and additional support for certain groups of parents, as well as for parents of children from vulnerable groups. Out of four general objectives, two address parenting support significantly. Through specific objectives, it adequately defines the contents of the programmes for parents and the theoretical concepts underpinning the parenting support approach, fosters an interdisciplinary approach, insists on the training of professionals in the field of parenting support, particularly for the earliest age group and vulnerable families, and expands the platforms for support delivery. Although coming from one sector, it seeks and promotes intersectoral cooperation. It provides guidance as well as concrete task descriptions for various professionals in the context of parenting support (less specific than task descriptions for professional associates in education). According to data obtained from interviews with experts, it is said that this Regulation on the National Programme is a step forward and the momentum in an attempt to understand early childhood development support broadly enough, and to shift the focus from the child to the entire family. On the other hand, the informants said that this document is not enough to provide complete support and that there needs to be a way to link it more adequately with other regulations, strategies and laws. They confirmed its relevance even though it dates back to 2016. Representatives of other ministries, not only the Ministry of Health, also recognize this regulation, find it important and refer to it.

Support to Early Childhood Development — Call for Action of the Government of the Republic of Serbia from 2018 is a multisectoral document that indicates the direction of necessary changes in supporting children in their early development and their families. The document has six priorities, the first of which is parenting support and contains specific objectives and measures aimed at parenting support. The document does not deal in detail with parenting and parenting programmes, but it provides a sufficiently sound framework and direction for work in this area based on contemporary theories of parenting and early childhood development.

In line with the above, in 2021, the Minister of Health issued a decision establishing a multisectoral and interdisciplinary Special Working Group for monitoring the implementation of the National Programme for Improving Early Childhood Development, which is an important foundation for further planning in the field of early childhood development today.

The mentioned documents in the field of early childhood development rightly highlight the importance of DCUs and plan to improve their work. Although DCUs are places that predominantly provide individual counselling and instructional work with parents of children with developmental disabilities, they have the potential for universal parenting support during the early years of the child, which is encouraged through the measures of the mentioned programmes. Similarly, the mentioned documents highlight the need to improve the way of working and the content of parenting schools and the importance of sustainability and innovation of the Bebbo app.

Important for parenting support, **although with a greater focus on the children from school-age up to adulthood**, is the I Protect You (Čuvam te) app developed within the education system. The application is intended for both children and teachers and parents of children of the specified age.

Important for parenting support, **although with a greater focus on the age group of adolescents and young people**, is the multisectoral document *Multilateral memorandum of understanding and cooperation in the field of prevention and protection of mental health of children, adolescents and young people* (MMMH), signed by representatives of the Ministry of Health (MoH), Ministry of Education (MoE), Ministry of Tourism and Youth (MoTY), Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs

23 Developed in 2024 based on the experiences of the project Scaling-up Playful Parenting, implemented with the support of the LEGO Foundation, within the Cooperation Programme of UNICEF Serbia, the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Serbia and the City Institute for Public Health Belgrade.

(MoLEVSA), Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue (MoHMRSD) and the Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography (MoFWD). An Action Plan for the period until 2029 was also developed, where, for example, MoLEVSA has committed, among other things, to support the development and implementation of parenting support programmes aimed at building nurturing and caring skills, positive parenting practices and non-violent disciplining of children during childhood and youth, particularly recognizing vulnerable target groups.

Important for parenting support, **although with a focus on one vulnerable group**, is the *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women in the Republic of Serbia (2022–2030)* with the Action Plan 2022–2024. This is an example of a strategy that addresses improving the quality of life of a particularly vulnerable group, but within its scope, it comprehensively addresses parenting support, respecting the characteristics of this target group. It also analyses the importance of specific support mechanisms for the Roma national minority, such as 'health mediators' working in primary health care centres within the polyvalent visiting nurse service (75 mediators according to the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women from 2022).

Several rulebooks from the **social protection system** were classified through the rapid analysis as documents **important for parenting support, but with a focus on families in need of additional support**, since the social protection system in Serbia is not oriented towards working with the entire population. The *Rulebook on the organization, norms and standards of work of the centres for social work* (CSW) describes that in order to protect the best interests of the child, the CSW professional workers can conduct the procedure of assessing the capacities of parents to perform the parental roles and recommend certain services and measures in order to support parenting or to correct inadequate parenting practices in order to protect the child. Parenting support in the social protection system is predominantly provided through a set of counselling/therapeutic and socio-educational services presented as a group of services in the Law on Social Protection from 2011. However, the minimum standards and requirements for the provision of this group of services have not yet been defined in by-laws (with the exceptions such as counselling and support for foster parents through the *Rulebook on foster care* or for victims of domestic violence through the *Rulebook on detailed conditions and standards for the provision of the SOS hotline services for women with the experience of violence*). It is encouraging that interviewed people say that MoLEVSA has established working groups tasked with defining in greater detail the standards of individual services within the set of counselling/therapeutic and socio-educational services and that draft Rulebooks are expected by the end of 2024. It is also recognized that, with the support of UNICEF in recent years, the competencies of employees within the social protection system for parenting support have been visibly strengthened, both in CSWs and among service providers (trainings for Family Outreach Worker, Playful Parenting, and Be the Hand That Loves), and the Marriage and Family Counselling Service is also being supported. The importance of assessing caregiving capacities and improving such capacities through trainings is also evidenced by the *Instructions on the work methodology of the centre for social work — guardianship authority in the adoption procedure* and the *Professional methodological instructions for the work of guardianship authority in the procedure of maintaining the personal relations of a child with a parent, relatives and other persons with whom he/she has a special closeness in controlled conditions*.

Listed below are both strategic and normative documents that have been assessed as **moderately important** for parenting support or moderately important but with the potential to be improved in order to contribute more to parenting support. These are: *Strategy for Improving the Position of Persons with Disabilities (2020–2024); Revised Action Plan for Negotiating Chapter 23 ; Regulation on the National Programme for the Support of Breastfeeding, Family Care and Developmental Care of the Newborn,* and *Professional methodological instructions for maintaining medical documentation and records and reporting in the Programme for the Support of Breastfeeding ; Regulation on the national health care programme for women, children and youth; Professional methodological instructions for the implementation of the Regulation on the national health care programme for women, children and youth ;* Guide for Monitoring Child Development, Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ)*, Law on the Foundations of the Education System; Law on Preschool Education* ; *Preschool Curriculum Framework — the Years of Ascent; Standards of*

competencies of preschool teachers and their professional development; *Rulebook on pedagogical and andragogic assistants; Law on Social Protection; Law on Financial Support to Families with Children,* the part about financial benefits in the *Law on Social Protection;* and the majority of the *Strategy for the Encouragement of Childbirth* are examples of family-friendly policies.

From the documents that were assessed through a rapid analysis as documents that are **not important** for the area relevant for the report (i.e., the area of parenting support), there are a few that stand out that, bearing in mind the area they address or the influence they have, need to recognize the importance of parenting support to a greater extent: *Family Law, Strategy of Deinstitutionalization and Development of Social Protection Services for the period 2022–2026, Rulebook on detailed conditions and standards for the provision of social protection services,* and *Rulebook on the Municipal Council of Parents*.

Through the analysis of strategic, normative and other documents, interviews with representatives of the UNICEF office in Belgrade and professionals working in the field of parenting support, both the presence and the level of development of parenting support programmes were examined. The *Benchmarking tool for parenting support policies and programmes* defines parenting support **programmes** in several ways, but primarily as concrete interventions, activities or services aiming to strengthen parental knowledge, behaviours and practices for support of child development and parental well-being. The Tool Framework uses the term 'programme' interchangeably with 'service' and 'intervention' to capture the broad range of diverse activities that contribute to more successful parenting. Interventions can be integrated into existing services or organized as separate programmes.

The findings indicate an **increasing number of programmes, interventions, and activities** that focus on strengthening the capacities of parents for the parental role, and as the Tool suggests, parenting support programmes appear in different modalities, through different approaches:

- Programmes for working with parents (in the narrower sense), which have a precisely defined content, manuals with instructions and materials for the programme implementation. Such programmes are most often group-based, with a defined number of meetings according to a certain schedule. They are sometimes combined with individual work or field visits. The following programmes are designed and implemented in this way: Strong Families, CFC — Caring for the Caregiver; Parenting skills training; Strong from the Start — Dam len phaka; Support, not Perfection, Socio-educational programme for the family — parenting school, etc.

- Trainings for strengthening the capacities of professionals who are in contact with parents: through these trainings, professionals learn about new approaches to parenting, gain new knowledge about parenting, as well as new skills for working with parents. Practically, through trainings such as Playful Parenting or Five P — Be the Hand That Loves, professionals do not get ready-made programmes for working with parents but improve their existing knowledge in the field of parenting. Then they integrate this knowledge into their daily work with the parents of children they are in contact with, within their regular jobs, which are most often focused on children. Also, those professionals who work directly with parents on parenting integrate this knowledge into their work, which enriches and guides their way of working with parents on parenting.

- Programmes such as Family-centred Early Interventions, Family Outreach Worker or Family Strengthening, Support groups with families of unemployed young people with the experience of psychiatric hospitalization are family support programmes but with a high focus on parenting in particularly vulnerable families. These intensive and time-limited family work programmes involve trainings for the implementation of the programmes, offering (just like the previously described concept) certain principles, concepts, skills for professionals, but not a set of clearly defined contents with a description of each meeting with parents.

- A different modality is represented by, for example, the Parenting Helpline, counselling work with parents in counselling offices within the social protection system and in certain civil society

organizations (CSOs), in the shelter, through the drop-in centre mobile team, and they provide current individualized support to the broadest population of parents or target groups of parents.

There are two prominent digital forms for the dissemination of parenting support programmes: one directly aimed at parents — Bebbo mobile application and one aimed at various beneficiary groups including parents — I Protect You.

The above list is certainly not exhaustive, it is very possible that there are other parenting support programmes not mentioned here, and so this list is also a call for additions. Annex 5 provides a more detailed description of various programmes, interventions and services aimed at strengthening parenting. These are mostly programmes for which there is some evidence of validity (accredited in one of the sectors or having available external evaluations). However, listed here are also support programmes that are only getting started and do not have such strong evidence of success, but they are important because of the target group they address or the age group they focus on, etc.

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Level of development of parenting support policies and programmes measured with the tool with 12 standards

DOMAIN 1: LEGISLATION AND POLICIES

The standard for the domain Legislation and Policies aims to assess the extent to which national strategies and sectoral laws, i.e., the entire normative framework in Serbia, include and are conducive to parenting support. *The question arises as to whether there is a national-level obligation to implement parenting support — as a framework for implementing policies, programmes and interventions. In particular, whether there is an obligation to provide universal parenting support, and then, how sectoral documents address the issue of parenting, are there budgets in place to implement planned support, and whether parenting support policies are accompanied by key family-friendly policies.*

In the Republic of Serbia, **there is no** dedicated strategy (a multisectoral policy framework) that explicitly states the Government's commitment to parenting support as a primary goal, with defined specific objectives and measures for implementation, and planned financial and human resources. Therefore, there is no unified framework for implementing policies/plans and parenting programmes and interventions. Furthermore, the universal progressive approach, i.e., the aspiration towards universal parenting support, is not recognized. Nor is there a dedicated strategy or law that comprehensively addresses the child, the protection of their rights and safety in accordance with their age (0–18), one that would encompass key issues of parenting support in one place. What is encouraging is information from the Action Plan for MMMH (2024–2029), where MoFWD announces the drafting of the Family Strategy, which could definitely be the multisectoral policy framework to explicitly stipulate the commitment to parenting support as one of the main objectives.

However, the desk research and interviews with relevant stakeholders show that there are multisectoral

documents where the Government (*Support to Early Childhood Development — Call for Action of the Government of the Republic of Serbia*) or several ministries (MMMH) **commit to coordinated support to children and young people** and recognize parenting support as a mandatory aspect of support to children and young people. Then, there are Strategies as planning documents at the national level that address important issues related to children, families or vulnerable groups, which, within their goals or specific measures, recognize the necessity of parenting support within the area they primarily address (e.g., *Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence 2020–2023* (expired), *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women in the Republic of Serbia (2022–2030), Strategy for the Encouragement of Childbirth* from 2018 — duration not defined, *Strategy for Improving the Position of Persons with Disabilities 2020–2024* (new strategy under development)). Strategies are usually accompanied by action plans with defined required funds and recognized responsible sectors. The problem is the lack of monitoring of the implementation of measures and activities prescribed in action plans. The problem that appears is that action plans have often expired or that there are no publicly available reports on the implementation and effects (results) of implemented measures.

Sectoral laws and by-laws related to the development and well-being of families, children and adolescents also contain chapters or individual provisions concerning parenting support. A good example includes the *Regulation on the National Programme for Improving Early Childhood Development* and the *Regulation on the National Programme for the Support of Breastfeeding, Family Care and Developmental Care of the Newborn* in the health sector. The *Law on the Foundations of the Education System* is accompanied by an entire set of laws and by-laws that significantly and precisely define the relationship between schools and parents, as well as the responsibilities of school staff for parenting support. In the social protection system, the *Law on Social Protection* defines the family as the key beneficiary, then there are also rulebooks that further specify the role of institutions and services within the social protection system for parenting support. The Family Law primarily addresses rights and obligations but not parenting support. It is encouraging that the Action Plan for the MMMH says that amendments to the **Family Law** by-laws will introduce **a ban on corporal punishment of** children. However, it is still not clear whether the State will commit to providing a minimum package of support to parents, to help them develop capacities and skills for safe and nurturing monitoring and responding to children's developmental needs, and ensuring optimal care and upbringing.

Depending on the level of the legislation, the conditions under which these obligations are implemented may or may not be described in the laws and by-laws addressing parenting support in specific articles.

In recent years, there has been great progress in key **family-friendly policies**. Unlike the piloted Tool, which sees family-friendly policies as part of the parenting support policies, family-friendly policies in Serbia are seen as a broader and more comprehensive concept than parenting support. In addition to key family-friendly support measures, the *Strategy for the Encouragement of Childbirth* from 2018[24] highlights key goals such as reducing the psychological cost of parenting, establishing gender balance in private life, gender equality in parenting, introducing paid parental leave, pointing out the role of the father in raising children, etc. An entire set of measures, rights and services belonging to family-friendly measures is defined in the *Law on Financial Support to Families with Children* and the *Law on Social Protection* in the part related to financial benefits to individuals and families. There are precisely defined conditions and the manner for exercising rights, and the majority of rights are funded from the national level and administered from the local level.

There are several strategies displaying a clearly defined holistic and intersectoral approach to the child and the family, with the focus on support to parents and parenting for adequate and timely protection of the child: *Strategy for the Encouragement of Childbirth*, *Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence* and *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women*. Out of the intersectoral documents that do not have the status of a strategy, there is the request

24 This strategy uses annual regulations to define the fields and amount of the funds allocated for the implementation of the strategy, rather than doing it through the action plan.

of the Government of Serbia for support to early childhood development — Call for Action (2018). Out of the sectoral documents, the *Regulation on the National Programme for Improving Early Childhood Development* is an excellent example of the holistic approach and the call to intersectoral cooperation and coordination, without which this National Programme would not be feasible.

The mentioned documents are not in conflict with each other, but neither do they rely on each other. Furthermore, there is a question whether all documents addressing the family and children sufficiently recognize the importance of parenting support. An additional challenge lies in the lack of coherence and uniformity in the analysed documents, i.e., the absence of a clear national plan that would unify various sectoral efforts within the topic of parenting and enable them to go beyond the existing domains within which they are addressed (e.g., violence prevention, early childhood development or family-friendly policies). Also, among the documents recognized as having good potential (e.g., Call for Action), it can be noted that they provide only a partial framework for implementing policies/plans and parenting programmes and interventions, they are limited to parenting of younger children (e.g., the *Regulation on the National Programme for Improving Early Childhood Development*) or simply do not use the potential they have. The Family Law could be the umbrella law providing the general framework for the mandatory and publicly financed universal and evidence-informed parenting support, aligned with modern scientific knowledge and already evaluated successful programmes, and reference the by-laws or other laws that would define in greater detail the aspects of this requirement. The Family Law would therefore introduce the policy/concept of universal parenting support as one of the ways to prevent child neglect and violence against children. The existing documents are also often not sufficiently promoted or visible, so they are practically not accessible and not sufficiently usable. Very often, there are no data on the implementation of the recommended measures provided in the document (e.g., *Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence*).

Additionally, the data from the interview show that experts believe that it may not even be necessary to have a single document, but that it would be preferable for the existing documents to be better connected, when it comes to parenting, and that the strategic commitment of the State to address this topic is recognized in various documents that complement each other. The informants point out in the interviews that, regardless of the good quality of individual documents, they are not sufficient to ensure comprehensive support, and that there needs to be a way to better connect policies with other regulations, strategies and laws. Additionally, they say there is insufficient visibility and promotion of strategies, and particularly reports on the monitoring of their implementation, which would help with the development of evidence-informed policies, programmes, measures and services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Define the national plan that would unify the currently fragmented but adequately defined objectives, measures and activities focused on parenting support in various documents, both strategies and accompanying action plans, and in sectoral laws and by-laws.
2. Ensure coherence and harmonization in the approach to parenting support in the existing documents.
3. Ensure the availability of data on the implementation monitoring, i.e., on the achievements and effects (results) of implemented measures on the national and local level, both for professionals and the general public. Ensure high visibility of such findings on the websites of various ministries.
4. Encourage the development of the Family Strategy and ensure that the field of parenting is recognized and defined in this Strategy in line with the Tool (domains and standards) and modern scientific achievements.
5. Ensure that measures and activities from various strategies recognized as relevant have their place in the laws, if that is not already the case, to increase the certainty of their implementation. Consider having one comprehensive law, e.g., Law on Children.
6. When amending the Family Law, primarily in the context of banning physical punishment, initiate the discussion on whether the Family Law should introduce the family-friendly approach, and whether this law should provide the general framework for the mandatory and publicly financed universal and evidence-informed parenting support, aligned with modern scientific knowledge and already evaluated successful programmes, and reference the by-laws or other laws that would define in greater detail the aspects of this requirement. In this way, the normative framework would introduce the discourse that society commits, through the competent sectors, to provide publicly financed parenting support free of charge at all significant transitional points in parenting, with a focus on the child's early years.

