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Child, parent or family? Applying a systemic lens to the conceptualisations of Family Support in Europe

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers how Family Support is conceptualised in the European context with respect to its primary beneficiaries. The central question considers the focus of concern in a child welfare system and what it means when Family Support is focused on children, on parents, or involves the family unit as a whole. Informed by a body of relevant literature reviewed as part of a wider project, Family Support is seen as more often conceptualised as being targeted toward parents as the primary service user, and to a lesser extent described as being tailored toward children or whole families. This approach to Family Support provision is somewhat at odds with a systemic understanding of families, which is foundational to much social care and child welfare work, and which takes account of the multi-layered relationships between individuals within families, and between individuals, families and their social world. Applying an ecological systems perspective, this paper critically discusses the consequences for the involved stakeholders and the implementation of services at different system levels when support and interventions are targeted at the child, the parents or at the family as a whole.



KEYWORDS

Family Support; child; parent; family

Introduction

Although dynamic agents in their own right, children remain a vulnerable group dependent on adults to protect, support, nourish and educate them. In certain circumstances and for a range of reasons some families' capacity to provide for and care for their children can be reduced or compromised, and as a result, they require support and assistance in carrying out this fundamental function. Family Support is an approach to providing this help with an overall aim of protecting children and promoting their well-being.

However, the conceptualisation of Family Support varies in terms of its orientation and implementation. For instance, Family Support approaches can take a child-based or parent-oriented perspective, can be framed by concerns about care or control, and may be provided universally or have a targeted approach to respond to specific issues. Of note, how Family Support is conceptualised informs the type of services provided and the intended outcomes of those services. The prevailing

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political orientation to policy in a given country can also influence how family support is conceptualised and delivered. In particular, orientations towards the relationship between the family and the state, and the prevailing ideas of parenthood (whether it is a set of skills to be learned or a set of relationships to be nurtured) can impact on the provision of Family Support services.

This paper is based on a systematic review of academic literature carried out to understand how family support is conceptualised in the European context (Devaney et al. 2021). This review was completed as part of the work of a formal European Network working to enhancing the role of Family Support research, policy, and practice in order to promote children's rights and family welfare (please see EurofamNet: The European Family Support Network at <https://eurofamnet.eu/home> for further detail). Following an outline of the approach used in the literature review, this paper begins by outlining accepted definitions of Family Support and providing a brief summary of an ecological understanding of families. We then review how the literature has conceptualised Family Support as either child-focused, parent-focused or family-focused and consider some of the associated implications. Drawing on the ecological systems theories, the paper discusses consequences for the involved actors and the implementation of services at different system levels, when support and interventions are targeted at the child, the parents or the family as a whole.

Methodology

All authors of the current paper were involved in the systematic literature review process which focussed on the conceptualisations, main forms (types) and modalities (genres) of Family Support delivered in European countries. Following a systematic screening process (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005), a total of 82 peer-reviewed articles which conceptualised family support and family support services, provided theoretical, disciplinary or political perspectives on family support and discussed applications, limitations and complexities of the concept for research, policy and practice were included.

Based on this review, it was apparent that the central aim of Family Support is the well-being and welfare of children – in this regard Family Support in Europe is primarily understood as being child-centred (see Authors, 2021). However, while children are the intended ultimate beneficiaries of support, actual services are not always targeted directly to them, nor are children or young people necessarily directly involved in service provision. This approach to Family Support provision struck us as being somewhat at odds with a systemic understanding of families, which is foundational to much social care and child welfare work, and which takes account of the multi-layered relationships between individuals within families, and between individuals, families and their social world. This conflict inspired us to undertake a secondary analysis (Ruggiano & Perry, 2019) of the included literature with the aim of exploring the conceptualisation of family support as either child-, parent-, or family-focused. We re-examined the papers to identify how children, parents, and the whole family are positioned as beneficiaries and as agents in family support. Thereafter, these findings were synthesised and analysed with reference to an ecological system theory perspective to assess how the interrelations between family member, and between the family, its members and society is accounted for.