DOMAIN 2: LEADERSHIP AND COORDINATION

The standard for this domain refers to exploring whether there is a national coordination mechanism with the mandate of monitoring/overseeing national parenting policies, plans, programmes and interventions at the national level. *The question arises as to whether the established intersectoral coordination mechanisms work, whether their roles and responsibilities are defined, who is included in consultations and whether the participation of children is ensured.*

The analysis of available strategic and normative documents revealed that different ministries play a leading role in implementing policies concerning the child and the family, which, among other issues related to the rights and protection of the rights of the child and the family, also regulate certain aspects of parenting. The key ministries are MoFWD,[25] MoH, MoLEVSA and MoE. In Serbia, **there is no lead body or agency with a clear mandate to oversee national parenting policies and plans**.

In accordance with the Law on Planning Documents, all strategies in the Republic of Serbia are intersectoral documents; they must specify the lead implementer, the method of coordination and the composition of the required coordination body, as well as who is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the strategy. There is always a participatory process that includes all relevant stakeholders in the development of the strategy; it insists on the participation of representatives of the target group and the involvement of both the public and the civil sector. Representatives of the target group are usually represented through CSOs, and in the case of parenting, through parents' organizations. Therefore, there is a legally mandated structure of strategies and action plans, regardless of the content of the document, so that the requirements defined under Standard 2 are also met, to the extent that the strategy and action address parenting. For example, the *Strategy for Prevention of Violence against Children* (expired) is particularly sensitive to the

25 Having in mind that the Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography (MoFWD) was established in 2020, it is evident, based on the current activities of this Ministry, that the responsibilities of the Office of the Minister without Portfolio which was in charge of, for example, the *Call for Action*, have been transferred to this Ministry.

principle of participation, the involvement of those who are affected by the topic, both in the strategy planning and development phase, as well as in the monitoring process. That is why it is emphasized that it is necessary, in accordance with the principle of children's participation (as one of the main principles on which this Strategy is based), to develop mechanisms that will ensure children's participation in the management of the Strategy, i.e., in the process of monitoring, reporting and evaluating the implementation of the Strategy.

A review of the selected strategies confirms that **intersectoral coordination committees are planned and most often are established based on the authority of the agreed lead ministry** (available documents with delegated members). The texts of the strategies define tasks at the national or subnational levels related to the coordination and monitoring of implementation. For the analysed strategies, the authors of the report were not always able to find information on whether the bodies were established, and if so, whether they are operational, or whether there are published reports of the bodies on their work, on the coordination or implementation of the strategy.

Call for Action of the Government of the Republic of Serbia — Support to Early Childhood Development recognizes the importance of the Government's Council for Child Rights, within which a special working group is formed to address issues of early childhood development and coordinate the activities of various sectors and other stakeholders from society.

Some normative documents, although sectoral (e.g., regulations on national programmes under MoH), have an intersectoral character that is recognized in the established working groups (e.g., the multisectoral and interdisciplinary Special Working Group for monitoring the implementation of the National Programme for Improving Early Childhood Development, or the Working Group for the National Programme for the Support of Breastfeeding, Family Care and Developmental Care of the Newborn, or the National Advisory Board for Early Interventions).

Most of the presented committees or working groups have defined roles and there is available information about their members, but not always about their meetings and completed tasks, nor the reports on monitoring the implementation of strategies or other normative documents. If these documents exist, it is important to ensure their greater transparency and availability to the public.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increase the influence and enhance the work of the Council for Child Rights and enable strengthening its role in monitoring all activities addressing issues of rights and protection of rights and safety of children, which includes parenting, in all children's life stages. Otherwise, ensure the establishment of another interministerial coordination body with such an overarching role or secure good coordination of the existing active bodies, e.g., intersectoral working groups for early childhood development and for youth mental health.
2. Consider the possibility of making the Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography the lead ministry in the area of parenting support policies and programmes and the lead of the entire coordination in this area.
3. Consider the possibility for the Parliamentary Committee for Health and Family to become more involved in the field of strengthening parenting.
4. Given that there are already examples of national and local mechanisms addressing children and families, and indirectly touching on parenting topics, ensure mechanisms for their sustainability and mandatory use (e.g., local mechanisms stemming from the Playful Parenting project, newly established Councils for Family and Demography).
5. Ensure greater transparency of the work of coordination mechanisms and reports and findings of their work.
6. Provide mechanisms for direct participation of parents in drafting and especially in monitoring the implementation of policies, a mechanism for independent monitoring of policies, mechanisms allowing for this feedback to reach policymakers, decision makers and other relevant stakeholders.
7. When drafting strategies, plan the financial resources for monitoring the implementation, human and technical resources.

DOMAIN 3: EVIDENCE-INFORMED PROGRAMMES

The standard for the domain Evidence-Informed Programmes asks for policies to require that parenting programmes and interventions adhere to agreed core content and delivery that is evidence-informed and relevant to the national and local context.

Parenting policies and practices should require that parenting programmes and interventions include the following components in their content: ***key areas of parenting behaviour, including child-care behaviours, focus on gender-equitable parenting, self-care and support-seeking****.*

Programmes need to be designed, implemented and evaluated through a consultative process and mechanisms to ensure regular feedback from all relevant stakeholders, including parents. National policies need to contain evidence-informed criteria used for identifying, adapting and providing parenting support programmes and interventions in accordance with the specificities of target groups and the local context.

Existing strategies, in accordance with the Law on Planning Documents, often explicitly require that applied support programmes (in this case for parenting) are scientifically based, evaluated, and that their positive effect on the target group has been proven. Some strategies give specific content or manner of programme delivery, particularly when working with vulnerable groups (Roma national minority, children with developmental disabilities, adults with disabilities and difficulties, etc.). Some strategies and normative documents list concrete support programmes for parents and parenting and propose their scale-up (e.g., improving parenting schools within the *Regulation on the National Programme for Improving Early Childhood Development* and *Regulation on the National Programme for the Support of Breastfeeding, Family Care and Developmental Care of the Newborn*; phone counselling service Halo Beba[26] within the *Regulation on the National Programme for Improving Early Childhood Development* (2016), I Protect You in the *Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence*, Family Outreach Worker in the Strategy of Deinstitutionalization and Action Plan for Chapter 23).

All three key sectors relevant to the field of parenting (health, social protection and education) have a developed quality control system for the continuous professional development of their employees.[27] Most parenting support programmes are designed as trainings for parenting support professionals, and therefore, trainings for these support programmes are often accredited in one or more systems.[28] For example: training for the Playful Parenting programme is intersectoral, for now it is accredited in the systems of education and health; Family-centred Early Interventions (FCEI) is also intersectoral and is accredited in all three systems (education, social protection and health); Caring for the Caregiver is accredited in the health sector, and there are ongoing plans for accreditation in the education sector.

The following trainings have been accredited in the social protection system so far: Be the Hand that Loves, Family Outreach Worker, Family Strengthening, Parenting School, Phone Counselling for Parents. Improving Service Providers' Competencies for Working with Parents of Children with Developmental Disabilities has been submitted for accreditation. The following have been accredited in the education sector: Strong Families programme, Programme for children and families Strong from the Start — Dam Len Phaka, Programme for parents Strong from the Start — Let's Give Them Wings. Caregiver Skills Training is accredited in the health sector.

It can be concluded that the training programmes related to parenting, which are accredited in one of the three systems, certainly meet the majority of the

26 Regulation from 2016 uses the old name for the app currently known as Bebbo.

27 *Rulebook on continuous professional development of teachers, preschool teachers and professional associates* (2021), *Rulebook on detailed conditions for continuous education of health care workers and associates* (2022), *Rulebook on standards and the accreditation procedure of training programmes for professional workers and associates in social protection* (2014).

28 Annex 10 provides a brief description of accreditation requirements in all three systems.

set indicators (e.g., they have a clear theoretical basis, offer a body of evidence, include clear content and methods), because such or similar indicators are included in the competition conditions for submitting training programmes to the accreditation process in the country. On the other hand, the accreditation bodies in these three systems do not emphasize clearly enough the following indicators that the Tool insists on: that the support programme was created through a consultative process and that there are mechanisms for ensuring regular feedback from all relevant stakeholders, as well as that the programme itself is adapted to the unique needs, cultures, languages and values of diverse families. Given that this analysis did not involve an in-depth review of all accredited trainings for parenting support programmes, it cannot be said with certainty that the programmes do not contain these components that are not provided for by the accreditation requirements in the three systems. It is certainly important to note that there are also programmes available in the community that are not accredited as trainings for providing support programmes in any of the three mentioned systems, and their analysis indicates that they meet most of this standard (e.g., Parent Line, Support groups with families of unemployed young people with the experience of psychiatric hospitalization).

Furthermore, it is important to say that programmes like FCEI, Family Outreach Worker, Playful Parenting and Be the Hand that Loves were launched and designed in cooperation between UNICEF and relevant ministries, professionals and the scientific community and that they were designed precisely in accordance with the requirements specified by the Tool. Programmes such as Family Strengthening, Caring for the Caregiver (CFC) and Caregiver Skills Training (CST) are international programmes adapted to the local context. Parenting support programmes adapted to parents of the Roma minority (Programme for children and families Strong from the Start — Dam Len Phaka) and continuations of this programme have also undergone very rigorous checks and analyses beyond accreditation in the education system.

The results of the focus group discussion conducted with parents indicate that it is necessary to prescribe certain standards regarding the provision of parenting support services and ensure their compliance. This way, parents would be better protected from involvement in programmes whose quality has not been tested and proven. Decision makers (MoH) believe that one of the ways of prescribing the quality of provided services could be resolved through the systematization of jobs, and then through a precise description of the manner of providing services related to parenting support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Launch an initiative to organize national competitions for financing programmes aimed at parenting support, whereby the selected programmes should meet the criteria from the Tool. Develop guides for developing parenting support programmes with recommendations based on the Tool and make them available to the professional public.
2. Ensure national and sustainable financing for evidence-informed parenting support programmes.
3. Provide mechanisms for the participation of parents in the creation, implementation and evaluation of parenting support programmes for children and young people.
4. Increase the availability of existing programmes to all families who could benefit from them by following clearly defined steps for identifying, adapting and delivering the programmes in accordance with the specific needs of target groups and the local context.
5. Having in mind that a number of high-quality parenting support programmes primarily focus on improving childcare, it is necessary to encourage programme authors to ensure their programmes encompass all three key areas of parenting behaviour, namely, child-care behaviour, self-care behaviour and help-seeking behaviour.
6. Identify areas where targeted parenting support programmes are lacking (e.g., in situations of domestic violence, for families living in socio-economic deprivation, such as Roma families, parents with difficulties and disabilities) and ensure that such programmes are developed and made available (free of charge) to these particularly vulnerable groups.

DOMAIN 4: LIFE-COURSE APPROACH

> The standard for the domain Life-course Approach requires that parenting support programmes have a life-course approach, that *parenting support policies emphasize the diversity of children's needs according to their age, which are accompanied by corresponding various needs of parents, as well as to take into account the needs of different types of parents, such as young or older parents*.

Since the Republic of Serbia does not have a dedicated strategy or law focusing on the child and child rights, nor dedicated national parenting policies and plans, there is no explicit requirement to comply with the life-course approach while developing parenting support programmes. Depending on the key area addressed by a given policy, the focus is placed on parenting within a specific target group or on a child of a specific age group. The area of parenting has a life-course approach to the extent that the primary policy area requires a life-course approach. When a policy or programme addresses the early development of a child, it will be very dedicated to parenting at that age, whereby it is completely clear that the authors of the programme or policy recognize the specificities of parenting depending on the age of the child or the age of the parents. The approach closest to the life-course approach can be seen in the *Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence,* precisely because the main topic (prevention and protection of children from violence) applies to all age groups of children.

The social protection system in general also has a life-course approach in addressing the child, including parenting, when it explicitly addresses it. This is particularly visible in the *Rulebook on the organization, norms and standards of work of CSWs* and the *Rulebook on foster care*.

The *Strategy for the Encouragement of Childbirth*, although focused on the parenting of children at an early age, very carefully addresses the support to young parents, including adolescent parents. Also, the *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women* is not limited to one period — it recognizes the important topic of parenting and strengthening parenting skills and responsibilities, particularly in the area of including children in the preschool system, as well as in preventing dropout in primary and secondary school. This strategy also addresses a tailored approach to pregnant women and new mothers, field visits by visiting nurses to pregnant women and new mothers in Roma settlements, as well as the inclusion of pregnant women and new mothers in parenting schools. Of course, there is also special focus on preventing underage marriage, as a harmful practice that particularly affects the Roma minority. And when the MMMH talks about family interventions, it focuses on parents of children and young people.

Additionally, by analysing the available programmes, it was observed that they are usually limited to one age group (e.g., the Playful Parenting programme, implemented as part of the primary work of the visiting nurse service, is related to early childhood development; the FCEI programme, aimed at families of children at risk and children with developmental disabilities, refers to the early age; CST), although there are programmes that follow the life-course approach (e.g., Parenting School from 1997, the Family Strengthening service, Family Outreach Worker, Be the Hand that Loves is a programme with the possibility of adaptation to special target ages of children or characteristics of parents). Observing the platforms and/or services for delivering parenting support, it can be said that many of them respect the diverse needs of parents whose children are at different developmental stages, for example: Marriage and Family Counselling Service, Family Strengthening, Family Outreach Worker, Municipal Council of Parents, etc.

Based on the data obtained in focus group discussions, it can be concluded that parents, professionals and decision makers in the country believe that a single programme does not necessarily have to ensure a life-course approach, but that it is important to have programmes that build on one another, i.e., to ensure continuity in the provision of services depending on the age or phase the family is in. Additionally, it would be important for the programmes available to parents in their different life stages to use the same language, the same philosophy and approaches, regardless of where they are provided or by which professionals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Establishing a meta-registry of all parenting support programmes: The existence of a joint registry of (recommended) parenting support programmes (whether trainings intended for professionals to strengthen their professional capacities in this field, or standardized programmes for direct work with parents or other types of programmes) would make it easier to monitor whether a continuum of support exists for all age groups of children and all groups of parents, and to provide timely interventions by requesting the development of missing programmes (to ensure a life-course approach). Such monitoring of available resources of parenting support programmes would be the responsibility of the institution in charge of one of the coordination bodies (Standard 2) or working groups (intersectoral expert groups) mandated by these bodies.

DOMAIN 5: TIERED APPROACH TO PARENTING SUPPORT

Standard: The national/federal parenting policies and plans include universal, targeted and intensive parenting interventions of progressively increasing intensity. This standard explores the existence of different programmes for different groups of parents. *Questions are raised about whether there is a clear structure of parenting programmes based on the intensity and needs of the target group (e.g., universal, targeted, intensive), whether clear criteria have been defined to include parents in programmes offering more focused support and whether these programmes are linked to additional services.*

In the relevant strategies, as well as in the documents of the three key systems dealing with the health, education or social protection of the child and family, and therefore also with parenting, there is a clear understanding that not all children or families have the same need for support, and that the support clearly differs in terms of intensity, depending on the needs of the target group. This difference is visible to the interested reader, but it is not always explicitly stated, and it is not always accompanied by clear terminology explaining to which level a certain programme/intervention belongs.

The *Regulation on the National Programme for Improving Early Childhood Development* (2016) fully recognizes the tiered approach to supporting the child and parenting at an early age. And that is exactly how it classifies its main objectives: 1. *Universal prevention* — measures aimed at all children in the general population ... through support for safe motherhood and responsible parenting... ; 2. *Selective, targeted prevention that includes measures aimed at children exposed to some risk factor for development...* through targeted and timely interventions to reduce risk factors and support children and their parents. 3. *Use of indicated prevention measures to reduce the intensity of the consequences of developmental disabilities through the timely application of early interventions...* It can be said that this National Programme, although originating from a single sector and relating to only one, but crucial, stage of child development and parenting, provides an excellent foundation for further guiding parenting support policies in later stages of a child's life.

The *Strategy for the Encouragement of Childbirth* and the *Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence* also recognize universal measures and those aimed at special target groups of parents or children.

Some sectors or some strategies, in accordance with their mandate, address vulnerable groups, i.e., those who need targeted support in the short or long term. Examples of targeted, focused and even intensive parenting support measures (to the extent that they address parenting) are measures, services and rights in the social protection or measures described in the *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women.* The social protection system has clearly defined criteria for identifying parents in need of targeted, specific support, but the number of available interventions and the availability of these services are insufficient and do not reach all those in need. At the level of specific parenting or child and family support programmes, the following are examples of universal programmes: Playful Parenting, Parenting School in the health care system, Parenting School and Parent Line in the social protection system, Democratic Families, etc. All programmes intended for parents of children with developmental disabilities (FCEI, CST) or parents from socio-economically deprived contexts (e.g., Strong from the Start — Let's Give Them Wings — Dam Len Phaka) are targeted programmes. Family Outreach Worker, Family Strengthening, Strong Families, Support groups with families of unemployed young people with the experience of psychiatric hospitalization are examples of intensive support to family and parenting.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The established meta-registry of all parenting support programmes should include in the description of those programmes the information on whether they are universal, targeted or intensive parenting support programmes.
2. Similar to the model of the National Programme for Improving Early Childhood Development, programmes for improving the development of children and young people in other age groups also need to recognize this tiered approach to parenting support.