The review and this paper are based on literature sourced from European countries; however, it does not compare or contrast individual countries legislative, policy or service delivery approaches to Family Support. Of note, it is accepted that European countries vary with regard to their public policy traditions and contexts (Thévenon, 2011) and this complexity of political and administrative structures as well as social policy regimes in European countries is discussed in Churchill et al. (2021).

Understanding Family Support

Much has been written about the concept of Family Support within the European context, with literature repeatedly highlighting the benefits of Family Support provision to achieve positive

outcomes for families. Hidalgo et al. (2018) suggest that Family Support as a child welfare measure is a social priority for government bodies across Europe, as the effectiveness of Family Support in promoting child well-being in disadvantaged family contexts is supported by research evidence. However, Family Support is a broad concept, with notable differences across jurisdictions, both in definition and focus.

At an overall level, Family Support is accepted as a transdisciplinary field made up of practices and knowledge from different areas, theories and approaches (Herrera-Pastor et al., 2020). In a similar vein, Family Support is referred to as an umbrella term covering a range of interventions which vary along many dimensions depending on their target group, the background of service providers, the issue being addressed and the nature of the intervention or activity as well as the service setting (Brady et al., 2018; Frost et al., 2015). Churchill et al. (2019) broadly define family support services as: services and programmes targeted at children and/or young people and their parents and/or their families which variously aim to support families, benefit children and improve the quality of family life and relations. While the primary aim of securing children's welfare in a child-centred approach is emphasised, the transactional nature of family relationships is also recognised. Definitions, therefore, highlight the importance of promoting the well-being of each family member if the rights and well-being of children are to be upheld. Most definitions of Family Support emphasise the role of informal, community, voluntary sector (semi-formal) and professional, sometimes statutory (formal) networks of support (Frost, Devaney and Herrera - Pastor, 2020). Family Support is also included as part of a protective response for children and young people, advocating a supportive approach to parents, families, and extended family members when there are adverse conditions and challenges in ensuring their safety (Mc Gregor and Devaney, 2020a, 2020b). A human rights and social justice perspective is also noted as underpinning the Family Support orientation with an emphasis on the right of parents and families to receive support if and when they need it to fulfil their parenting role. Ultimately, Family Support is an optimistic approach with an underpinning view that adverse or challenging situations can change and improve (Herrera-Pastor et al., 2020).

An ecological systems approach to understanding Family Support

Ecological systems theories are today widely used to understand complex inter-relationships in different fields of applied social research and practice (e.g. Spiel et al., 2008; Ungar et al., 2013). Initially proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) they describe a multi-layered relationship between the individual and their wider social environment. In a revised and more recent iteration of the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), the individual is at the centre of the system, embedded in five interconnected bioecological systems, the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chronosystems. Whereas the microsystem refers to the immediate environments of the individual, the mesosystem refers to interactions between the individual's microsystems, such as a child's parents and teachers. The exo-system incorporates formal and informal social structures that indirectly influence the individual via their microsystems, such as parents' workplaces or the neighbourhood. The macrosystem refers to cultural elements that may include wealth, ideologies and jurisdictions. Finally, the chronosystem refers to environmental changes that occur over the lifetime, including significant life events and historical events.

Applying the bioecological model to the conceptualisation of Family Support, its systemic perspective provides a useful framework for understanding the diverse factors and processes that may influence children and families within systems of care (Cook & Kilmer, 2010). Child welfare systems are understood as adaptive networks of structures, processes, and relationships grounded in values and principles that provide children and their families with access to services and supports (Hodges et al., 2006). Thus, the understanding of a child welfare system is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's systemic perspective on proximal and distal influences that are interrelated, interacting and dynamic. However, as pointed out by Cook and Kilmer (2010), additional clarification is needed regarding the focus of concern in a child welfare system. While Bronfenbrenner's model

clearly focuses on the individual at the centre, child welfare systems with respect to the provision of family support differ regarding their primary beneficiaries. The child, the parent or the wider family unit can be positioned as the priority or focus in terms of the aim of a Family Support intervention.

Family Support with a focus on the child

A significant body of the literature reviewed emphasises that protecting children, promoting their well-being, and guaranteeing their rights are overall aims of Family Support (reference removed; Hidalgo et al., 2018; Jiménez et al., 2019; Rácz & Bogács, 2019). However, as Daly (2020) notes, many policies and actions aimed at supporting children are in effect family-focused, viewing children's welfare as best achieved within a family/collective-unit orientation. Related to this point, surprisingly few authors in the reviewed papers approached the topic of family support from a children's or children's rights perspective or with a focus on children's agency within families. According to Daly (2020) there is little direct engagement with children; rather the focus is on the adult world, and the extent to which children's welfare is dealt with by resourcing the family or parents and/or seeking to affect parental behaviour and institutions. In recognition of this, Juul and Husby (2020) stress the need for child welfare workers to engage in more conversations and closer collaboration with children to strengthen their ability to cope with everyday life through child-friendly practices (Freijo & López, 2018; Roberts, 2015).

However, from a political perspective some authors note that the aims of family and parenting support can be understood as prioritising the rights of the child. Ivan et al. (2015) found that parenting support was a welcome source of information and advice on investing in children's well-being. Further, Littmarck et al. (2018) point to the strategic aim of parenting support in the Swedish context as an acceptance of the state's responsibility for improving and equalising children's living conditions and investment to achieve equality in children's life chances.

Several papers emphasise prevention as a core ambition when children are focused. Examples include services aimed to support the transition to the school system and prevent educational failure (Tunstill & Blewett, 2015), universal help for parents of young babies, (Knijn & Hopman, 2015), services aimed to prevent children from negative impact of parents' drug-use (Whittaker et al., 2016), and mental illness (Yates & Gatsou, 2021). These examples illustrate that parents in several contexts are referred to as risk factors to their children's well-being, with support for children intended to mitigate potential harm.

However, Roberts (2015) notes that in the provision of respite care, the intention of the service is not to enrich the lives of children but to alleviate stress on parents. While the benefits to parents are obvious, the benefits to children are less obvious, especially for those who are reluctant to go to the carer. While it is children who engage in the service, their parents are intended beneficiaries. In this orientation, there is a risk that the needs of children will be overshadowed by the needs of parents. It is argued that while we need to maintain an emphasis on easing parental stress to avoid family breakdown, there is insufficient attention paid to children's perspectives and a more child-centred agenda is needed.

Family Support with a focus on the parent(s)

As noted, although Family Support is defined in different ways in different contexts, most European literature employs the terms 'family support' and 'parenting support' interchangeably (Boddy et al., 2009). Increasingly, the literature on supporting families refers to parenting support and includes a broad range of services and programmes focussed on the welfare of parents to improve outcomes for children (Devaney et al., 2021). Family Support interventions and programmes are typically based on the principle of the well-being of the parent being a prerequisite of child well-being and as a result much of the focus both in academic and practice terms now focuses on the parent(s). Littmarck et al. (2018) discuss the responsabilisation of parents as a relatively new approach built on

the basic right of parents to make decisions for their children enshrined in Articles 5 and 18 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). A particular focus in supporting parents is to enhance family well-being and contribute to better outcomes for children by reducing the prevalence of problems later in a child's life. In addition, at a community level, parenting support can encourage healthy communities and promote social inclusion, while at a societal level, support for parents can ensure a more effective use of resources, serve to reduce inequalities, and develop and promote human and social capital (references removed).

However, Knijn and Hopman (2015) differentiate between parenting support, which focuses on a set of services and other activities oriented to improving how parents' approach and execute their parental role while increasing their child-rearing resources and competencies, and Family Support, which focuses on the stability and well-being of the family. Indeed, parenting support is more often conceived of as more specifically concerned with parenting practices and parent-child relations which leads some authors to suggest that parenting support is inherently different from Family Support (Daly, 2015). According to Daly and Bray (2015), the core orientation of provision is to 'support' and 'educate' parents in their child-rearing role. The authors argue that there are four conceptualisations of parenting support and what it can achieve: (1) improvement of child outcomes generally, especially with regard to education and health; (2) early intervention and prevention towards minimising child risk; (3) focus on parental well-being; (4) social inclusion, and the building of social capital among and by parents (and by association in families, including children) on the basis that stronger social relationships improve parental mental health and reduce child risks.