DOMAIN 6: REACHING THE MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

This standard is used to assess the method of reaching families that are in the greatest need of support. *Accordingly, questions are raised about the existence of strategies as clear steps for identifying and reaching marginalized families who would benefit from targeted and intensive programmes, while also checking the content of interventions.*

Standard 6 is closely related to Standard 5. This standard primarily focuses on the existence of a strategy for reaching the most vulnerable groups of parents (e.g., adolescent parents, single parents, parents of children with developmental disabilities, parents or caregivers with disabilities, minority ethnic communities, families in crises (displacement, conflict, etc.)). The analysed individual documents identify certain vulnerable groups, and even name specific indicated and intensive support programmes aimed at them, or describe the necessary content and manner of support, but there is a lack of clear steps outlining how to recognize, identify and reach these groups, as well as how to ensure that support is provided to those who need it the most, who may not seek it on their own, or who are even avoiding it due to social isolation or stigmatization following them as families. It is possible that such data may not be found in strategies, regulations or laws (because they are too detailed for the type of analysed documents). These families are indeed the target of measures, rights and services in the social protection system, but the criteria provided for identifying these families often do not outline steps for reaching the most vulnerable; rather, they describe the criteria used to prove that a parent, child or family belongs to a vulnerable group. One of the dilemmas among professionals is precisely whether, for example, some particularly vulnerable families need to have a referral from the Centre for Social Work (CSW) for more intensive support, or if they can access the service in other ways.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Support to all sectors working with children and families, and therefore with parenting, to develop strategies to ensure that the support they provide reaches those who need it most, to develop a proactive approach to the most vulnerable groups. Digital apps can be one way to provide widespread access to support.
2. Universal access, widely available free basic support for all parents (e.g., through the maternity ward and the polyvalent visiting nurse service) is one of the possible ways to ensure a large coverage from the very beginning and make sure that even the most vulnerable parents and families can be included in basic (universal) support, and then introduced to targeted and intensive programmes through a clear system of needs identification and referrals.
3. Develop a communication strategy that will offer tailored methods of communication and provision of information for different target groups of parents and ensure direct communication with the most vulnerable families at the local level.

DOMAIN 7: SCALE AND SUSTAINABILITY

Standard 7 says: The national/federal parenting policies and plans include strategies to ensure scalability, sustainability, long-term impact and reach. *This standard checks whether the analysed documents recognize strategies that ensure scaling up of parenting interventions through budgeted intersectoral strategies, a clear plan for scalability, whether decisions to reapply or scale up something are based on previously successful implementation, and whether innovative methods for scaling up parenting support programmes are used.*

Strategies, and above all action plans accompanying strategies, which are written in accordance with the *Law on the Planning System* by their required document structure, plan the scale-up of mechanisms, measures and services (even parenting support programmes) that have been previously tested and proven. For now, there is no budgeted multisectoral strategy for scaling up universal parenting support and no comprehensive plan for programme scalability.

Some analysed documents (e.g., *Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence* and *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women*, Chapter 23, *Strategy of Deinstitutionalization*, *Regulation on the National Programme for Improving Early Childhood Development*) tentatively propose the scale-up of specific, previously evaluated programmes (Parenting School, Halo Beba, Family Outreach Worker, Playful Parenting, FCEI). The *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women in the Republic of Serbia* explicitly requests scaling up of what has been previously successfully implemented. Programmes such as FCEI, Playful Parenting, Be the Hand that Loves, Family Outreach Worker, Strong from the Start — Let's Give Them Wings, and the remaining two programmes of the organization CIP, had first been piloted and then scaled up in cooperation with a donor and/or a relevant ministry. Some regulations or professional methodological instructions have been updated in the past based on data on previous implementation (e.g., Professional methodological instructions for the Programme for breastfeeding support).

The analysis of action plans and statements from professionals who are the authors of parenting support programmes indicates that scaling up is more often funded through donor funds rather than the national or local budget, leaving the issue of sustainability open. Therein lies the importance of examples of good practice of ensuring the sustainability of programmes that have been piloted and evaluated and partially scaled. The representatives of the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities (SCTM) particularly discussed ensuring the sustainability of relevant parenting support through local plans and budgets in their interview. This organization helped the local self-government units (LSUs) where the Playful Parenting programme was piloted (in 5 LSUs) and then scaled (in another 29 LSUs) with donor funds, to ensure that parenting support was sustained through local funding even after the end of donor funds. The experiences are rather positive: it turned out that 24 LSUs managed to use their development plans or other local strategic documents to secure support for early childhood development

and parenting, contextualized and aligned with the resources available to the LSUs (26 LSUs programmed targeted measures for early childhood development and parenting support), and 31 LSUs signed intersectoral cooperation protocols that would enable the implementation of adopted plans and measures. It was shown that LSUs believe that they have strengthened human resources (through the training of practitioners for Playful Parenting). This experience is also documented through the *Guide for local self-governments for creating a stimulating environment for early childhood development and providing systemic support to parents* (2024). The Guide includes specific steps and activities that need to be implemented at the local self-government level in order to start the initiative and strengthen the process aimed at improving parenting support during early childhood development. The Guide provides guidelines and enables LSUs that did not participate in this process to include parenting support programmes in their local documents and budgets. It also contains strategies for encouraging behaviour change at the level of parenting practices through the coordination and activation of local communities and strengthening the demand for quality support.

The project implemented by MoE in cooperation with UNICEF, with support from the Delegation of the European Union, Enhanced Equal Access to and Completion of Pre-University Education for Children in Need of Additional Support in Education (Learning Together), also reports similar experiences in working with 20 LSUs, 8 of which put parenting support for children of different ages and target groups among their priorities after the project ended.

In relation to innovative methods for scaling up parenting support, it is important to highlight two digital applications, two extremely important platforms for scaling up parenting support, Bebbo and I Protect You. Bebbo is a comprehensive, interactive guide for parents through the parenting and growing up of a child from birth to the first day of school, and its content can be adapted to the age of the individual child. The app was made based on a prototype developed by UNICEF in Serbia and the City Institute for Public Health of Belgrade. MoE had continuous participation in the process of developing the I Protect You digital platform and creating the content of the platform — informative materials, trainings for students, parents, employees in education institutions — and this platform scales up parenting support to parents of children of all ages. The Everything is OK digital platform has also become active recently; it is oriented towards supporting adolescents and young people, and is partly aimed at parenting support for this age group. During interviews and focus group discussions, parents particularly emphasized that they were not sufficiently informed about which of the available digital apps and online information can be considered reliable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop a coordinated strategy with clearly defined budget lines for the further scaling of already proven parenting support programmes, define which programmes need to be present at the local level, which at the inter-municipal or regional level, and determine the timeline for their scaling. This should be the task of the institution that is in charge of the coordination body or working group mandated with these tasks.
2. Develop guidelines related to the funding mechanisms of programmes (national, local or inter-municipal level; pay special attention to programmes accredited in all three systems), develop strategies to determine which programmes are free of charge for beneficiaries and for which programmes beneficiaries may be required to contribute financially.
3. It is necessary to establish continuity between various programmes (for example, the app Bebbo and platform I Protect You), thereby ensuring a reliable digital platform for continuous support to parenting of children from birth to at least the age of 15.
4. Promote different apps (for example, Bebbo and I Protect You) to the general public and strengthen their credibility.

DOMAIN 8: USE OF DELIVERY PLATFORMS (EXISTING SERVICES, MEASURES AND MECHANISMS) FOR SCALE-UP OF PARENTING PROGRAMMES

This standard checks to what extent the parenting interventions are incorporated into the existing services in order to achieve the necessary scope of service provision. In this regard, questions are raised about whether there is a national strategy that enables the provision of parenting programmes through different platforms, whether there is a two-way referral system between the platforms providing services and whether parents are aware of all this.

In the broadest sense, the term platforms in the Tool means sectors in charge of child and family care, so it specifies: Parenting programmes can be organized within existing service delivery platforms, including health care and social services (e.g., cash transfer programmes), education or early learning services, child protection and justice systems or through civil society platforms (e.g., non-formal learning platforms, communities, religious institutions, non-governmental organizations), in order to maximize implementation outcomes and ensure their scalability.

The analysed documents addressing parenting support as part of their primary area of work suggest existing community settings for delivering parenting support. For example, the *Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence* proposes consolidating and supplementing the existing frameworks in various sectors. The Regulation on early childhood development also points out that the gynaecological offices and hospitals, primary health care centres, visiting nurse services, developmental counselling units and family counselling centres, as well as the local communities, are all places where parenting support can be provided. This document also envisages cooperation with other sectors to implement this support. The situation is similar with the *Regulation on the National Programme for the Support of Breastfeeding*.

If the term strategy used in the standard ("There is a strategy for ensuring delivery of parenting programmes and interventions through delivery platforms") is understood as an identified approach or pathway, we can say that individual documents, addressing the topic of parenting, usually recognize where the recommended activities could be implemented within existing systems and as part of already existing services. The following platforms are mentioned: DCU at primary health care centres, youth counselling units at primary health care centres, counselling/therapeutic and socio-educational services, marriage and family counselling services, day-care service, app (digital platform) I Protect You, and youth offices. Participants in focus group discussions believed more explicitly that parenting support programmes should be provided in the natural location of families and children, and that families should not have to go and seek out programmes; instead, programmes should be provided where the families are. Therefore, preschools, schools and primary health care centres, particularly paediatric services with all their staff, have been recognized as the main platforms. That is why modern interdisciplinary and intersectoral programmes such as Playful Parenting, Five P or FCEI conduct trainings in all three sectors and establish the same approach and the same language of professionals in contact with parents. However, it remains unclear which programmes and to what extent should be provided in primary health care centres, preschools or schools, whether the staff working there have sufficient basic skills and whether there is enough time for more dedicated contact with parents.

Decision makers (MoH) believe that it is possible to create conditions to ensure scaling platforms, because the sectors communicate with each other daily and jointly implement certain tasks, but that challenges may arise in the systematization of duties. Already in 2021, MoE developed a systematization of duties of professional associates, which recognizes working with parents as one of their tasks very consistently and thoroughly.

The analysis of specific support programmes indicates that some of them are already being implemented across multiple systems simultaneously and do not exist as separate, time-limited and content-limited sessions, but rather as a method of working and communicating with parents (e.g., Playful Parenting has its use in the visiting nurse service, but also in preschool institutions and social protection; FCEI brings together all three

systems and the support is provided in the parents' natural environment). Support programmes with a clearly defined structure in terms of time and content are also designed to take place in spaces that parents already visit because of their children. It is not always clear how it is planned to ensure time and human resources for the implementation of such programmes (e.g., employees in day-care centres for children with developmental disabilities report that they may have adequate knowledge and skills but not the available time to carry out group work with parents).

Interviewed professionals noted that there are informal referrals for parenting support from one sector to another, but they do not recognize the existence of clear procedures to ensure this. According to them, the following barriers are present even when intersectoral cooperation exists and there is a hypothetical possibility of using different platforms: insufficient number of trained and motivated professionals, unequal geographical coverage, lack of awareness among parents, etc.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The recommendation is that all sectors consistently record the platforms through which parenting support can be provided, list the services that must include parenting support programmes as part of their regular work (e.g., all services for children within the social protection system), job descriptions and a mandatory element of monitoring and supervision, while also allowing room for adapting to local context depending on the resources available in a given community.
2. Create 'local maps' of institutions, organizations and spaces where parenting support programmes can take place or are already taking place. These maps would represent the parenting pathway.

DOMAIN 9: PARENTING WORKFORCE

Standard 9 refers to the strategic planning of human resources in order to provide the highest quality and most inclusive services to parents. This standard asks questions about whether the following segments exist: budgeted workforce mapping; national strategy for the development of human resources; standards regarding minimum training, monetary compensation and supervision within each sector or platform; and finally, whether the professionals providing support to parents have the necessary competencies.

The analysis of existing documents has shown that in the Republic of Serbia, **there is no national strategy** (nor a plan) **focused on the development of human resources** and containing standards for qualifications, trainings and financial compensation for the workforce in the field of work with parents. On the other hand, **individual strategies that focus on other topics recognize the importance of the competencies of professionals** (e.g., the *Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence* highlights the importance of organizing trainings for professionals in health care, social protection, education and the police in order to improve their competencies; the *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women* emphasizes the importance of establishing and improving professional competencies and culturally competent practices of professional workers). **Intersectoral documents** also address the topic of human resources (e.g., MMMH emphasizes the importance of improving the competencies of employees in the social protection and education sectors for the effective provision of support to children and young people, their parents or guardians and other family members in the field of mental health and promotion of healthy lifestyles), and list the trainings that need to be organized or conducted for professionals. However, despite the clear guidelines regarding the improvement of professional capacities within individual strategies, certain issues are detected in practice. For example, in the report on the availability of support measures for children (and parents) of Roma ethnicity, Marković (2020)[29] emphasizes that it is clear

29 Marković, Jelena, *Dostupnost usluga i mera podrške za decu romske nacionalnosti na lokalnom nivou*, [Availability of Local Support Services and Measures for Roma Children], Team for Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade, 2020.

that a significant number of local self-governments still do not have sufficient capacities or, in some cases, the professional knowledge for the effective implementation of social inclusion measures for Roma men and women. Although significant mechanisms have been established to improve and support Roma families and children at the national and local levels, and their usefulness has been proven (such as coordinators for Roma issues, pedagogical assistants, health mediators, mobile teams, etc.), in practice, there are still numerous challenges related to their employment status, defined roles, the recognition of the importance of their roles within the institutions of the system, increasing their numbers and continuously improving the quality of their work through trainings.

When looking at sectoral documents, we can see that the **standards regarding minimum training and required competencies for the work** (with parents) are clearly highlighted through **rulebooks in the education sector** (e.g., *Rulebook on the programme of all forms of work of professional associates*, *Rulebook on the programme of all forms of work of professional associates in preschool institutions*, *Rulebook on pedagogical and andragogic assistants*). In the **social protection sector**, the expected competences are less explicitly highlighted, but they can be recognized through the description of the work of professional workers (e.g., *Rulebook on the organization, norms and standards of work of CSWs*, *Rulebook on foster care*, *Rulebook on licensing*). What is concerning when analysing the *Rulebook on detailed conditions and standards for the provision of services* is that the job description for those engaged in services intended for children does not include a requirement for working with parents. Although the **health sector** also has its rulebooks regarding professional development, specialization, etc., for now, they do not seem to contain discernible standards referring to the required minimum trainings or competencies that would be related to the tasks of providing parenting support. On the other hand, the importance of training health care workers on topics related to cooperation with parents and strengthening parenting competencies, as well as the descriptions of specific tasks, are highlighted in certain documents. The *Regulation on the National Programme for Improving Early Childhood Development* emphasizes the importance of incorporating the early child development field into undergraduate medical studies and relevant specialist studies, into education of nurses at all levels of education, as well as training health care associates while respecting the principles of work based on the bioecological model, functional assessment of developmental achievements, approach centred on the family and strengths of the child and family, reducing risk factors affecting child development, etc. Professional methodological instructions

for home visits organized by the polyvalent visiting nurse service to families with pregnant women and children from 2022 also identify the necessary knowledge and skills of employees for parenting support.

Interviews with experts in the field of parenting have resulted in **some concern about the mismatch** between the job descriptions of certain professionals and their actual competencies (e.g., it was listed that paediatricians are required to advise parents on stimulating early childhood development, but on the other hand, it is possible that paediatricians may not have these skills and knowledge and have not received them through their education). A question can also be raised about different levels of knowledge relevant to working on strengthening parenting, which is acquired during undergraduate studies by professionals in the social protection system (social workers, psychologists, pedagogues, special educators, special pedagogues), and professional associates in the other two systems. While rulebooks in the education system make fine distinctions in the description of tasks related to parenting support for different associates, they have the same tasks in the social protection system. It is also noted that work on parenting is not listed as the 'primary' task in the job description for any position in any of the systems. Professionals from both within and outside the public sector expressed concerns in their interviews that the way their work is organized does not allow sufficient space for working with parents on strengthening parenting capacities (e.g., staff working in day-care centres for children with developmental difficulties believe that they have little or no opportunity to work with parents, although they feel sufficiently competent for that task[30]). It is also recognized that targeted forms of parenting support (for children with developmental disabilities and difficulties, or those exposed to multiple developmental risks such as extreme poverty, domestic violence, neglect, etc.) require highly specific, long-term professional training that goes beyond undergraduate studies and is not sufficiently available. The data obtained from a representative sample of professionals from the three systems are concerning, showing that 17.2 per cent of professionals trust their own parents the most as a source of information on parenting, making this the highest percentage among all sources cited by professionals.[31]

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. It is necessary to conduct a systematic process of analysis, planning and allocation of human resources in the field of providing support to parents and children. Additionally, systematically analyse and plan human resources for monitoring the quality and implementation of parenting support programmes.
2. It is necessary to identify specific roles and tasks, abilities and qualifications for working with parents, and then find and categorize the existing resources.
3. It is necessary to ensure budgeting for trainings and development of professionals.
4. It is necessary to consider the possibility of developing a national strategy that would specify the importance of investing in human resources and trainings of professionals, all with the aim of increasing access to parenting support services and ensuring the adequate allocation of resources for project implementation.
5. Continue with proven successful joint trainings of professionals from different sectors to ensure that families moving through different sectors and in contact with different professionals receive the same basic key messages, that professionals use the same language and develop their attitudes in the same direction.
6. When amending the Rulebook on detailed conditions and standards for the provision of services of social protection, provide the existence of a programme for working with parents as one of the activities in the description of each service intended for children.
7. It should be insisted on that communication with parents regarding childcare, nurturing care, child disciplining and self-care of parents is the task and responsibility of every professional working with children and families — this is not a private or personal choice of each individual, it is a professional requirement and an obligation related to public health.

30 RISP, UNICEF, 'Internal analysis — Mapping the resources of day care centres for working with parents', RISP, UNICEF, Belgrade, 2022.

31 Pejović Milovančević, M., Tošković, O., (eds.), *Istraživanje primene vaspitne discipline nad decom u porodici u Srbiji* [Research on child disciplining at home in Serbia], Institute of Psychology, Belgrade, 2020.

DOMAIN 10: PUBLIC FINANCING

This standard talks about budget allocations for sustainability and scalability of parenting interventions. In line with this, the questions are aimed at whether budgets are being planned, whether allocations are adequate and distributed based on results, whether there are specific reporting requirements, whether strategies have been established for allocating funds from various sources and whether funds are also allocated for data collection.

According to the Law on the Planning System of the Republic of Serbia, all strategies are accompanied by action plans, which implies budget planning for the envisaged activities. Given that the Republic of Serbia does not have a unified strategy for children, nor one that addresses the topic of parenting, **there is also no unified action plan or designated budgetary funds specifically allocated to parenting support programmes**. On the other hand, individual strategies that focus on some of the topics related to parenting support programmes often have **action plans that have expired**. In other strategies, action plans contain the envisaged funds for parenting programmes, but they are **about to expire** (e.g., the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women by 2024 envisages funds from general budget revenues for various forms of work implemented by preschool institutions with the aim of supporting families, as well as from donor funds for partnerships between LSUs and preschool institutions to foster the development of parenting skills). The Action Plan following the MMMH (2024–2029) recognizes support programmes and platforms with already proven results, where the activities are partly related to parenting support (phone and digital counselling services: National Children's Line (NADEL); **Parent Line**, online counselling, chat-based counselling and SOS hotline for women who have experienced violence, platforms I Protect You and Everything is OK). The Action Plan mainly specifies regular budget funds and donor funds (already allocated and necessary). It is encouraging that specific support programmes and interventions for young people (which also indirectly impact parenting) are being planned through programmes for civil society organizations (CSOs) by MoFWD, and that they are relying on budgetary funds. Donor funds are expected for the planned intersectoral trainings for professionals in the field of mental health of children and young people, while MoE partially funds the planned trainings from budgetary resources.