Reviewing the literature on the benefits of parenting support initiatives, Rodrigo (2016) highlighted that services that place the parent at the centre of the services increase parents' sense of confidence in their own capacities, strengthen parents' informal support networks and also foster the empower of the community are the most effective interventions. Varied approaches to achieving this aim are suggested, ranging from a broader supportive perspective, i.e. what do parents need to create a warm, stimulating environment, to a more change-oriented view, i.e. what do parents need to do better. Furthermore, a focus on voluntary engagement, harnessing parents' agency for change, establishing shared goals and a clear communication about what needs to change, and respecting the parents' perspectives on their circumstances are noted as key factors in the effectiveness of parenting support initiatives (Sen, 2016).

While many conceptualisations of parenting support highlight the role of empowerment and the resource-building capacity of families, they also seem to imply a pedagogical or expert type of action. A discourse of 'expert parenting' seems to underly the literature, which in some circumstances requires that the parent informs his/her daily practice through the knowledge of experts (Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012). As Ostner and Stolberg (2015) emphasise, parenting support is seen as a 'pedagogical intervention', with the provision of interventions an 'educative' goal. Therefore, the underlying assumption is that parents are in need of expert-knowledge to accomplish their role. Deepening this reflection, Daly and Bray (2015) argue that, while the use of the word 'support' tends to imply a needs-led engagement with parents, much of what is offered are parental education interventions developed by experts to address what are perceived by them as deficits in child-rearing practices, reflecting a move away from structural solutions towards those that are more behavioural in orientation and intent.

This educational perspective on parenting support, is intended to substantially influence and change parental interactions with children, can also be viewed as state intrusion or manipulation, 'infringing on parental rights and as an invasion of the privacy of the family' (Littmarck et al., 2018, p. 492). Aligned with this reasoning, is Daly's (2015) definition of parenting support as a social policy phenomenon and type of governance of 'private life'.

Closely associated with this orientation towards parenting education is the challenge faced by professionals in maintaining a balance between empowering and supporting all parents in a universal, service-oriented way, and controlling or even punishing those seen as irresponsible or incompetent (Martin, 2015). As Join-Lambert (2016) identified there are two distinct tendencies in parenting

support: the first is to build on their strengths and capacities through partnership approaches with professionals; and the second is the more controlling approach in targeted services for parents of vulnerable children. For example, Leese (2017) considers how practitioners in a family support role can find themselves in the dual purpose of supporting young mothers while making judgements about the quality of the care given to the child.

Ponzoni (2015) notes attempts to shift from professional control to a greater emphasis on parental perspectives and wishes. The goal is a more balanced distribution of tasks and responsibilities between formal services and parents and a better and more fruitful interplay between formal and informal sources of support to provide more effective interventions. Through dialogue, parents, as service users, can be afforded more influence as professionals engage with and promote their perspectives about problems within their families and their objectives for support (Join-Lambert, 2016; Roose et al., 2013). Examining professional–parent partnerships, Van Houte et al. (2015), however, note that this is often an instrumental and strategic approach to partnership and parental participation: ‘stressing the importance of parental involvement for the realisation of the desired outcomes of professional interventions’ (p. 122).

Family Support with a focus on the family

Many definitions of Family Support view the aim of multidisciplinary service provision, not only as promoting children’s well-being but also seeking to improve life quality for each member of the family and enabling long-term social integration of the whole family, particularly those facing multiple challenges (Rácz & Bogács, 2019; references removed). In this orientation there is acceptance of the child’s dependence on its family, and recognition of the rights of parents to make choices for their children, but it is the family unit that is the focus for social policy investments (Littmarck et al., 2018), with the family seen as a self-supportive social system. Churchill and Sen (2016, 2016) demonstrate an emphasis on ‘whole-family support’ and ‘family-centered practice’ in many jurisdictions where services aim to engage parents, children, young people and broader family and social networks to address intergenerational and multiple needs and adversities.

Some authors describe an empowering, strengths-promoting approach when the focus of support is the family as a whole. The emphasis is on responsive needs-based family support rather than parenting education or monitoring (Join-Lambert, 2016), seeking to empower parents as they fulfil or discharge their parental responsibility (Littmarck et al., 2018). Brady et al. (2018) highlight how service provision must enable families to draw on support as and when they need it, using their own skills to assist each other. This empowerment perspective requires family-centred programmes to strengthen the capacity of parents, involving them in shared decision-making and recognising their expertise as active participants in meeting their children’s needs (Damen et al., 2020).