When it comes to planning and securing funds for research (e.g., on the needs and behaviours of parents), strategies usually identify such needs about knowledge related to the target group (not identified strictly for parenting, but in that direction) and more often plan for donor funding rather than budgetary funds, primarily through EU accession funds and similar sources.

There are **also those strategies** (e.g., *Strategy for the Encouragement of Childbirth*) **that are accompanied by one-year regulations** with clearly defined budgets with the aim of supporting the pro-childbirth policy measures in LSUs (e.g., the Regulation on establishing the Support programme for the implementation of population policy measures and support in the field of family and children, the Regulation on granting subsidies to mothers for the purchase of first real estate, with clearly defined budgetary funds). MoFWD is responsible for monitoring and implementing these programmes and for reporting, and there is potential for budgets to be better directed towards parenting support.

Observing sectoral documents, it can be noted that there are regulations in the field of health on national programmes that envisage the funding of specific activities (e.g., the *Regulation on the National Programme for Improving Early Childhood Development* from 2016 envisages **funding of** two concrete programmes for the current year, while it is said that for the next two fiscal years, the funds will be determined within the limits set by the Ministry of Finance; the *Regulation on the National Programme for the Support of Breastfeeding, Family Care and Developmental Care of the Newborn* (2018) has budgeted funds for 2019 and 2020). It has not been explored whether the earmarked transfer mechanism in the social protection system is used for parenting support.

The analysis of the existing documentation gives the impression that donor funding is currently predominant in the Republic of Serbia when it comes to the

sustainability and scalability of parenting interventions (e.g., UNICEF for FCEI, CST, Bebbo, Parent Line; GIZ and Help for CST; Nordeus for Bebbo; Telekom Serbia and FICE Serbia for Parent Line; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) for Strong Families; SOS Children's Village Foundation for its service Family Strengthening).

LSUs have the possibility to plan and finance parenting support by relying on national documents. The description of Standard 7 (Scale and Sustainability) shows some of the planning for the sustainability of successful programmes for working with parents through local financing. Sometimes it feels like the local level is more agile than the national level, both in renewing the local strategies and other documents, and in the continuous provision of funds.

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An informant from a republic-level institution points out that, most often, there is no mandatory requirement to work with parents in the standards of services for children in the social protection system, nor in the laws that govern them, which consequently results in rare financing of programmes intended for parents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ensure long-term budget allocations to ensure stability and continuity in providing parenting programmes.
2. Ensure national coordination of the currently fragmented parenting support policies, with special emphasis on coordination and harmonization of financial planning in the field, and then on monitoring the implementation.
3. Ensure greater transparency of monitoring the implementation of strategies that partly address parenting.
4. Use donor funds for creating and piloting mechanisms and interventions, and strengthen the sectoral legislative framework with mandatory financing from the national or local level, to ensure that programmes with proven success do not depend on donations and that the State or LSUs are responsible for financing them.
5. The amendments to the Law on Social Protection need to include an obligation for local self-government units to provide a minimum package of services in accordance with the needs of the local population to ensure the mandatory rather than optional financing of social protection services and, therefore, create space for continuous financing of parenting support programmes.
6. Promote good practices of LSUs that have incorporated tested parenting support programmes into their plans and budgets, promote the Manual developed by the SCTM with the aim of informed inclusion of parenting support in local plans and budgets and, if necessary, harmonize it with the standards recommended by the Tool.

DOMAIN 11: DATA AND MONITORING

Standard 11 refers to a system for gathering and using evidence to achieve scaled-up and sustainable parenting support. Questions are raised here about whether the following exists: an agreed-upon system of indicators for measuring progress towards universal support; a standardized data gathering tool; use of gathered data for programme improvement or decision-making; support for participatory research.

In Serbia, there are some attempts and initiatives to gather data on parenting support programmes, but there is currently no fully integrated and agreed-upon system of indicators that would allow for monitoring progress towards **universal parenting support**.

Looking at strategic documents, we can conclude that they generally define responsibility for data gathering and have an agreed-upon system of indicators (for all envisaged activities, including those related to programmes intended for parents). The tools and participatory research are not precisely defined, and reports on the monitoring of strategic activities are often unavailable.

On the other hand, each sector has institutions responsible for gathering data at the national level on the implementation and effectiveness of interventions in the areas covered by the system, i.e., the official producers of statistics for different systems. In this context, data on parenting support are only available to the extent that they are part of the official work programmes of institutions within the system. However, there is no publicly available record of further data-informed practice planning. Donor-based financial support is usually used to provide funds for specific participatory research, additional monitoring or special evaluations of individual programmes. In specific cases, programme implementers, together with donors, plan the scope and coverage of monitoring, the method of data gathering, data processing and further usability of the data (e.g., programmes such as Parent Line, CST, FCEI, Bebbo, Family Outreach Worker, Family Strengthening), often using specific tools developed for each of these initiatives, but these are not tools that are harmonized or standardized at the national level. These tools include monitoring the number of beneficiaries, beneficiary satisfaction, possibly measuring beneficiary progress, types of advice provided and other metrics, but there is no comprehensive tool for gathering data for all types of parenting support. The obtained data are most often used later in advocacy processes for the institutional adoption of new programmes or for strengthening and improving existing ones. Although donor funds often support **participatory research**, it is not clear at all to what extent these data are integrated into state policy or the decision-making system.

The development of this report on the level of development of parenting support policies and programmes, in line with the 12 standards, can serve as a *baseline*, a foundation for further monitoring of policy development, as well as for the scaling up and sustainability of parenting support programmes. In that case, an analysis and assessment similar to this one would be conducted every three or five years (in accordance with the recommendations of the authors of the Tool).

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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. It is necessary to develop precise and measurable indicators, but also to update them regularly (in line with the needs of beneficiaries, but also with international standards and recommendations).
2. Develop and implement standardized tools for gathering relevant data to monitor and assess the effectiveness of programmes at the national level and for data exchange among sectors for the purpose of improved planning and efficient organization of services in accordance with available resources.
3. Develop and interconnect already developed digital data-gathering tools to ensure greater efficiency and accelerate the reporting process.
4. It is necessary to establish mechanisms for identifying successful practices and for making decisions based on the gathered data.
5. Ensure financial and technical support for participatory research that will include a focus on qualitative monitoring of the impact of programmes on behaviour, self-confidence, parenting capacities, removal of barriers, etc.
6. Launch an initiative and determine whether there is consensus among the relevant ministries for the Benchmarking Tool for parenting support policies and programmes to be used in Serbia.

DOMAIN 12: SOCIAL NORMS

This standard highlights the importance of promoting positive social norms. Accordingly, questions arise about whether parenting interventions contribute to reducing stigma and harmful norms that give legitimacy to violence, do they promote gender-equitable norms, are there mechanisms allowing feedback and networking with other forms of support to ensure family well-being.

By analysing the available parenting support programmes, it can be noticed **that all of them contribute to reducing stigma** (e.g., FCEI and Playful Parenting, Five P and Be the Hand that Loves do that by providing concrete tools for supporting parents in various life situations, i.e., by emphasizing parenting as a skill that can be learned rather than an inherent trait, thereby reducing the stigmatization of parents; Parent Line contributes to reducing stigmatization through the anonymity of the service, among other ways; Bebbo reduces stigma associated with the lack of knowledge and insecurity by providing accessible and educational resources for parents, Strong Families does this through positive communication and strengthening family relationships). Also, all analysed programmes **contribute to reducing harmful norms that give legitimacy to violence** (through tips and guidance for creating a safe environment for children, recognizing violent behaviours, prevention, etc.). **Promoting gender-equitable norms is also highlighted in numerous parenting programmes** (through promotion of balance in parenting roles and reducing stereotypes that link certain family roles to gender identities, etc.). A review of the content of some parenting support programmes that do not explicitly promote positive social norms suggests that it is possible to integrate this topic into the content without any major effort.

At the policy level, the *Strategy for the Encouragement of Childbirth*, *Strategy for Prevention and Protection of*

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Children from Violence, *Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women*, Call for Action and MMMH explicitly identify harmful practices, including physical punishment of children and, for example, early marriage or failure to include the child in the education system. These strategies also promote gender-equitable norms, and particularly the *Strategy for the Encouragement of Childbirth* offers a series of mechanisms for better gender balancing of parenting. It is particularly encouraging that MoFWD commits in the Action Plan for the MMMH to ensure that amendments to the **Family Law** and by-laws will also include the ban on the **corporal punishment** of children. This significant step would create a range of new opportunities for laws and by-laws across all relevant sectors to introduce the requirement to eliminate **harmful norms that legitimize violence**, as well as to ensure the provision of minimum packages of information and tools to help parents shape their approaches to child disciplining towards supportive, positive and responsible parenting without physical punishment (and ultimately without any form of punishment). At the same time, this would also be a way to create a framework for perhaps a minimum, but universal, support package for all parents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. All parenting support programmes should integrate information on gender-equitable norms into their content. This includes talking (education, counselling) with parents about the balanced division of parenting roles and reducing stereotypes that associate specific roles with gender identities. This criterion may be considered mandatory within the accreditation process for programmes in different sectors.
2. Strengthen mechanisms for educating parents about alternatives to physical punishment. All parenting programmes should provide clear guidelines and tools for positive disciplining, as well as for recognizing and preventing abusive behaviour. This criterion may be considered mandatory within the accreditation process for programmes in different sectors.
3. Support for the elimination of harmful norms needs to be further integrated through legislative initiatives. Adopting amendments to the Family Law related to the ban of physical punishment of children is a crucial step, but further work is needed to develop legal frameworks that provide minimum packages of information and tools for parents regarding positive disciplining.

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ASSESSMENT OF THE LEVEL OF DEVELOPMENT OF PARENTING SUPPORT POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

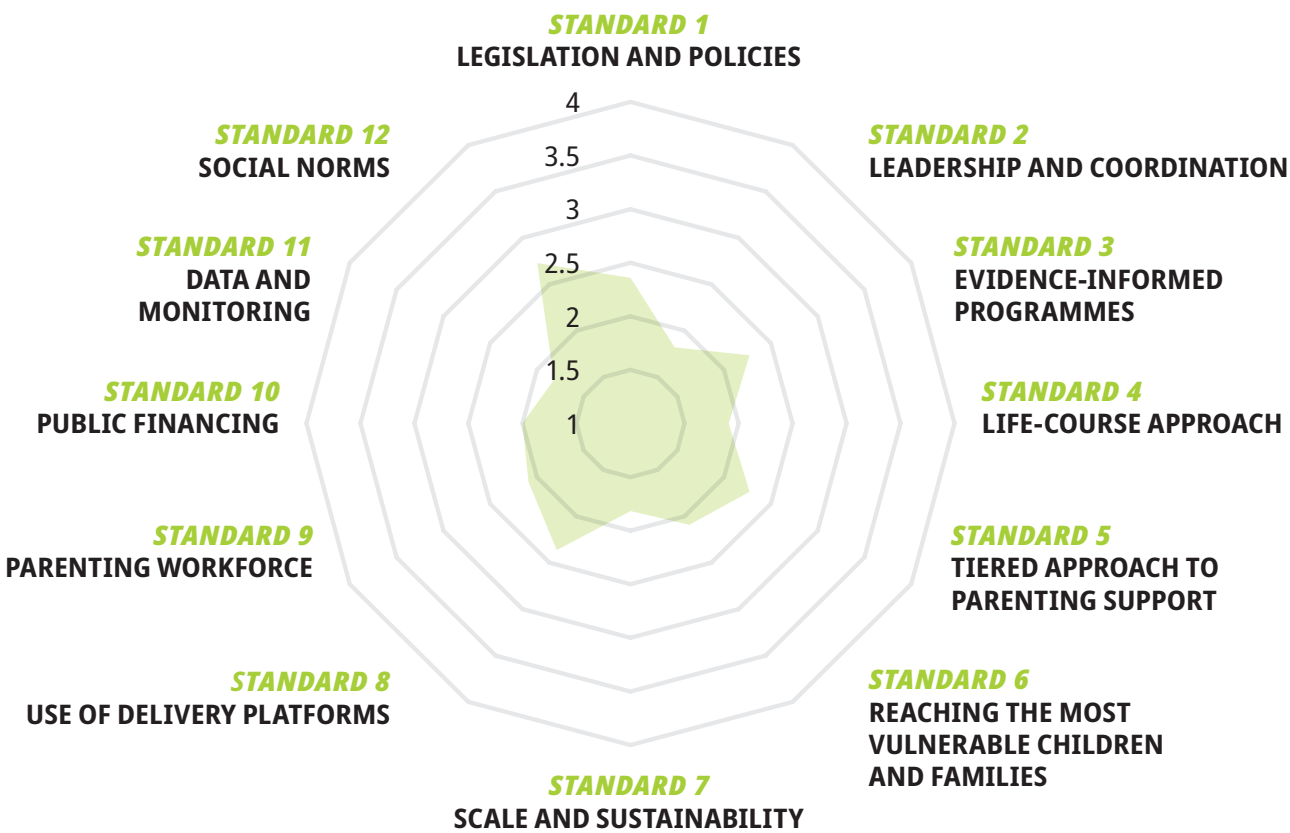
The Conceptual Framework with the Benchmarking Tool for parenting support policies and programmes also provided the possibility of quantifying the level of development of parenting support policies and programmes. As stated in the description of the methodology, the assessment/evaluation is done at the level of each indicator (49) and each standard (12) using a four-level rating scale: 1 — not in place; 2 — some elements in place; 3 — most elements in place; 4 — all elements in place. This approach enables objective measuring of the current state of parenting policies and programmes in a given country. In accordance with the proposed methodology, during each interview and focus group discussion conducted in the preparation of this Report, participants were expected to carry out an assessment/evaluation as part of the process. The majority of participants in the participatory process did not feel ready to engage in the assessment process, primarily due to the complexity of the Tool, believing they did not have sufficient information for fact-based assessment of the very specific components (49 indicators), or of the 12 standards.

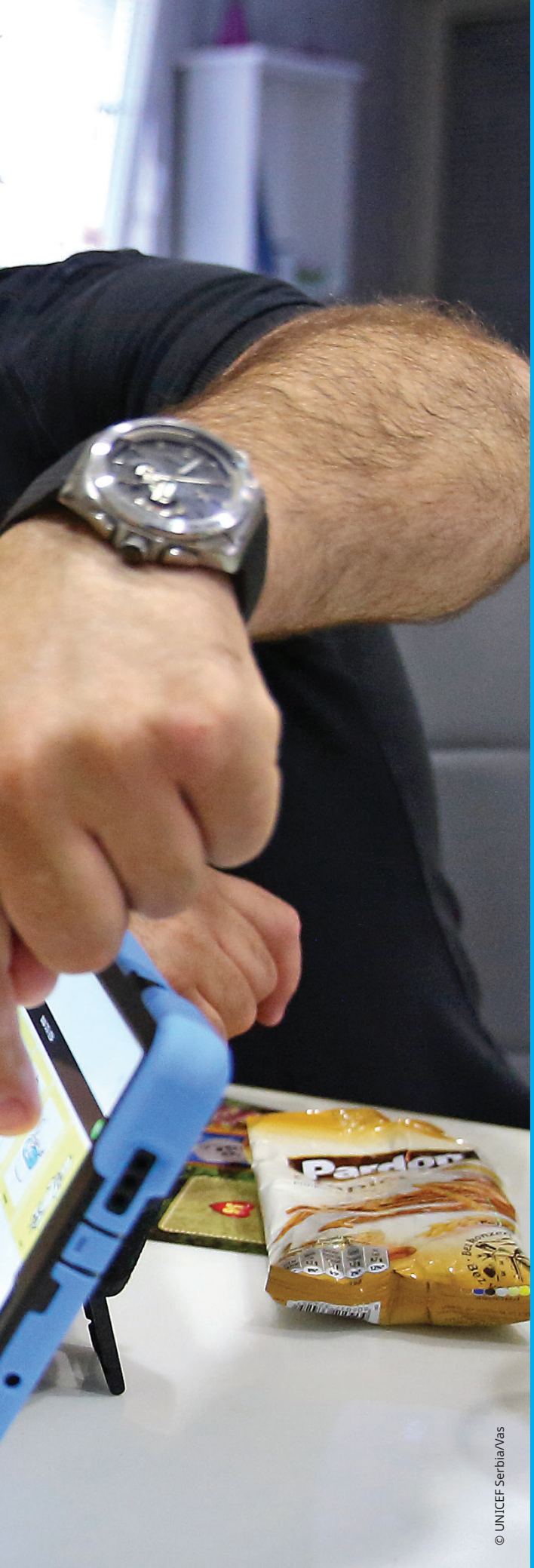
The authors of the Report in Serbia, in consultation with the UNICEF office as the commissioning body for the Report, and respecting the views expressed by participants in the Report development process, conducted the assessment process only with the participants of the validation workshop. Participants in the validation workshop, members of the Working Group that followed the Report drafting process, were presented with the preliminary findings and recommendations of the Benchmarking Report on Parenting Support Policies and Programmes, and were given the opportunity to submit their comments on the content of the findings in writing. At the validation workshop, in addition to the final formulation of

recommendations for each of the 12 domains, the assessment process was also carried out. Both the indicators and the standard were assessed for the first 2 standards, while for the remaining 10, only the level of fulfilment of the standard was assessed.

The analysis of the presented chart (Figure 2) reveals that the three lowest-rated standards are Standard 2 (Leadership and Coordination), Standard 7 (Scale and Sustainability) and Standard 11 (Data and Monitoring). These three standards have the same average score (AS), which falls between 1 and 2 (AS = 1.82). On the other hand, the highest-rated standards are Standard 12 (Social Norms, AS = 2.73), Standard 8 (Use of Delivery Platforms, AS = 2.36), Standard 1 (Legislation and Policies, AS = 2.26), as well as Standards 3 (Evidence-Informed Programmes, AS = 2.27) and 5 (Tiered Approach to Parenting Support, AS = 2.27). It is important to mention that Indicator 5 of Standard 1: (The national or federal parenting policy framework is complemented by key family friendly policies) received an average rating of 3.03, which is the highest rating among the 10 indicators for Standards 1 and 2, as well as the highest rating across all standards. Based on the presented range of ratings, we can observe that so far none of the standards have a score of 3 or higher, which indicates that, at this point, we cannot say for the existing policies and practices assessed through these 12 standards that there is a domain where the majority or all of the indicators provided by the Tool are fulfilled. We can also conclude that the ratings are in the range of 1.82–2.73, i.e., that almost all standards have some elements that can be improved in the future.

FIGURE 2
AVERAGE RATING ACROSS STANDARDS





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ANNEX 1

Definitions

KEY DEFINITIONS FROM THE TOOL ALIGNED WITH THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR PARENTING SUPPORT IN UNICEF EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA REGION[32]

Parenting: interactions, behaviours, emotions, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and practices of nurturing childcare. Positive parenting is associated with child-sensitive caregiving in the stable environment protecting them from threats and offering learning opportunities through interactions that are appropriate and playful, emotionally supportive and growth stimulative.

Nurturing care is associated with early childhood: the environment created by parents/caregivers, ensuring good health and nutrition, protecting them from threats and giving them opportunities for early learning, through interactions that are emotionally supportive and adequate.

Responsive caregiving: the ability of parents/caregivers[33] to notice, understand and respond to their child's signals in a timely and appropriate manner. It includes both sensitivity and responsiveness. Sensitivity is awareness of a child, child's acts and vocalizations as communicative signals indicating needs and wants. Responsiveness is the capacity of caregivers to respond to a child's signals in a timely and appropriate way.

Parenting behaviours: the behaviours and practices that form the foundation underpinning parenting. Core components of parenting behaviours are caregiving, childcare, support-seeking information and self-care.

Alternative definition

Parenting comprises a range of various behavioural aspects, such as physical care (caring about needs, health and safety of children), cognitive stimulation (through talking, singing, reading, educational materials, involvement in education of own children, etc.), warmness (love, support, responsiveness), control and monitoring (by setting rules, exchange of information) and positive disciplining (Lansford, 2022).[34]

DEFINITIONS FROM INSTRUMENTS ALIGNED WITH THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR PARENTING SUPPORT IN UNICEF EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA REGION

Parenting support: a wide range of services, programmes, activities, resources and information available to parents, helping them in their parenting role, by increasing knowledge about child-raising, skills and social support, improving parents' competences and promoting well-being of parents and children.

Parenting support programmes: specific interventions, activities or services that enable strengthening of parents' knowledge, behaviours and practices for supporting child development and parental well-being.[35]

Tool: Parenting interventions or programmes are often defined as a set of activities or services that need to upgrade the way in which the parents and caregivers approach their roles of caregivers, relating to their knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, skills, behaviours and daily interactions and practices. Parenting programmes differentiate from other parent support interventions (e.g., parenting campaigns) as they consist of a structured series of sessions, use multiple learning activities and often follow the structured manual or curriculum.[36]

32 UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, draft, 2024.

33 In this document, the term parent shall refer not only to the biological parent or legal guardian, but also to other caregivers responsible for the child's daily care.

34 Lansford, J. E. 'Annual Research Review: Cross-cultural similarities and differences in parenting', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, vol. 63, no. 4, 2022, pp. 466–479.

35 The term 'programme' is used throughout this document, occasionally replaced with 'service' and 'intervention', in order to cover a variety of different activities.

36 Instrument.

Tool: Approaches to provision of programmes: Parenting programmes are more likely to have positive impacts when they use strength-based approaches that build from parents' and caregivers' skills and lived experiences and when they implement the core content in ways that promote learning (e.g., through demonstrations and modelling, practice and rehearsal, and positive feedback). These approaches are equally effective in home and group delivery. The programme approaches should be informed by evidence about current practices and needs, behavioural drivers, gender and social norms of parents/caregivers, disaggregated by age, geographic area, disability and other to identify the type of support required for specific audiences, especially in the case of more targeted support programmes.

Family-friendly policies: Policies that promote support to parents/caregivers, relevance of time and resources to achieve family life and work balance, importance of quality childcare, including maternal and paternal paid leave, breastfeeding support, and quality childcare support in formal and informal settings and child benefits, and related social protection systems.[37]

Family-friendly policies are not the same as parenting policies.

Alternative definitions

Parenting interventions[38] will mean a set of activities or services that seek to improve how parents approach their parenting role, in particular, their knowledge, attitudes, skills, behaviours and practices. Interventions may be integrated in the existing services or may be carried out as a separate programme. Parenting interventions should be supported by **family-friendly policies** that provide the caregivers with care, time and resources in order to ensure quality childcare.

Parenting interventions predominantly mean social and behavioural programmes seeking to improve knowledge, attitudes, practices and skills of parents in order to promote an optimum child development. Various publications mention that parenting interventions may be focused on different risks, behaviours or parent–child relationship aspects, including stimulation interventions, joint book reading, parents' attachment and sensitivity, managing behaviours, positive discipline and prevention of violence, including mental health of parents (Jeong et al., 2021).[39]

Unicef Innocenti Office of Research emphasized that **family support programmes** differ from **parenting support programmes**, the latter representing only one of their elements. In particular, **family support** involves a set of services and activities focused on the enhancement of family life, placing the child-raising and other family activities within the system of reassuring relationships and resources (formal and informal). On the other hand, **parenting support** means the set of services and activities focused on enhancing the way in which the parents approach and perform their parenting roles, as well as on improving parents' competences with child-raising (to include their awareness, knowledge, skills and social support).[40]

In the light of numerous parenting support programmes, different schools diversely define the essential features of those programmes. The common attributes of the parenting support programmes as classified, are: (a) targeting parents and focusing on their parenting roles; (b) provision of services, instead of material aid, or parental leave; and (c) focusing their activities towards enhancing parenting competences and resources.[41]

37 UNICEF, *Family-friendly Policies: Redesigning the workplace of the future*, UNICEF, New York, 2019.

38 A policy call for national governments of all countries to commit to parenting support that has universal coverage.

39 Jeong, J., et al., 'Parenting interventions to promote early child development in the first three years: A global systematic review and meta-analysis', *PLoS Medicine*, vol. 18, no. 5, e1003602.

40 (Dali et al, 2015, Proteknon, 2017), I, UNICEF, Podgorica, 2018.

41 Ibid.

Family support:[42] A set of policies, services, interventions and other activities aimed at enhancing family life, by using the network of both formal and informal supportive relationships and resources in child-raising and other family activities. Despite having different focuses, both the parenting and family support are essential. They complement each other by providing focuses relating to policies and plans to promote child development and support to parents.

TOOL DEFINITIONS ARE ALIGNED WITH THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR FAMILY SUPPORT IN UNICEF EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA REGION:

Levels of parenting support: Parenting programmes can be classified into three tiers: universal, targeted and intensive. **Universal programmes** are delivered to all parents regardless of risk levels (i.e., no screening or selection criteria are used). **Universal parenting support**: a basic package of parenting interventions received by each parent or caregiver.43 **Targeted programmes** are aimed at parents who have specific needs with respect to the support. **Intensive interventions** are aimed at families with complex needs and challenges related to high-risk behaviours, including families with emerging signs of the problem (e.g., child maltreatment) as identified by a screening assessment or referral systems.[44]

Alternative definitions

There are programmes with different intensity and focuses. **Universal programmes** are those that could also be used by the parents that need parenting support and advice, but also by all families in general. Universal programmes basically support all generations of parents with the expectation that the improvements with child well-being would be measurable at the population level (Lindsay & Totsika, 2017).[45] According to some authors, universal programmes are briefer and target ordinary parenting challenges and are thus aimed at general population (Van Leuven et al., 2023).[46] On the other hand, parenting programmes may also **target particular individuals and families at risk** (e.g., socio-economically deprived families, parents who are adolescents, parents who use drugs) but also may be **intensive**, intended for parents seeking stronger support.

The programmes may be delivered **in different ways**: in-person (e.g., home visits) or in groups (e.g., regular group sessions, in person); virtually (e.g., online programmes, regular telephone calls, mobile apps); or may use communication strategies targeting the general public (e.g., radio and TV broadcasts, social networks). The programmes may be autonomous (independent from any other services) or integrated into the existing service platforms (e.g., health and social care services, schools).[47]

Tool: Effective parenting programmes and interventions have a common **content** comprising (1) the promotion of knowledge of children's and adolescents' development, behaviour, and needs through the life course, (2) responsive caregiving, (3) quality time together, (4) non-violent discipline (including positive reinforcement, rule setting and appropriate consequences), (5) stress management and self-care, (6) communication and self-regulation skills, (7) and promoting gender-transformative norms.

Alternative definitions

Tool: The basic **content** of effective parenting interventions for preventing abuse and neglect rely on the social learning theory and the principles

42 UNICEF, 'Conceptual framework for Parenting Support in ECARO', UNICEF ECARO, Geneva, draft version, July 2024.

43 Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, WHO and UNICEF, *Universal parenting support to prevent abuse and neglect: A policy call for national governments*, November 2021.

44 World Health Organization, *WHO guidelines on parenting interventions to prevent maltreatment and enhance parent–child relationships with children aged 0–17 years*, WHO, Geneva, 2022.

45 Lindsay, G., & Totsika, V., 'The effectiveness of universal parenting programmes: The CANparent trial', *BMC Psychology*, vol. 5, 2017, pp. 1–11.

46 Van Leuven, L., Engelbrektsson, J., & Forster, M., 'Reach and predictors of effects during nation-wide dissemination of the universal parenting programme All Children in Focus', *BMC Public Health*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2023, 2027.

47 UNICEF, Mapping of Parenting Programmes for Adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean, UNICEF, Panama, December 2021, https://www.unicef.org/lac/media/34526/file/Mapping-of-Parenting-Programmes.pdf.

of attachment, focusing on the strengthening of parenting skills and sensitivity by means of a **practical training** on parent–child positive interaction, use of positive reinforcement, games, non-violent discipline techniques, problem solving, social and emotional teaching and monitoring customized to the developmental needs of a child.[48]

Child: Any person under the age of 18.[49]

Early childhood development: the period of 0–8 years of age characterized by rapid physical, cognitive and social and emotional development.[50]

Adolescent: an individual between 10 and 19 years of age. Younger adolescents are between 10 and 14 years of age, and older adolescents are between 15 and 19 years of age. However, it is noted that in different contexts, definitions of adolescence differ vastly, and in some cases, children are considered to transition directly from childhood to adulthood.

Alternative definitions

Early childhood development: In **Serbia**, this age group predominantly refers to age 0–8 years.

Adolescence:[51] Prevailingly means the age between 12 and 24 years in Serbia.

Adolescence:[52] The General Comment No. 4 of the UN Committee on Adolescent Health and Development describes adolescence as the dynamic period "characterized by rapid physical, cognitive and social changes, including sexual and reproductive maturation; the gradual building up of the capacity to assume adult behaviours and roles involving new responsibilities requiring new knowledge and skills."[53] The Committee highlights the inclination towards positive changes during the transition towards adulthood, "prompted by the significant capacities of adolescents to learn rapidly, to experience new and diverse situations, to develop and use critical thinking, to familiarize themselves with freedom, to be creative and to socialize."[54] (Therefore, adolescence should be approached proactively, even though "adolescence also poses new challenges to health and development owing to their relative vulnerability and pressure from society, including peers, to adopt risky health behaviour."[55])

Adolescence is a critical period of transition between childhood and adulthood that is characterized by transformations in children's physical, emotional and cognitive development. Within this life stage, children seek to establish their own identity and relationships apart from family; they are also inclined to experiment and take risks to explore boundaries (Siegel 2013). These natural processes can make adolescence a challenging season — both for adolescents and their parents/caregivers. All too often, stereotypes that portray adolescents as 'moody', 'volatile' or 'risk-prone' reinforce the negative associations many make with children in the second decade of life.[56]

Support programmes for parenting of adolescents share the same characteristics as the parenting support programmes for early age children and should consolidate and increase positive benefits from earlier investments. As children grow and become adolescents, their relationship with parents develops and the parents need to adopt skills and strategies that follow the child's development, in order to meet their needs. Support programmes for parenting of adolescents have been designed to respond to those needs, along with specific priorities and preferences of adolescents and their parents.

48 Policy Call for Universal Parenting Support.
49 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
50 UNICEF, 'Early Childhood Development', UNICEF, New York, 2022.
51 UNICEF, Parenting of Adolescents: Programming Guidance, UNICEF, February 2021.
52 UNICEF, *Studija o programima podrške roditeljima/starateljima adolescenata*, UNICEF Montenegro, Podgorica, 2018.
53 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) General Comment (GC) 4, par. 2, Proteknon, 2017.
54 CRC GC 4, par. 2, ibid.
55 CRC GC 4, par. 2, ibid.
56 UNICEF, *A Regional Study on Parenting Adolescents and Parenting Support Programmes in Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro and Romania*, UNICEF ECARO, Geneva, 2018.

ANNEX 2

The Tool

DOMAIN AND STANDARD	CHECKPOINTS/INDICATORS
DOMAIN 1 **LEGISLATION AND POLICIES** **Standard:** **There are legal and policy frameworks at an overarching national level conducive to parenting support.**	Political leaders at national or federal level committed themselves to achieve universal parenting support, or at senior level in a decentralized system (e.g., as part of mid-term development plans or Sustainable Development Goal plans).
	Sectoral laws and policies related to family, child and adolescent development and well-being include goals and commitments to achieving parenting support, accompanied by budget action plans that guide implementation.
	There is an overarching document (multisectoral policy framework) that outlines the government's commitment to parenting support and provides a framework within which policies/plans and parenting programmes and interventions can be implemented.
	Development of policies and/or legislation is informed by behavioural science and based on consultations with multiple stakeholders including parents and caregivers.
	The national or federal parenting policy framework is complemented by key family-friendly policies (e.g., parental leave, breastfeeding support, childcare and child benefits).
DOMAIN 2 **LEADERSHIP AND COORDINATION** **Standard:** **There is a national coordination mechanism that is responsible for oversight of national parenting policies, plans, programmes and interventions at national level or at senior decentralized level.**	There is a lead ministry or agency with a clear mandate for overseeing the national parenting policies and plans at the most senior (national or federal) level.
	Intersectoral coordination committees are in place and operational, (i.e., they are established under the authority of the agreed lead ministry or agency and have terms of reference, at national and subnational levels).
	Multisectoral coordination committees have clearly defined roles and responsibilities at national or subnational levels.
	Mechanisms exist that ensure meaningful consultation and participation of parents, caregivers and communities in parenting policy, plans, programme and intervention planning, implementation and evaluation.
	A mechanism exists to ensure the age and developmentally appropriate representation of children's voices within both national and subnational/ decentralized coordination mechanisms to inform planning and implementation.

DOMAIN AND STANDARD	CHECKPOINTS/INDICATORS
DOMAIN 3 **EVIDENCE-INFORMED PROGRAMMES** **Standard:** **Policies require that parenting programmes and interventions adhere to agreed core content and delivery that is evidence-informed and relevant to national and local context.**	Parenting policies, strategies and action plans require that parenting programmes and interventions include a Theory of Change or Programme Theory that explains how activities are expected to produce a series of results that contribute to addressing observed needs and achieving desired impacts for parents, caregivers and children.
	Parenting programmes are developed, implemented and evaluated using a consultative process and regular feedback mechanisms across relevant stakeholders, including parents.
	Parenting policies and plans require that parenting programmes and interventions state the evidence base informing their design, drawn from formative research about the social and behavioural drivers of key parenting behaviours.
	Parenting policies and plans require that parenting programmes and interventions incorporate content (across the key areas of parenting behaviours, including caregiving, self-care and support-seeking behaviours), programmes and interventions' delivery methods, and structural approaches that are informed by the most recent evidence-based practices and behavioural science, where available and appropriate.
	Parenting policies and plans require that clear evidence-informed criteria are in place for identifying, adapting, and delivering parenting programmes and interventions that address the unique needs, cultures, languages and values of diverse families.
DOMAIN 4 **LIFE-COURSE APPROACH** **Standard:** **Content and delivery of parenting programmes have a life-course approach.**	The national/federal parenting policies and plans include considerations of children's evolving needs during different developmental periods (0–17 years), including early childhood, middle childhood and adolescence.
	Parenting policies and plans consider the evolving needs of caregivers across the developmental trajectories of children (0–17 years), taking into account the unique needs of older caregivers and parents of adolescents.
DOMAIN 5 **TIERED APPROACH TO PARENTING SUPPORT** **Standard:** **The national/federal parenting policies and plans include universal, targeted and intensive parenting interventions of progressively increasing intensity.**	There is a well-defined tiered structure of parenting interventions that categorizes them into universal, targeted and intensive levels, based on their intensity, profile and needs of target groups.
	Targeted and intensive parenting programmes and interventions are connected to additional services and support.
	There are clear criteria for identifying parents and caregivers who are eligible for and could benefit from targeted and intensive parenting programmes and interventions that address their specific or complex needs.
	Parenting support programmes and interventions are developed, implemented and evaluated through consultations with parents and caregivers, including both the targeted and intensive interventions and programmes.