Overall, familial relationships are viewed as crucial to families’ capacity to withstand adverse circumstances. However, a myriad of factors can impact on individuals within families, affecting their ability to support and care for each other. Maurović et al.’s (2020) reviewed the term ‘family resilience’ to describe the supportive resources that can be drawn from within the family enabling them to adapt to risk. However, stressors within the family, for example mental or physical illness, or relationship breakdown, or in their extended environment, such as poverty, or social isolation, can adversely affect each family member’s ability to deal with regular and irregular life events. The role of public programmes and policies, therefore, is to promote and enable this resilience within family systems. Of note Devaney (2017) identifies sibling relationships as also significant for children in terms of their proximity, emotional intensity, time spent together and the longevity of the relationship, and highlights how they are often overlooked as a resource in child welfare interventions and responses.

A family-focused orientation also sees families as part of their wider social systems. Devaney, Rodriguez and Cassidy (2019) note that in Ireland, families often access their own naturally occurring

informal supports to cope; this has been found an effective form of early intervention and prevention. Engaging and strengthening informal social networks is emphasised (McGregor, Canavan, & Gabhainn, 2020), while Join-Lambert (2016) defines Family Support described as entailing three types and sources, with formal professional support only one element. Core components of support include informal support, provided by extended family, friends and neighbours; and semi-formal support provided by neighbourhood-based community and voluntary organisations. The importance of recognising informal and semi-formal sources of support is noted (reference removed). Franco et al. (2017) for example, emphasise the significance of a family-centred approach to early intervention in conjunction with recognition of the community in the individual child's life context.

A whole-family approach is not without its tensions and challenges. Roberts (2015) highlights the dilemma in providing respite care services which effectively try to simultaneously meet the needs of both parent and child. While this is a pragmatic response to parental need, the longer-term implications of such a framing for family relationships is unclear. In many countries a 'whole-family' approach is demonstrated through centre-based models. Typically named Family Centres or Hubs, these centres provide families with a range of services meeting all levels of need and also serve as a connection point between parents and practitioners (Balenzano, 2020). They are designed as family friendly places where users of different ages and with various needs can take advantage of a range of services. For this reason, Family Support centres are both a place and a method of engaging families in activities aimed at preventing negative outcomes (Balenzano, 2020). However, if services are conceptualised as family-focused the implication is that all family members will benefit, however as Roberts (2015) identifies the risk is that the needs of children will be overshadowed by the needs of parents and/ or other family members.

Discussion

Based on a comprehensive review of recent academic literature (Devaney et al., 2021), this paper considers how Family Support is conceptualised in the European context with respect to its primary beneficiaries. Our central question considers the focus of concern in a child welfare system and what it means when Family Support is focused on children, on parents, or involves the family unit as a whole. Drawing from the numerous authors whose work we reviewed, we now apply an ecological systems' perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), as a logical framework to meaningfully interpret this literature and portray the role of different system levels and their inter-relationships as these re-conceptualised within the Family Support literature.

The ecological model as it is commonly presented draws clear boundaries that demarcate one system from another, yet the central idea is that these separate milieus (sets of relationships) inter-connect and interact to form a complex whole. In essence, our review of the literature revealed that conceptualisations of Family Support tend to likewise demarcate individuals (parent and child primarily) from one another, rather than considering how they relate as a whole-family system together (see for example Daly, 2020, for discussion of the focus on the 'adult world'). In this regard, the literature is narrowly oriented towards boundaries between elements of the ecosystem rather than on the inter-relationships between them. The child is at the centre, with parents at the next level. Other members are interpreted as being more distant and the boundaries between the system levels are ascribed greater importance overall than perhaps corresponds to the day-to-day reality in families. While there is some focus on family and community integration (Rácz & Bogács, 2019), in concrete terms, demarcations between family members, and between families and their social ecology, are reflected and reinforced in how the unit of Family Support interventions is defined. We reflect that this may prevent us from seeing the interconnected nature of family life, and the way that children and parents are each separately and jointly connected to wider networks of community and family support.