DOMAIN AND STANDARD	CHECKPOINTS/INDICATORS
DOMAIN 6 **REACHING THE MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES** **Standard:** **The national/federal parenting policies and plans include a strategy to reach the most vulnerable groups, e.g., adolescent parents, parents of children with developmental issues, parents or caregivers with disabilities, minority ethnic communities, families facing adversity (displacement, conflict, etc.).**	Processes have been defined to identify and reach parents and caregivers who are marginalized, face barriers to accessing parenting programmes and interventions or who may need additional parenting support for specific or complex needs.
	The targeted and intensive parenting interventions implemented should be disability-inclusive and include specialized parenting interventions for children with atypical development or for parents and caregivers with disabilities. The development of these programmes must be done with the participation of persons with disabilities and other disability experts.
	The national/federal parenting policies and plans include a gender-transformative approach,[57] including gender-transformative outcomes and a measurable strategy for involvement of fathers/male caregivers.
DOMAIN 7 **SCALE AND SUSTAINABILITY** **Standard:** **The national/federal parenting policies and plans include strategies to ensure scalability,[58] sustainability, and long-term impact and reach.**	There is a costed multisectoral strategy to scale up universal parenting support, including reaching the most vulnerable parents, caregivers and children by applying parenting programmes and interventions.
	A clear plan for programme and intervention scalability has been developed, outlining strategies required to expand reach over a defined time period.
	Strategic decisions on replication and scale-up have been based on successful implementation in the past.
	Innovative evidence-informed methods, including digital (e.g., apps, messaging services, websites, parenting hubs, chatbots and social media), hybrid and low-tech approaches (e.g., radio and television) are deployed to complement in-person delivery approaches and expand the reach of parenting interventions.

57 A gender-transformative approach is a strategy that seeks to actively examine, challenge and transform gender inequalities and legislation, in order to achieve higher gender equality. This approach recognizes and addresses deeply rooted stereotypes, discrimination and injustice present in the society and acts towards their elimination by deploying different interventions and programmes.

58 A possibility of expansion, scaling.

DOMAIN AND STANDARD	CHECKPOINTS/INDICATORS
DOMAIN 8 USE OF PLATFORMS (EXISTING SERVICES, ACTIONS AND MECHANISMS) TO SCALE UP THE PARENTING PROGRAMMES AND INTERVENTIONS Standard: Parenting interventions and services are integrated into existing delivery platforms and supplemented by innovations to achieve the required delivery scale.	National policies/plans identify one or more priority delivery platforms that can reach parents and caregivers throughout the life course and address different needs.
	There is a strategy for ensuring delivery of parenting programmes and interventions through different platforms and the existing services. The strategy has been developed and managed by the appropriate ministry or ministries/ organization in coordination with key civil society actors.
	Parents are aware of parenting interventions and services and how to seek the support (i.e., they know what support and services are available to them and why, where, when and how to approach them).
	There is a functioning two-way referral mechanism within and between service delivery platforms, to ensure access to parenting programmes and interventions for the most vulnerable individuals.
DOMAIN 9 PARENTING WORKFORCE Standard: The national/federal parenting policies and plans include a workforce strategy to ensure efficient, quality and inclusive delivery, scalability and sustainability.	There has been a costed workforce mapping and capacity assessment across relevant delivery platforms.
	There is a national/federal workforce development strategy/plan in place that includes standards for qualifications, training and reimbursement for service providers.
	There are national/federal workforce standards within each delivery platform system or line ministry institutional curricula, encompassing minimum training, reimbursement policies and the provision of supportive supervision for the workforce.
	The workforce has adequate competencies and tools to overcome institutional or personal bias, identify vulnerable groups, assess their needs and/or refer, and engage with parents and caregivers and their families in an inclusive, equitable, gender-transformative and enabling manner using a family-centred approach.
DOMAIN 10 PUBLIC FINANCING Standard: There is a commitment to allocation of national/ federal and decentralized level budgets to ensure the sustainability and scalability of parenting interventions.	National and local level budgets within key sectors responsible for delivering parenting interventions include budgeting, adequate allocations and specific budget reporting requirements.
	Strategies aimed at influencing the mobilization, allocation, and utilization of financial resources from the public sector, private sector and/or international funders are established and maintained.
	A system of results-based budgeting for parenting support is established and maintained.
	Financial resources are allocated for data collection (e.g., about parents' behaviours, barriers and enablers, service providers' capacities and needs, for outreach and family-based support, for capacity building, monitoring and evaluation).

DOMAIN AND STANDARD	CHECKPOINTS/INDICATORS
DOMAIN 11 **DATA AND MONITORING** **Standard:** **There is a system for gathering, assessing and using evidence to achieve scaled-up and sustainable parenting support.**	There is an agreed set of core indicators to measure progress towards universal parenting support at the national level.
	There are standardized data collection tools and systems in place across sectors to monitor evidence in relation to relevance, effectiveness, quality and efficiency of intervention/services, and outcomes and impact at the level of the child, parent and family.
	Data are used for continuous improvement, programme adaptation, development of public policies and decision-making at the national and subnational levels.
	There is support, through strategies and financial support, for participatory research and monitoring and evaluation, that allows user inputs and informed policy and programme-related decisions about parenting interventions and programmes.
DOMAIN 12 **SOCIAL NORMS** **Standard:** **The national/federal parenting policies and plans identify and address harmful social norms and promote positive social norms that increase positive parenting.**	Parenting interventions address stigma reduction, promotion of gender-equitable norms, and reduction of harmful norms that legitimize violence, with measurable outcomes.
	Community engagement strategies using social and behaviour change methodologies are developed and implemented.
	Feedback mechanisms are in place to gather feedback from the community to inform programme adjustments.
	Parenting interventions are either incorporated or are linked to community support structures to enhance family well-being and support networking.
	Parenting policies have their strategies in place for the engagement of fathers and male caregivers, and there is an implementation strategy for those programmes.
	There are strategies that obtain information from social and behaviour change (SBC) strategy to reach parents and caregivers in greatest need of support, i.e., single parents, adolescent parents, foster and other family-based alternative care givers.

ANNEX 3

List of Mapped Documents and Support Programmes

- Strategy for the prevention and protection of children from violence for the period 2020–2023 with an Action Plan for 2020 and 2021
- Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women in the Republic of Serbia 2022–2030
- Strategy for the Encouragement of Childbirth
- Strategy for Development of Education of the Republic of Serbia until 2030
- Regulation on establishing the Support programme for the implementation of population policy measures and support programme for families and children in the Republic of Serbia
- Family friend
- Regulation on detailed conditions and methods of exercising the right to financial funds for construction, participation in the purchase, that is, the purchase of a family-residential building or apartment based on the birth of a child
- Regulation on granting subsidies to mothers to buy their first property
- Strategy for Improving the Position of Persons with Disabilities 2020–2024
- Action Plan for the implementation of the Strategy for Improving the Position of Persons with Disabilities in the Republic of Serbia 2020–2024, for the period from 2021 to 2022
- Youth Strategy in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2022–2030 and the Action Plan for the period 2023–2025
- Strategy of deinstitutionalization and development of social protection services for the period 2022–2026
- National Call for Action for Support to Early Childhood Development
- Multilateral Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation in the prevention and protection of mental health of children, adolescents and young people
- Revised Action Plan for Negotiating Chapter 23
- Rulebook on additional educational, health and social support for children, students and adults

NATIONAL SECTORAL LEVEL

Health

- Regulation on the National Programme for Improving Early Childhood Development
- Professional and methodological guidance for home visiting of the polyvalent nurse services to families for pregnant women with children
- Regulation on the National Support Programme for Breastfeeding, Family and Developmental Care of Newborns
- Professional and Methodological Guide for Maintaining Medical Documentation and Records and Reporting in the Breastfeeding Support Programme
- Regulation on the National Health Protection Programme for Women, Children and Youth
- Expert-methodological instructions for the implementation of the regulation on the National Health Care Programme for Women, Children and Youth
- Regulation on the National Programme for Preservation and Improvement of Sexual and Reproductive Health of Citizens of the Republic of Serbia

- Rulebook on Nomenclature of Health Services at Primary Level of Health Care
- Development Counselling Units
- Situation analysis of health services for babies and young children with developmental disabilities in the Republic of Serbia
- URD (Ages and Stages Questionnaires) screening tool
- Parenting schools
- Bebbo app
- Health care mediators
- Youth Counselling Units within Health Centres

Social protection and family and child welfare

- Family Law
- Law on Social Protection
- Rulebook on the Organization, Norms and Standards of Work of Social Welfare Centres
- Rulebook on Foster Care
- Instructions on Procedures of Social Welfare Centres — the guardianship authority in the adoption procedure
- Professional methodological instructions for the work of the Guardianship Authority in the process of maintaining the child's personal relationship with a parent, relatives and other persons with whom they have particularly close relationship in controlled conditions
- Rulebook on Closer Conditions and Standards for Providing SOS Helpline Services for Women with Experience of Violence
- Family Outreach Worker
- Family Strengthening Programme — Support to Families — SOS Children's Villages
- Parents Helpline in the social protection system
- Socio-educational Family Programme — School for Parents
- Rulebook on Closer Conditions and Standards for Providing Social Protection Services
- Law on Financial Support for Families with Children

Education

- Law on the Education System Foundations
- Rulebook on the Municipal Council of Parents
- Rulebook on the Protocol Actions in the Institution in Response to Violence, Abuse and Neglect
- Law on Preschool Education
- Godine uzleta (Years of Ascent) — new foundations of the preschool education program
- Rulebook on the Programme of all Forms of Work of Professional Associates
- Rulebook on the Programme of all Forms of Work of Professional Associates in Preschool Institutions
- By-law on Pedagogical and Andragogical Assistants
- Regulation on Safety and Protection of Children when using Information and Communication Technologies
- Čuvam te (I Protect You)
- National Coalition of Parents and Teachers (NARNS)
- Strong Families
- Growing up in a Democratic Family
- Living in a Democratic Family
- Programmes for Families (parents and children) Strong from the Start — Let's give them wings
- Programme for Parents Strong from the Start — Let's give them wings
- Project 'Improved equal access and completion of pre-university education for children who need additional education support' i.e., Učimo svi zajedno (We Learn Together)

Youth care

- Law on Youth
- Criminal Code
- Law on Juvenile Criminal Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles
- Youth Office
- Youth Community Centres
- National Strategy for Youth 2023–2030
- Programme — Support groups of families of unemployed young people having experienced psychiatric hospitalization

Intersectoral parenting support programmes

- Scaling-up Playful Parenting — parents in focus
- Guide for Local Self-governments in creating playful environment for early childhood development and providing of systemic support to parents
- Pet P's and Be the Hand That Loves
- CFC — Caring for Caregivers — care about parents and caregivers (safeguard parents, nurturing parenting (ČRNR))
- Caregiver (parent) skills training (CST)
- Strong from the Start — Dam Len Phaka
- Everything is OK platform
- Minimum Service Package for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support for Youth in Serbia.

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ANNEX 4

Rapid Review of Parenting Support Policies and Programmes

Brza procena koliko je dokument značajan za oblast roditeljstva imala je za cilj da bez korišćenja standarda iz Instrumenta napravi prvu selekciju dokumenata prema sledećoj klasifikaciji:

Relevant for parenting support at **all ages and for a wider target population of parents**
Relevant for parenting support **at some ages or focused on individual target groups**
Medium relevance for parenting support, including those with room for improvement and that have higher relevance
Irrelevant, but may and should be improved, in order to increase its relevance
Irrelevant

STRATEGIC AND INTERSECTORAL NATIONAL LEVEL

Strategy for the prevention and protection of children from violence for the period 2020–2023 with an Action Plan for 2020 and 2021
Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women in the Republic of Serbia 2022–2030
Strategy for the Encouragement of Childbirth + annually adopted regulations
Strategy for Improving the Position of Persons with Disabilities 2020–2024 + Action Plan
Youth Strategy in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2022–2030 and the Action Plan for the period 2023–2025
Strategy for Development of Education 2020–2023
Strategy of deinstitutionalization and development of social protection services for the period 2022–2026
Support to Early Childhood Development — National Call for Action for Support by the Republic of Serbia
Multilateral memorandum of understanding and cooperation in the field of prevention and protection of mental health of children, adolescents and young people
Revised Action Plan for Negotiating Chapter 23
Rulebook on additional educational, health and social support for children, students and adults

NATIONAL SECTORAL LEVEL

Health

Regulation on the National Programme for Improving Early Childhood Development
Professional and methodological guidance for home visiting of the polyvalent nurse services to families for pregnant women with children
Regulation on the National Support Programme for Breastfeeding, Family and Developmental Care of Newborns + SMU
Regulation on the National Health Protection Programme for Women, Children and Youth + SMU
Rulebook on Nomenclature of Health Services at Primary Level of Health Care
Regulation on the National Programme for Preservation and Improvement of Sexual and Reproductive Health of Citizens of the Republic of Serbia
Development Counselling Units
Ages and Stages Questionnaires screening tool
Parenting schools
„Bebbo" app
Health care mediators
Youth Counselling Units within Health Centres

Social protection and family and child welfare

Family Law
Law on Social Protection
Rulebook on the Organization, Norms and Standards of Work of Social Welfare Centres
Rulebook on Foster Care
Instructions on Procedures of Social Welfare Centres — the guardianship authority in the adoption procedure
Professional methodological instructions for the work of the Guardianship Authority in the process of maintaining the child's personal relationship with a parent, relatives and other persons with whom they have particularly close relationship in controlled conditions
Rulebook on Closer Conditions and Standards for Providing SOS Helpline Services for Women with Experience of Violence
Rulebook on Closer Conditions and Standards for Providing Social Protection Services
Law on Financial Support for Families with Children

Education

Law on the Education System Foundations
Rulebook on the Municipal Council of Parents
Law on Preschool Education
Godine uzleta (Years of Ascent) — new foundations of the preschool education programme
Rulebook on the Programme of all Forms of Work of Professional Associates
Rulebook on the Programme of all Forms of Work of Professional Associates in Preschool Institutions
Rulebook on the Protocol Actions in the Institution in Response to Violence, Abuse and Neglect
Bylaw on Pedagogical and Andragogical Assistants
Regulation on Safety and Protection of Children when using Information and Communication Technologies
Čuvam te (I Protect You) app
National Coalition of Parents and Teachers (NARNS)

Youth care

Law on Youth
Criminal Code
Law on Juvenile Criminal Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles
Youth Office
Youth Community Centres
National Strategy for Youth 2023–2030

PARENTING SUPPORT PROGRAMMES — INTERSECTORAL AND SECTORAL

Sectoral — health care

Family-Centred Early Interventions (FCEI)

Sectoral — social welfare

Family Outreach Worker
Family Strengthening Programme — Support to Families — SOS Children's Villages
Parents Helpline in the social protection system
Socio-educational Family Programme — School for Parents

Sectoral — education

Strong Families
Growing Up in a Democratic Family
Living in a Democratic Family
Programmes for Families (parents and children) Strong from the Start — Let's give them wings
Programme for Parents Strong from the Start — Let's give them wings
Project 'Improved equal access and completion of pre-university education for children who need additional education support' i.e., Učimo svi zajedno (We Learn Together)

Sectoral — youth

Programme — Support groups of families of unemployed young people having experienced psychiatric hospitalization

Intersectoral

Scaling-up Playful Parenting — parents in focus
Guide for Local Self-governments in creating playful environment for early childhood development and providing of systemic support to parentsPet P's and Be the Hand That Loves
CFC — Caring for Caregivers — care about parents and caregivers (safeguard parents, nurturing parenting (ČRNR))
Caregiver (parent) skills training (CST)
Strong from the Start — Dam Len Phaka
Everything is OK platform
Minimum Service Package for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support for Youth in Serbia
Minimalni paket usluga za mentalno zdravlje i psihosocijalnu podršku za mlade u Srbiji

ANNEX 5

Detailed Review of Relevant Documents and Review of Available Parenting Support Programmes[59]

59 This document exists only in Serbian and is available separately.

ANNEX 6

Semi-Structured Interview Questions with Suggested Informants

This document presents the proposed structure and questions for the interview format with key informants.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. My name is [consultant's name]. I work with the UNICEF Serbia on the development and implementation of the tool that evaluates policies for universal parenting support, aimed at supporting the Serbian Government in expanding programmes and parenting interventions.

Thank you for your time and willingness to share your perspectives and experiences. The goal of this interview is to collect information in order to measure progress in the implementation of universal parenting support policies in Serbia.

Your participation is voluntary. The interview will presumably take up to 90 minutes. Do you agree with my recording the interview, as I would like to make sure not to miss anything and use the recording in case I skip anything in the notes? I would not share the video with others.

Before we start, do you have any questions to ask me?

Place of conducting the interview: _____

Total number of participants: _____

Interviewer(s): _____

Recording secretary: _____

Date: _____ Starting time: _____ Ending time: _____

Introductory questions:

1. Can you first tell me something about your position and role in promoting and supporting parenting in Serbia?
2. Please explain your perception of the term 'universal parenting support'. Is there a common understanding of this definition in your ministry/organization and beyond that, with other ministries and organizations?

An additional definition we use is: Universal parenting support involves providing resources, information and services to all parents or caregivers regardless of their socioeconomic background, ethnicity, or any other factors. This support may include trainings on parenting, access to child development information, parenting counselling, group support programmes, and access to resources such as daycare, schools, health care, and social welfare services. The aim is to ensure that all parents have access to the essential resources and support in order to be able to raise their children in the best way possible.

Domain 1	**LAWS AND POLICIES**
Standard 1	**DEFINITION:** includes national action plans and policies with specific goals, implementation measures and allocation of financial and human resources. Action plans and policies may be subnational, in decentralized and federal systems. **There are legal and policy frameworks at an overarching national or federal level conducive to parenting support.**

Domain 2	**LEADERSHIP AND COORDINATION**	
Standard 2	**There is a national coordination mechanism that is responsible for oversight of national parenting policies, plans, programmes and interventions at national level or at senior decentralized level.**	
	Questions	Informants/ interviews
	1. To what extent are you familiar with the fact that Serbia has an integral document committing to the provision of support to parents, as a form of a single policy of support to parenting and parents? If not, how much are you aware of the existence of an official document by which the Serbian Government or several ministries have jointly committed to support parenting or early childhood development and their families? Can you name those documents? Note: If the participants cannot recall the documents mentioned below, we may remind them.	Representatives 4 (5) of the ministries Representative of the National Council for Child Rights
	• *How familiar are you with the Serbian Government's Call to Action from 2018? This call was initiated by the Ministry of Health; Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Education, as well as the then minister without portfolio responsible for demography and population policy and the President of the National Child Rights Council. How much are you aware that someone from your Ministry has been involved in the process of overseeing the level of achievement of six priorities defined in this Document now, five years later?*	Ministries/SCTM
	• *How familiar are you with the fact that in 2016 the Ministry of Health adopted the Regulation on the Programme for Improving Early Childhood Development? What is your perception of this programme? (Note: We are checking whether the respondent sees this programme as a comprehensive parenting support policy for children at an early age?) Also, in 2021, a **Special Working Group was established to support and oversee the implementation of the National Programme for Improving Early Childhood Development**. Do you have any information about it? To what extent have you been informed about the official establishment of a working group (WG) based on the authority of the agreed lead ministry, have they developed any tasks at the national or subnational levels? What kind of body is it? Has anyone from your sector/department been **involved** in the work of this group? Do you know whether this body meets, works, or...?*	Ministries/SCTM SP: a member from the ministry + a WG member for preparing Family Law amendments
	• *To what extent are you aware that the documents that we identified through our conversation as either related to or providing more focus on the support to parents and parenting, have been accompanied with the developed action plans that are followed by the budget? Or that by way of, e.g., IPA programming and the line/intersectoral strategic projects, some funds have been allocated, directly or indirectly related to the preparation of some umbrella policies in this field? What about the funding of the implementation of parenting support programmes?*	Ministry of Family Care and Demography (MFCD)
	Please consider what needs to be improved in the existing national documents, so that they become the relevant foundation and basis for providing the universal parenting support services.	
	• *To what extent are you aware that there are certain local coordination mechanisms that place focus on parenting support? Or the support to children that clearly understands the significance of parenting support activities for the child well-being? Are you familiar with/what do you know about **local level** documents in place that recognize parenting support? Which sector do they predominantly belong to? Are there any examples of local intersectoral documents? What is your experience? Which of the local documents should most preferably and most confidently take on this topic. According to your knowledge, are the documents accompanied with Local Action Plans, have the funding sources been identified? Do you know if any of the Local Self-governments has already financed their activities presented in the documents?*	
	• *What is the status of Municipal Councils of Parents? Is this a mandatory body, which document is the basis for their establishment, how many municipalities have such councils, which tasks are they in charge of...?*	
	• *As regards the legal and strategic documents, are there procedures in place that mandate the participation of parents in the development of parenting policies? Or children? How does this work in real life? / the same question for the local level.*	
	• Do parents participate in coordination bodies or in monitoring mechanisms?	

	MINISTRIES/NATIONAL LEVEL PER SECTOR • *How familiar are you that the system of Social Protection/Health Care/Education/Population policy (demography) and family has such a well-developed parenting support policy?* **For Social Protection:** How do you perceive the current Family Law in the context of parenting policies? What do you think about Correctional Supervision in this context, should the universal and targeted parenting support be more clearly defined in the Family Law? What do you think about the Law on Financial Support for Families with Children 2018 in this context? International documents recognize this type of support as family-friendly policies. Does that wording/term appear here? ***Family-friendly policies:*** *policies that provide parents and caregivers with care, time and resources to achieve balance and benefit from both the work and family life, that promote high-quality childcare, including paid maternal and paternal childcare leave, support to breastfeeding and support for high-quality childcare in both formal and informal settings and benefits for children, including the related social welfare systems.* *Please consider what needs to be improved in the current sectoral documents in order for them to provide solid ground and foundation for providing the universal parenting support.*
Domain 3	**EVIDENCE-INFORMED PROGRAMMES** ***DEFINITION:*** *In general, effective parenting programmes and interventions have a common content related to (1) promotion of knowledge of child and adolescent development, behaviour and needs through the life course, (2) responsive caregiving, (3) quality time together, (4) non-violent discipline (including positive reinforcement, rule setting and appropriate consequences), (5) stress management and self-care, (6) communication and self-regulation skills and (7) promoting gender-transformative norms, among others.* ***DEFINITION 2:*** *The basic content of effective parental interventions for the prevention of abuse and neglect is, among others, based on social learning theory and attachment principles, and a focus on strengthening of parents' skills and sensitivity through a practical training on positive parent–child interaction through practical training on positive parent–child interaction, the use of positive encouragement, games, non-violent discipline techniques, problem-solving, social and emotional teaching and developmentally appropriate supervision.* *It is up to us (decision makers and professionals) to tailor and accomplish the optimum content in the context of Serbia.*
Standard 3	**Policies require that parenting programmes and interventions adhere to agreed core content and delivery that is evidence-informed and relevant to national and local context.**

	Questions	Informants/ interviews
	• Speaking of the importance of parenting support, to what extent are you familiar with it, do we have any programmes for training professionals to work with parents, or any direct interventions/programmes with parents? What programme comes to your mind? Why do you think it is a good programme? What should a good programme contain (incentives through questions in accordance with the description of evidence-informed programmes)? • This international document for the assessment and monitoring of parenting policies raises the question of verifying whether those programmes have been based on contemporary scientific views. Do the sectors demand, through their legal documents and regulations, that the creators of parenting support programmes provide a decisive explanation of the theoretical concept used, as well as the obligatory reporting on the delivered trainings, accompanied with the requested evaluation by the training participants — who may either be professionals, or occasionally, the parents themselves. What are your views on this matter? • Do you know whether the strategic and normative acts directly or indirectly related to parenting are based on, or make reference to, those scientific achievements and proofs? *Please think about what needs to be improved in the existing programmes so that they could become the national programmes of universal parenting support.* • What do you believe a good parenting support programme should contain? The interviewer will ask additional questions according to the definitions of evidence-informed programmes. • Which theoretical framework — the scientific understanding of parenting — should be the basis of such programmes? Do we, as professionals, have any consensus about what is a 'must' for the programmes developed today, that would apply to all parents? Also, do we need any consensus about the underlying theoretical concept of the programme for specific, additionally vulnerable groups of parents? • This international document for the assessment and monitoring of parenting policies raises the question of verifying whether those programmes have been based on contemporary scientific views. Do the sectors demand, through their legal documents and regulations, that the creators of parenting support programmes provide a decisive explanation of the theoretical concept used, as well as the obligatory reporting on the delivered trainings, accompanied with the requested evaluation by the training participants — who may either be professionals, or occasionally, the parents themselves. What are your views on this matter?	Ministries, all 4/5 UNICEF Focus Group WG — Experts in parenting
Domain 4 **Standard 4**	**LIFE-COURSE APPROACH** **Content and delivery of parenting programmes have a life-course approach.**	
Domain 5 **Standard 5**	**TIERED APPROACH TO PARENTING SUPPORT** **The national/federal parenting policies and plans include universal, targeted and intensive parenting interventions of progressively increasing intensity.**	
Domain 6 **Standard 6**	**REACHING THE MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES** **The national/federal parenting policies and plans include a strategy to reach the most vulnerable groups, e.g., adolescent parents, parents of children with developmental issues, parents or caregivers with disabilities, minority ethnic communities, families facing adversity (displacement, conflict, etc.).**	

Domain 7	**SCALE AND SUSTAINABILITY**
Standard 7	**The national/federal parenting policies and plans include strategies to ensure scalability, sustainability, and long-term impact and reach. What is scalability in this context? Planning to ensure that relevant programmes are available to all parents through different stages of child and adolescent development — to be universal, for the general population of parents?**

Questions	Informants/ interviews
• Please let us know if, according to your knowledge, there are plans for the scale-up of parenting programmes and their wider implementation in Serbia? Could you please share some details about those plans?	Decision makers /ministry representatives
• Are there any thoughts about the introduction of some minimum parenting support packages to improve their parental role, that would be universal, intended for the entire population of parents of children of all ages? We know we do not have that for now. Are we discussing an approach/policy to develop at least minimal support packages for all parents? In your opinion, which ministry should manage and take care of this approach? What are the biggest strategic opportunities for scaling, that is, reaching truly universal programmes in the future?	
• Do you believe that some of the existing programmes that achieved good results, and recorded a positive impact, could, with some improvements, be the answer for universal access?	
• What would be the solution for budgeting of such an approach that would permanently provide this kind of parenting support?	Group of professionals, parenting experts
• Are you aware of any online programmes, applications, websites providing easy access for parents, launched by government authorities or by professionals having authenticated access and programmes, that were proven to be successful? How can parents distinguish them among the multitude of advisory portals that have not been evaluated in this way?	
• Which of the existing programmes do you believe have potential to be universal? What do you think about introducing minimum support packages for parents in improving their parental role that would be universal, oriented to the entire population of parents of children of all ages?	
• At the level of national policies, which sector would be the most suitable to be the owner, to perform budgeting and monitoring?	

Domain 8 **Standard 8**	**USE OF PLATFORMS (EXISTING SERVICES, ACTIONS AND MECHANISMS) TO SCALE UP THE PARENTING PROGRAMMES AND INTERVENTIONS** **Parenting interventions and services are integrated into existing delivery platforms and supplemented by innovations to achieve the required delivery scale.**	
	Questions	Informants/ interviews
	LIFE-COURSE/TIERED	Ministries, all 4/5
	The tool being the subject of the interview that seeks your help with the benchmark assessment of parenting policies, programmes and interventions in Serbia, highlights the importance of having both the **universal programmes and those targeting special groups of parents/children**. It also features individual programmes involving **intensive parenting support**. Do you recognize the existence of such diversity of programmes in Serbia? Do the national policies or the legal framework mentioned before, provide for the same diversity of programmes (for all, some parents, or rather those preventive or intensive...)?	
	According to your knowledge, are there different approaches or specific programmes depending on the **age group** of children, through adolescents and up to the age of 18?	
	Also, are you aware of any programmes specifically dedicated to or targeting caregivers, taking into consideration their age (adolescent parents, older caregivers)?	
	When national policies and plans that include the aspect of parenting policies are created, do they take into account the involvement of fathers and male caregivers and how are they supported in their parental role?	SP, MFCD
	Can you name any parenting programme/approach/intervention that sets an example of a universal approach: Does this approach provide information — guidance on how to adapt the programme to different ages of children or characteristics of parents. Could you provide an example?	
	Which groups of parents, considering the characteristics of either the children or parents, do you believe require the targeted programme/interventions or even an intensive support?	
	What about foster parents (according to the Rulebook on Foster Care in Social Protection), has the group of caregivers in our country been well-recognized? What about adoptive parents? What kind of parenting support do they have? How would you rate it?	
	Are there any criteria developed in your sector, on the basis of which particular groups of parents are referred to certain parenting services and supports? Could you mention any examples of targeted or intensive support? Where are such programmes delivered? How are they related to other supports for those target groups?	
	Which groups most often receive targeted programmes? Which groups in your opinion are not covered at all, or barely receive any targeted support programmes?	
	OUTREACH	
	We are aware that there are **families with children that are left out** and not connected to the support systems (for example, parents of children with disabilities or the poor, Roma families...). Are there any measures or methods developed in your sector, or any other sector working with children and families, to reach those most isolated and often the most vulnerable children?	
	Is there any example of a procedure or a designed programme that has a way to reach the most vulnerable groups among the vulnerable population / any incentive for the informant, e.g., a health mediator, even a pedagogical assistant, or any form of innovative services to be delivered by Social Protection outreach workforce, etc.?	

	PLATFORMS **Method of providing the support programme services**	
	(A reminder for the interviewer — *Is it a current practice that parenting programmes and interventions are provided in different ways (in a group, individually, in person, online, using portals...) as well as through the existing services to which these programmes and interventions are added. If so, could you share more details about those platforms providing the parenting support?* Is there a developed system for parent informing? Is there a two-way referral system to ensure access to programmes and interventions for the most vulnerable groups (from the referrer to the service and from the service to the referrer)? And finally, a question concerning the discussed topics is, whether all those described practices have been based on any official documents. We know that a single, umbrella policy does not exist, but we would like to know if the method and organization of parenting support implementation are based on the rules/procedures from the legislation, or if the professionals who created the programme developed their own procedures? Do you think that it is necessary to create a common strategy around this and who should be leading it? Which ministry or ministries/or institutions of a sector would be appropriate to provide an official, legislative/strategic support for parenting programmes in coordination with the civil sector; who should oversee them?	UNICEF focus group Parenting experts
Domain 9 **Standard 9**	**PARENTING WORKFORCE** **The national/federal parenting policies and plans include a workforce strategy to ensure efficient, quality and inclusive delivery, scalability and sustainability.**	
	Questions	Informants/ interviews
	Concerning the parenting workforce, could you describe the background of the key staff tasked with creating the programmes? Who is implementing the parenting programmes in Serbia (are they professionals, paraprofessionals; who is in charge of the workforce development, are there mandatory trainings, certification of those trained? Question of supervision, renewal of licenses, certificates, etc.?). Is there a national/local workforce development strategy/plan that contains standards for qualifications, training and remuneration...?	Only professionals, outside the ministry
Domain 10 **Standard 10**	**PUBLIC FINANCING** **There is a commitment to allocation of national/federal and decentralized level budgets to ensure the sustainability and scalability of parenting interventions.**	
	Questions	Informants/ interviews
	What kind of funding is provided at the national level to support the continuous implementation of parenting programmes, activities, etc.? Has your department ensured local budgets aligned with local needs for parental support, in the context of decentralization? How does this work and how much is the financing of these supports recognized locally?	Line ministries SP SCTM

Domain 11 **Standard 11**	**DATA AND MONITORING** **There is a system for gathering, assessing and using evidence to achieve scaled-up and sustainable parenting support.**	
	Questions	Informants/ interviews
	How are the data on parenting programmes and beneficiaries (e.g., attendance) being collected and monitored at the moment (e.g., about their implementation, effectiveness)?	Both line ministries and professionals
Domain 12 **Standard 12**	**SOCIAL NORMS** **The national/federal parenting policies and plans identify and address harmful social norms and promote positive social norms that increase positive parenting.**	
	Questions	Informants/ interviews
	To what extent do parenting programmes deal with stigma reduction and promotion of gender-equitable norms / involvement of fathers? How is this implemented? If not, are there opportunities to promote gender-equitable norms? Has the attitude towards violence been incorporated in the programmes?	Both line ministries and professionals
Questions tailored to follow all standards, addressed to professionals working with the youth	1. How familiar you are that some of the strategies or laws (or some other documents) deal with parenting in an organized and comprehensive way? In your opinion, to what extent have the documents dealing with young people and their needs recognized the importance of working with parents? Which documents are they? 2. Speaking of the importance of parenting support, according to your knowledge, do we have any programmes for training of professionals working with parents, and any direct intervention programmes with parents, primarily for parents of adolescents? Are there programmes intended for all parents, do you know that there are programmes designed for some particularly vulnerable families with adolescents and which families are covered? 3. To what extent are you aware of the practice of various forms of implementing the parenting programmes and interventions (in a group, individually, in person, online, using portals...), including through the existing services, by adding these programmes and interventions? If so, could you share more details about those platforms for implementing parenting support? 4. What should a good programme for parents of teenagers include? Which topics should be covered by each programme designed for parents, and which ones for the parents of adolescents? 5. Which theoretical framework or scientific understanding of parenting should such programmes be based on? Have we, as professionals, reached any consensus about the theoretical base for the current programmes designed to apply to all parents? Also, regarding the special, additionally vulnerable groups of parents or children, have we reached an agreement about the theoretical background of the programme? 6. How familiar are you with whether the programmes in place have been accredited, where are they usually accredited and if not, why is that so? As a follow-up, we would first like to discuss the programmes implemented by your organizations. We would appreciate if you could tell us for how long has your programme been in place, whether it is intended to build capacities of professionals working with parents of adolescents (please specify the sector) or does it include additional package of specific topics or structured workshops worked out with parents, what topics are covered, is it accredited, how is the implementation financed, provide any statistics on the number of participating professionals and/or parents, whether you have done any evaluations of the programme achievements ... including anything else that you may believe is important to share with us regarding your programme.	Professionals working with the youth (e.g., representatives of NGOs), UNICEF representatives

ANNEX 7

Guide for Individual and Group Interviews

Individual or group interviews should include representatives of decision makers, experts from various systems, representatives of NGOs implementing parenting support programmes, parents, etc.

In the case of group interviews, it is recommended to have a group of 5–8 participants.

It is recommended that group interviews (if they are held live) take place in a space where participants can sit in a circle, and they should not last longer than 90 minutes. Interviews may also be conducted online.

Interviews should begin with the introduction of the facilitator (consultant) and the purpose of the conversation. It is important to emphasize that the conversation is being recorded and to explain the procedure for handling the data, and especially to explain the personal data protection procedure (e.g., if someone's statement is quoted, it will only be indicated that it was an expert from the named system).

It is necessary to distribute the consent forms to the participants (and collect these after being signed by the participants). After that, the participants should be invited to introduce themselves.

The leader should make sure that all group participants are equally involved in the discussion (encourage the 'silent' participants, while respecting their contribution and referring to the common goal of the discussion) also avoiding dominance by any of them. It is equally important to allow (and ensure) that each participant clearly states their opinion (to avoid making assumptions or relying on personal impressions about what the participants wanted to say, in our subsequent analysis).

Note: Although the interview is being recorded, there should be a person taking notes during the discussion. It is essential that the transcript indicates the roles of persons who speak (not their names).

Key questions and guidelines for a more detailed conversation have been provided in the interview. However, the interview is only a framework for this conversation. Try to keep your questions open and allow the respondent to describe their experience or views as precisely as possible. Watch the time planned for each question — don't let the speaker stray from the subject.

ANNEX 8

Informed Consent Form

Dear all,

Please read carefully the information about this research sent to you via e-mail and accordingly, make a decision whether you are willing to participate in it.

I have read the informative e-mail about this research, its objective and the purpose of the interview are clear to me and I understand that participation is voluntary.	*Yes*	*No*
I had the opportunity to ask as many questions as I wanted about the research after receiving the invitation e-mail and I received satisfactory answers to the question and sufficient information about the research. I spoke with UNICEF consultant Sanja Miloradović.	*Yes*	*No*
I also understand that I can withdraw from the research at any time, without providing an explanation for such withdrawal.	*Yes*	*No*
I understand that I can contact Sanja Miloradović (via e-mail) to obtain answers to any additional questions related to this research.	*Yes*	*No*
I give my consent to audio and video recording during the interview, and collecting of data that will be anonymous and used for group analysis of future needs and research results.	*Yes*	*No*

DECLARATION OF CONSENT

I have read and understood the information provided herein and I am giving my consent to participate in this research.

a. Yes, I agree to participate

b. No, I do not agree to participate

(please put a circle around one of the options)

Date: _____/_____/_____..

Thank you for your assistance and collaboration!