The presence of a minor is a fundamental feature of all Family Support services and responses (e.g. Daly, 2020; Jiménez et al., 2019; Rácz & Bogács, 2019). Family Support, regardless of whether it is child-, parent- or family-focused always directly or indirectly refers to the well-being of minors within the family. However, strikingly, although they play a central and defining role in the conceptualisation of family support, children are rarely considered as active agents in their own lives or within their families. Rather, they are seen as passive recipients of care and preventative measures. Interestingly, the view of the child as a passive recipient becomes even more apparent in child-centred conceptualisations of Family Support. Authors note that children are primarily seen as vulnerable and risk affected, in need of protective and supportive measures (Whittaker et al., 2016; Yates & Gatsou, 2021). Minors' agency to shape their own lives, and the contribution they make to transactional, reciprocal family relationships, remains invisible in the shadows cast by the interaction between adults (parents and practitioners). Accordingly, from an ecological systems' perspective, the centre of the system is usually conceived as a passive unit on which more distant levels act.

The rights of the child are regularly used as an argument for Family Support; however, the implications of their various rights are rarely discussed. A number of academic papers (e.g. Litt-marck et al., 2018; Nethercott, 2017) use the UNCRC as an anchor for Family Support, more precisely in defining it as parenting support. It is in line with the letter and spirit of the UNCRC's Articles 5 and 18 that give parents the sole responsibility for bringing up their children and obliges signatories to the Convention to provide the support parents require. However, considerations for Article 12, the right of children to be listened to and heard with respect to decisions about them, especially the implementation of the rule of thumb on the evolving capacities of the child is mostly missing from conceptualisation, especially in the case of children not deemed to be at risk.

On the whole, the basic assumption underpinning parent-focused family support is that parents can optimise their actions and behaviours in order to achieve optimal child- and family well-being (see for example Daly & Bray, 2015). The literature highlights how the role of services, i.e. the exo-system, is to offer expert-led skills training, with practitioners afforded the role of instructing and informing parents, equipping them to fulfil their function (Ostner & Stolberg, 2015). The underlying premise is that there are right and wrong parenting methods and that experts know what optimal parenting should look like. Parents are supported to aim for this optimal approach in order to ensure the positive well-being and development of their children. This suggests that the relationship between a family and the supportive resources in their exo-system is framed as one of instruction, governance and surveillance. This may be at odds with a partnership approach, emphasised as important in both ethical and practical terms, and which seeks empower parental autonomy as actors in their own right. From an ecological systems' perspective, this shows how a higher system level actively influences a lower system level, by prescribing certain conventions, whereas the lower system level, in this instance parents, is conceived as a passive recipient of rules and instruction.

Of note also, the functional relationship between child and parent, and how it is achieved, is more present in the literature than the individual in terms of experience, needs, and self-efficacy. While some authors note a growing emphasis on supportive partnership approaches with parents (Join-Lambert, 2016; Ponzoni, 2015; Roose et al., 2013), they are, nonetheless, predominantly considered in terms of their instrumental child-rearing role (e.g. Daly & Bray, 2015; Van Houte et al., 2015). A deficit-oriented approach seeks to supplement the resources that parents lack in terms of efficacy in their child-rearing role and ensure that they are equipped to perform their parental function. Even if strength-based and empowerment approaches are emphasised, an educational perspective is dominant. Both the child-centred and parent-centred conceptualisations tend to restrict the position of the individual in terms of their clearly demarcated roles and positioning. Children are confined to be passive receivers of care and protection, while parents' position is predominantly limited to their parenting role. Accordingly, there is a danger that children's as well as parents' agency is undermined and that their broader needs for support are disregarded. This narrow

functional conceptualisation neglects other important social, emotional and symbolic aspects of child–parent relationships, and their continued significance even if unable to fulfil care-giving tasks. For example, there is limited conceptualisation of support when parents' active caregiving is constrained by disability or separation (e.g. through migration or placement in alternative care).