ANNEX 9

List of Informants Interviewed in the Course of Benchmarking of Parenting Policies and Programmes in Keeping with the Tool for the Benchmarking of Parenting Policies and Programmes

No	Sector	Full name, body/organization	Date	Work method	Note
1	Social protection	1. Sanja Kljajić, Head of Department for Professional Supervision, Republic Institute for Social Protection, member of WG for amendments to Family Law	6 June 2024	Interview, in person	Only covering the topic of the existence of parenting support and parenting in SP
2	1. Education, early childhood development 2. Social protection, early childhood development	1. Ivana Mihić, Prof. of Developmental Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, Therapist at OCD Harmonija 2. Ivana Cerović, Social Worker, former Head of Home Facility for children without parental care and parenting programmes and DsR — Impuls	7 June 2024	Focus group online	Focus on parenting programmes, not on the policy
3	Experts in the field of parenting/ children and representatives of health care sector	1. Ksenija Krstić, Institute for Psychology, Belgrade 2. Jelena Brankovic, Psychologist, NGO Harmonija, Playful Parenting 3. Snežana Plavšić, Institute of Public Health of Serbia Dr Milan Jovanovic Batut 4. Lana Vučičević Miladinović, Psychologist, NGO Belgrade Psychological Centre Association of Systemic Therapists	11 June 2024	Focus, online	Focus on parenting programmes and partially on the policy
4	Ministry of Health	1. Jelena Janković, Assistant Minister, Ministry of Health, Sector for Public Health and Health Care Programmes 2. Miljan Perić, Ministry of Health, Sector for Public Health and Health Care Programmes 3. Tamara Mirković, Ministry of Health, Sector for Public Health and Health Care Programmes	12 June 2024	In person	

5	Representatives of Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities	1. Maja Kneževic, SCTM 2. Sonja Vujin, SCTM	12 June 2024	Online	
6	Ministry of Family Care and Demography	1. Jelena Ranković Milovanović, Social Worker, Counsellor, Department for Administrative and Supervisory Affairs in the field of family and legal protection	12 June 2024	Online	Policy-related sectoral questions
7	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs	1. Slađana Čabrić, Pedagogist, Senior Counsellor, former Assistant Minister 2020, Trainer in the field of parenting	14 June 2024	In person	
8.	Representatives of NGOs focused on the youth	1. Slavica Ranisavljev Kovačev (OPENS) 2. Ivana Damnjanović (TOC) 3. Snežana Zarev (TOC) 4. Bojana Obradović (Mental hub)	6 August 2024	Focus Group, online	Questions of creation for professionals working with youth
9.	UNICEF representative Youth & Adolescent Development Officer UNICEF Serbia	1. Bojana Jevtović	12 August 2024	Online	Questions of creation for professionals working with youth

Aside from these, 7 interviews/focus groups included 15 respondents, 3 workshops were organized by UNICEF Belgrade.

Special Working Groups for the support and monitoring the National Programme for Improving Early Childhood Development

11 June 2024, UNICEF

Participation in the focus group organized with representatives of NGOs dealing with parenting, associations of parents of children with disabilities and parents. This focus group was engaged to gain insights into how parenting support is understood by the parents or associations performing activities relating to parenting and parenting support, about their best practices, their perception of shortcomings, the support that they find particularly important, etc.

13 June 2024, Hotel Trim

Validation officer, with representatives of MoE, MoH, MoFWD and independent experts

One of the sessions at the meeting held with representatives of various ministries and representatives of the scientific community, convened by UNICEF, addressed the Tool for Benchmarking of Parenting Policies and parenting support programmes. As the group of participants was very diverse (some had the opportunity to take part in interviews and familiarize themselves with the Tool), the session was the first level of validation for them, while some participants, primarily four representatives of MoE, were familiar with the Tool and shared their views on how MoE deals with the topic of parenting and made reference to essential documents that until then had not been covered by the desk analysis. Participants had the opportunity to comment on the proposed ratings for a number of benchmarks. Certainly, this workshop provided an early, rapid validation of findings and should be repeated once the process is completed.

ANNEX 10

Accreditation Procedure for Trainings in Three Systems in the Republic of Serbia (Health Care, Education and Social Protection)

All accredited training programmes within the health, education and social protection systems in Serbia must evidence their theoretical and scientific grounds, identify their goals, their expected output and method of achieving it.

The following information represents a summary of training accreditation processes within three systems in Serbia (health, education and social protection).

	Education	**Health care**	**Social protection**
Rulebook	Rulebook on continuous professional development of teachers, preschool teachers and professional associates (2021)	Rulebook on detailed conditions for continuing education of health care workers and associates (2022)	Rulebook on standards and the accreditation procedure of training programmes for professional workers and associates in social protection (2014)
Approving authority?	Institute for the Improvement of Education	National Health Council	Accreditation board
How?	Competition or minister's approval	Competition	Competition
Timeline	Every three years	Four times a year	Throughout the year
What requirements do they meet?	a) ***Contain a theory*** *that explains the way in which the activities are expected to produce a number of outcomes that contribute to the achievement of identified needs and desired impacts.* b) ***State the body of evidence*** *as the basis for their creation, originating from formative research.* c) ***Include content, programme and intervention delivery methods****, and structural approaches substantiated by state-of-the-art practices.*	a) ***State the body of evidence*** *as the basis for their creation, originating from formative research.* b) ***Include content, programme and intervention delivery methods****, and structural approaches substantiated by state-of-the-art practices.*	a) ***Contain a theory*** *that explains the way in which the activities are expected to produce a number of outcomes that contribute to the achievement of identified needs and desired impacts.* b) *State* ***the body of evidence*** *as the basis for their creation, originating from formative research.* c) ***Include content, programme and intervention delivery methods****, and structural approaches substantiated by state-of-the-art practices.* d) *Accreditation documents impose the* ***requirement to provide evidence-informed criteria for identifying, adapting, and delivering parenting programmes and interventions that address the unique needs****, cultures, languages, and values of diverse families.*

	Education	Health care	Social protection
What requirements do they fail to meet?	• *That training programmes (including parenting programmes) are developed, implemented and evaluated* ***through a consultative process and mechanisms for ensuring regular feedback*** *from all relevant stakeholders, including parents.* • *That accreditation documents require evidence-informed criteria for identifying,* ***adapting, and delivering parenting programmes and interventions that address the unique needs, cultures, languages, and values of diverse families****.*	• *That training programmes (including parenting programmes) are developed, implemented and evaluated through a consultative process and mechanisms for ensuring regular feedback from all relevant stakeholders, including parents.* • *That accreditation documents require evidence-informed criteria for identifying, adapting, and delivering parenting programmes and interventions that address the unique needs, cultures, languages, and values of diverse families.* • *That they comprise the theory explaining the way in which activities are expected to produce a number of outcomes that contribute to the achievement of identified needs and desired impacts.*	*Despite the statement that the programme must be based on the integration of theory and practice, that it must be relevant for the existing social protection practice and have its goals and contents, including the way of implementing the programme, tailored to the selected target groups, we find that we cannot be sure that* ***training programmes (including the parenting programmes) are created, implemented and evaluated through a consultative process and mechanisms*** *for providing regular feedback from all relevant stakeholders, including parents.*

Education system

Rulebook on continuous professional development of teachers, preschool teachers and professional associates (2021) sets forth two types of accredited trainings:

1. Those approved by the Institute for the Improvement of Education based on competitions, announced on their website, while the Pedagogical Institute of Vojvodina approves the programmes delivered in languages of national minorities in which education jobs may be performed in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, which are published on its website. The Institute announces competitions for the approval of training programmes every three years and they are approved for the period of three working (i.e., school) years. The Director of the Institute, and/or of the Pedagogical Institute, appoints the Commission for the preparation of proposals of professional development programmes to be approved, upon previously obtained consent of the minister. The appointment of the Commission is conducted by way of a public call, and/or upon the invitation of the Institute, and/or the Pedagogical Institute. The Commission's work is regulated by the *Rulebook on the work of the Institute's professional team in the process of approving and monitoring the implementation of approved forms of continuous professional development of teachers, educators and professional associates* (2022).

The programme may be registered for one of the 17 areas: librarianship, educational work, social sciences, health education, elective subjects and optional courses, information technologies, mathematics, children/students who need additional support in education, education in the languages of national minorities, general curriculum, preschool education, natural sciences, vocational subjects in secondary vocational schools, Serbian language and literature, foreign language, arts, physical education.

Some training programmes require the prior selection of competences and priority areas, and subsequent indication of the following data: Programme objective; Programme goals — in case of a tiered programme, prior knowledge of the participants is required for the successful achievement of the programme goals above the basic level; Expected prior knowledge of participants for the successful achievement of programme goals; Expected outcomes of the training; Method of checking the knowledge and skills acquired at the training; Method of evaluating the participants' activities; Method of monitoring the practical implementation of acquired knowledge and skills following the training; The anticipated method of providing support to training participants with their practical implementation of acquired knowledge and skills; Expected effects of practical implementation of the programme; An overview of the results of the needs analysis for professional development, or the results of research indicating that the proposed training programme leads to the achievement of the expected training outcomes (scientific, action, ad hoc, etc., without providing the links); References of the programme organizer relevant for the proposed programme topic registered for the competition; Technical equipment required for programme delivery; Price per participant and price specification; Estimated number of participants.

In addition, training scenarios and CVs of authors and facilitators must be submitted.

2. Those considered to be the programmes of public interest, whose content, goals and outcomes contribute to the systemic development and improvement of educational work and are not subject to competition. These programmes are free for the participants and are approved by the minister's decision. These programmes approved by the minister, equally as the programmes approved by the Institute through the competition, require the presentation of the programme explanation, along with all the aforementioned data (goals, competences, etc.).

To conclude, all the accredited educational training programmes (including those related to parenting) have to meet the following criteria: a) contain a theory that explains the way in which activities are expected to produce a number of outcomes contributing to the achievement of identified needs and desired impacts, b) state the body of evidence as the basis for their creation, originating from formative research, c) include content, programme and intervention delivery methods,

and structural approaches substantiated by state-of-the-art practices.

The available documents relating to the educational accreditation trainings provide no evidence that: a) the training programmes (including the parenting programmes) are developed, implemented and evaluated through consultations with parents and caregivers, including both the targeted and intensive interventions and programmes; b) that the accreditation documents impose the evidence-informed criteria to identify, customize and provide parenting programmes and interventions tailored to unique needs, cultures, languages and values of diverse families.

Health care system

Rulebook on detailed conditions for continuing education of health care workers and associates (2022)[60] lays down that the evaluation of the continuing education programme quality will be conducted by the National Health Council, based on the previous evaluation procedure of the continuing education quality conducted by the responsible chamber of health care workers, minimum four times a year.

The programme accreditation may be obtained under the following conditions:

1) if the programme improves the knowledge, skills and expertise of participants;

2) if the programme is based on the latest knowledge and achievements of the profession;

3) if it improves the quality of professional work of the specific target group;

4) if the topic and target group have been clearly identified, taking into account the participant's membership in relevant chambers, professional qualification and medical specialty, type of continuing education, content, timetable of events, lecturers, references, programme duration and intellectual property;

5) if the programme is approved by the professional authority of the continuing education organizer, and if the organizer has no such authority, approval is to be provided by the professional authority of the respective association of health care workers or the corresponding faculty;

6) if the lecturer of the accredited programme is a person who has at least five years of work experience and at least the same level of education as the students.

The request for accreditation of the continuing education programme carried out by the responsible chamber of health care workers or the Ministry is submitted to the Health Council, following the public call published on the website of the Health Council and the Chamber of Health Care Workers. The Health Council evaluates each registered continuing education programme by determining the collected number of points. After the quality assessment procedure of the continuing education programme, the Health Council issues the Decision on the Accreditation of the Continuing Education Programme.

When applying for accreditation, the authors of the programmes are required to submit a completed form that, among others, contains the following information: What are the educational goals of the programme? What knowledge will the participants acquire? What skills will the participants acquire? Which learning/training methods will be used? Will the educational material be distributed to the participants? Will there be any knowledge testing of the participants? Will there be an evaluation of the programme? Do faculty teachers participate in teaching? Do foreign lecturers participate in teaching?

Additionally, they need to submit the summary of the programme, its agenda, CVs and references for the proposed continuing education programme.

60 www.paragraf.rs/propisi/pravilnik_o_blizim_uslovima_za_sprovodjenje_kontinuirane_edukacije_za_zdravstvene_radnike_i_zdravstvene_saradnike.html

The website of the National Health Council[61] presents the criteria issued by the Health Council for the training programme accreditation. Those criteria, among others, include: a) Regular publishing of expert and scientific papers that include the materials from the conducted programme of continuing medical education (CME) — in paper or electronic form; b) Implementation of the state-of-the-art knowledge by Serbian Association of Health Professionals (SAHP) in CME programmes, recommendations of international organizations, etc. (mentioning the respective state-of-the-art knowledge); c) Collaboration of SAHP in conducting the CME with the related associations and medical schools, including other organizations (as listed).

In view of the above, we find that all training programmes accredited in the field of health care (including the parenting programmes) meet the following criteria: a) state the body of evidence as the basis for their creation, originating from formative research; b) include content, programme and intervention delivery methods, and structural approaches substantiated by state-of-the-art practices.

The available documents relating to the accreditation of medical trainings provide no evidence that: a) training programmes (including the parenting programmes) are developed, implemented and evaluated using a consultative process and regular feedback mechanisms across relevant stakeholders, including parents; b) that the accreditation documents impose the evidence-informed criteria to identify, customize and provide parenting programmes and interventions tailored to unique needs, cultures, languages and values of diverse families; c) that they contain a theory that explains the way in which activities are expected to produce a number of outcomes contributing to the achievement of identified needs and desired impacts.

61 www.zdravstvenisavetsrbije.gov.rs/dokumenta/KRITERIJUMIZAAKREDITACIJUUZS.pdf

Social protection

In 2014, the *Rulebook on standards and the accreditation procedure of training programmes for professional workers and associates in social protection* (2014) was developed within the social protection system. This Rulebook lays down the standards for training programme accreditation, method of conducting the accreditation procedure, method of maintaining and the content of the Accreditation Application Registry, Registry of Accredited Training Programme and the Registry of Delivered Training Programmes, including the content and design of certificates acquired upon the completion of trainings conducted based on the accredited programmes.

Accreditation of training programmes ensures the minimum quality of trainings delivered to the social protection staff, enabling the development of their competences.

Accreditation of training programmes should provide diversity, accessibility, comparability and competitiveness of training programmes, enable monitoring and evaluation of training programmes and the continuing enhancement of the training programme quality. It is also important to ensure the introduction of the quality assurance system in professional development programmes and to balance between the supply and demand in the field of professional training and development of the workforce. Accreditation standards of training programmes set up the minimum quality that the training programme has to achieve in order to be accredited.

According to the type of competencies they develop, the accredited training programmes include:

1) basic training programmes for acquiring general knowledge and skills for performing tasks related to social protection, other than the tasks of health care workers and health care associates;

2) complementary training programmes enhancing the competencies of the staff to perform social

protection tasks, for mastering the skills of applying modern approaches, procedures and work methods and improving the programmes for providing of social protection services.

As for the groups of accredited training programmes, the standards may be either common, applying to both groups of programmes, or individual, applying to one of the groups of accredited training programmes.

The content of training programme must:

1) be consistent with clearly defined goals and objectives set by the training programme;

2) contain elements that are interconnected and consistent;

3) represent the integration of theory and practice;

4) be relevant for the current social protection practice;

5) have goals and contents, including the method of programme implementation that is appropriate for the selected target group;

6) have goals that are consistent with the expected practical outcome;

7) be open towards continuous professional development;

8) have clearly defined procedures in place, for monitoring and evaluating the practical impact of the programme.

Individual standards for the basic training programmes require:

1) that the training programme is scientifically and theoretically underpinned;

2) that the training programme content is aligned with the prescribed standards for performing professional tasks covered by that programme;

3) testing the competences at the end of training is conducted so as to ensure the ability of participants to perform professional tasks covered by the training, in accordance with the prescribed standards and in the best interest of beneficiaries;

4) that the programme ensures encouraging of professional, evidence-based performance.

Individual standards for complementary training programmes require:

1) that the training programme is derived from modern, professional and scientific knowledge and/or practical experiences;

2) that the training programme reflects the objectively identified practical needs;

3) that the training programme is focused on practical experience that has to be verified and substantiated;

4) testing the competences at the end of training to be conducted so as to ensure the ability of participants to perform professional tasks covered by the training, in accordance with the prescribed legislation and in the best interest of beneficiaries;

5) that the training programme, aimed at the development of skills, includes in its training plan the procedure for verifying its practical viability;

6) that the intersectoral training programmes covering specific intersectoral knowledge are clearly dedicated to each of the sectoral groups.

The accreditation procedure includes:

1) announcement of the public call for accreditation;

2) submission of accreditation application, with the accompanying documents;

3) checking the fulfilment of mandatory requirements and registration of application;

4) deciding on the classification of accredited training programmes after the accreditation;

5) checking the compliance with accreditation standards;

6) deciding on accreditation and renewal of accreditation;

7) passing the decision on accreditation;

8) registration of the accredited training programme.

The training programme accreditation procedure is conducted throughout the year, based on the public call that may be either general or thematic.

The competition documents will include:

1) Application for the training programme accreditation;

2) Explanation of compliance with standards;

3) Statement of the applicant of the proposed training programme;

4) Review of training programme;

5) Training programme summary;

6) Integrated training programme.

To conclude, all the training programmes to be accredited in the field of social protection (including those related to parenting) meet the following criteria: a) contain a theory that explains the way in which activities are expected to produce a number of outcomes contributing to the achievement of identified needs and desired impacts; b) state the body of evidence as the basis for their creation, originating from formative research; c) include content, programme and intervention delivery methods, and structural approaches substantiated by state-of-the-art practices; d) that the accreditation documents impose the evidence-informed criteria to identify, customize and provide parenting programmes and interventions tailored to unique needs, cultures, languages and values of diverse families.

While it is stated that the programme must be based on the integration of theory and practice, that it must be relevant for the existing social protection practice and must have goals and contents, including the methods of implementing the programme that are suitable for the selected target group, we can conclude that we cannot be sure that training programmes (including programmes concerning parenting) are created, implemented and evaluated through a consultative process and mechanisms for providing regular feedback from all relevant stakeholders, including parents.

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Benchmarking report

on parenting support **policies and programmes** in the Republic of Serbia