A more family-focused approach adopts a broader perspective and is less pre-defined, which encourages a closer attention to and assessment of each family's specific needs, resources and relationships within the context of their particular social environment. A whole-family approach shines a focus on the ecology families represent by themselves and takes account of the factors in their wider world that might influence the well-being of both children and parents. Family resilience derives from well-resourced and accessible support across multiple levels of their social ecology (Join-Lambert, 2016). Principles of empowerment, working in partnership, and strengthening formal and informal social networks appear to be more heavily emphasised when the family unit or parents are the focus of the Family Support service (e.g. Damen et al., 2020). It is important, however, not to conflate the needs and rights of parents and children or to assume that their priorities and interests are consistent with one another. A focus on the family as a system must not lose sight therefore of the individuals within that system, nor ignore possible conflicts of interest between family members, parents and children.

Services, agencies and policies described in the reviewed literature, are also organised within these highly delineated frameworks and typically are focussed on the child, the parent or the family. Accordingly, individual members are located on separate systems or levels. Depending on the perceived risk on the individual level (i.e. the child being at risk), the individual level of the child is prioritised without acknowledging consequences on other system levels that, however, remain part of the child's ecosystem. Moreover, the concepts of a child-centred or children's rights perspective and a more parent-oriented approach are presented as if dichotomous. Family support services organised in tiered models with a distinct separation between child protection and broader support for families has been critiqued as failing to reflect the realities of family life – that the majority of families require both, a protective form of support (references removed). This dichotomy arises from an approach to families that views children and their interests as separate from those of their parents – when children are viewed as the recipients of care and parents as the functional provider of care without recognition of the importance of the reciprocal, transactional, agentic relationships that mean the family is experienced as a microsystem and not just a collection of individuals.

Conclusion

In the European Family Support literature, the locus of support tends to be described as focused separately on parents (primarily) or children (to a lesser extent). This reflects a functional, role-oriented conceptualisation of parent–child relationships with parents the providers and children the receivers of care and protection. There are no clear differences in conceptualisation between family support and parental support, and parents are mostly engaged with in terms of their child-rearing role. While most programmes reviewed in the academic literature acknowledge that the well-being of parents is a prerequisite of child well-being, this, along with other significant aspects of parent–child relationships, is relegated to a secondary position.

Furthermore, the family is presented as a narrow set of relationships, such that the variety of microsystems within an ecological system is not sufficiently taken into account. There is little mention of extended family and their potential as a source of support. Relationships with siblings are not elaborated on, or their significance emphasised. In the main, it is only the parent–child relationship which is considered. Even here, gender perspective on family life and caregiving is more or less absent. Likewise, the situation when parent or child are disabled or separated. Therefore, we need to more clearly and accurately indicate what is meant by the term 'family' in Family Support – which relationships are being referred to and what is the nature of the connection

between them. We should also consider other significant familial and non-familial relationships and question why these are not given the same level of attention.

Acknowledging that a fundamental aim of Family Support is to promote children's well-being, we have argued that a systemic understanding of families calls for a more integrative focus on parents *and* children within the context of their wider family and community networks. In reviewing the significance and implications of applying a child-, parent- or family-focused perspective to both the conceptualisation and delivery of Family Support it appears that services should be informed by a more nuanced understanding of family relationships, including how the respective rights of adults and children accord or compete. This systemic conceptualisation of families requires us to view parenting as more than a 'role' and to organise services around the guiding principle that parents' well-being is of crucial importance to overall familial well-being which in turn is foundational to meeting children's needs. It also requires us to acknowledge children as active agents in families, and recognise their role in constructing and shaping transactional, reciprocal family relationships, and their right to have their perspective heard, and taken into account on interventions that affect them. This agentic right-focused representation of children is under-represented in the literature.

Based on these findings, we conclude that there is a need for a re-think in service structures and orientations to provide protection and support at the level of the child, and support at the level of the parent and extended family doing justice to the term 'family-centred' in its truest sense. Applying an ecological system's perspective allowed us to uncover boundaries that currently demarcate system levels from one another. We conclude that they need to be questioned towards the development of concepts of Family Support that are functional for all actors of the complex whole. Finally, the alleged inevitability of higher system levels acting on lower system levels must be challenged. This could ultimately serve to promote functional multidirectional agency for all actors involved.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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