



# Parent- and Family-Focused Support in Portugal: Context and Analysis of Services/Programmes from an Equity Perspective

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## Abstract

In Europe, different approaches are used to support families of young children and to promote the quality of their home learning environment. Nevertheless, program evaluations often do not consider the macro-social context in which the programs are implemented. The purpose of this study was to understand and discuss the contextual factors, facilitators and underlying challenges of family support services in Portugal. This paper begins by providing an up-to-date overview of relevant social context statistics, about poverty, use of services and early education and care programs. These statistics serve to document country policies regarding parents and families. Secondly, 11 research-supported and promising parent- and family-focused support programs currently implemented in Portugal were analyzed. Key features and principles that have been empirically determined to address social and educational inequalities are discussed in the context of Portugal.

**Keywords** Family support · Parenting support · Effective programs · Portugal

Across many countries in Europe, different approaches have been used to support families of young children and to promote the quality of their home learning environment. Even though several studies on the effectiveness of such interventions have been conducted, existing program evaluations tend to not consider the macro-social context in which the programs have been implemented, including pre-existent services, local needs and target group specificities. Consideration of the wider context within which programs are created and implemented is particularly relevant since there is conflicting evidence on the effectiveness of widely known programs. For example, Triple P (Level 3), shown to be effective by several studies, was deemed as generally ineffective when implemented in the Dutch context (Spijkers, Jansen, & Reijneveld, 2013). Similarly, studies conducted in the UK showed that Family-Nurse Partnership did not provide gains on top of the typical services (Robling et al., 2016).

The results presented in this paper stem from secondary analysis of data gathered within the ISOTIS project. ISOTIS (Acronym for “Inclusive Education and Social Support to

Tackle Inequalities in Society”) is a European Union Horizon 2020 research project that aims to contribute to effective policy and practice development at different system levels in order to effectively combat early arising and persisting educational inequalities, with a particular focus on groups with immigrant background and/or ethnic minorities, as well as low-income families/parents. Within this project, an “Inventory and Analysis of Promising and Evidence-based Parent- and Family-Focused Support Programs” was conducted involving seven participating countries: Czech Republic, England, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, and Portugal. The objective was to create a broad overview of existing approaches and collect available evidence of parent- and family-focused support programs that were successful in tackling educational and social gaps, with a particular focus on three disadvantaged groups: immigrants, ethnic minorities, and low-income. The inventory included grey and unpublished literature of the participating countries, emphasizing evidence of particular new and innovative approaches in a comparative way. With this in mind, an important distinction was made between research supported and promising programs. Research supported are services or programs that have been subjected to high-standard evaluations with demanding study designs that provide evidence on what works. Promising are services/programs that, although might lack a thorough evaluation, might give powerful

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insights to promising practices, namely when country specific context is considered.

In the case of Portugal, there is a clear deficit of systematic research on services/programs directed at improving parental and familial care and competencies. Proving a need to review the few positive parenting and family services/programs that address social and educational inequalities.

This paper begins with an overall view of the Portuguese context through the integration of comparative key statistics and descriptions of existing current services for parental and family support. Next, it describes the methodology used for identifying 11 research supported and promising parent-/family-focused support programs currently implemented in Portugal. These programs were then analyzed with regard to empirical support for their effectiveness, and scrutinized for key features and principles which are helpful in tackling social and educational inequalities, while keeping the Portuguese context and challenges in mind.

## The Portuguese Context Through a Comparative and Equity Lens

The statistical indicators here presented were, with a few exceptions, retrieved from authoritative databases and sources:

- Eurostat-EU-SILC (i.e., the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions),
- OECD's Statistics (OECD's Family Database),
- UNICEF's Innocenti Report Cards.

These sources were extensively searched for indicators that provide insight to each country's contexts for the provision of positive parenting services/programs to tackle social and educational inequalities, especially for: immigrants, ethnic minorities, and low income families. Framed by this goal, key statistical indicators on target populations, parental leaves, maternal employment rates and ECEC attendance, income inequalities, children poverty and support for families in need—were selected for the seven countries that participated in the ISOTIS. For this paper's purpose, we analyzed how Portugal fares in comparison to the other countries.

## Migrant/Ethnic Minorities

Although the migrant population is increasing in Europe, it is important to note that the percentages of immigrants within their populations vary considerably between countries. As shown in Table 1, Portugal's percentage of foreign-born

population, around 8% is not particularly high, although higher in comparison with Eastern European countries.

When looking at younger ages, the variability of children (below 5 years old) is not high amongst the seven countries (varying within 4% and 6%); the case is different when one considers the percentage of foreign-born children (under 5) in the total number of children. Portugal shows a comparative low percentage, of approximately 1.5% of foreign-born children (see Table 1). The overall picture indicates that Portugal is not, in comparative terms, under significant pressure due to large proportions of foreign-born population or children.

One should notice, however, that these numbers certainly underestimate the cultural diversity within a country, as young children may be parented by second or third-generation immigrants, and also because there are national (ethnic) minorities that are not reflected in these statistics. This is particularly true in the case of Portugal, where the largest ethnic minority—Gypsies communities—is not a migrant one. It is important to notice that, within the Portuguese context, the term Gypsy is preferable to the term Roma. To be sure, Portuguese Gypsies refer to themselves using the term Gypsy and not Roma. To use the term Roma, although with the best of intentions, would mean—in the Portuguese context—that an academic term, foreign and estranged to this minority, is being preferred to the term used by that same minority. There is no official number of the Portuguese Gypsy population, as it is forbidden by the Portuguese law to identify citizens based upon their ethnicity. Several organizations and/or academics have set forward estimates, but these have ranged from as low as 20,000 to 200,000 (Bastos & Bastos, 1999; Racismo, 2001; Vasconcelos, 1999), which would correspond to approximately 0.2% and 2% of the Portuguese population, respectively. Less controversial, however, is the fact that the Portuguese Gypsy minority is the most impoverished minority within the Portuguese population, as well as the most discriminated against, compared to other ethnic/migrant groups in Portugal (Cabecinhas, 2003; Correia, Brito, Vala, & Perez, 2005).

## Parental Leaves, Maternal Employment Rates and ECEC Attendance

Regarding social support for children and families, Portuguese social policy is characterized by a strong partnership with the third sector, local private, non-profit, publicly-subsidized institutions playing a key role in the delivery of services (Perista & Baptista, 2014; Wall & Correia, 2014). Currently, public support to families in parental functions is very low; there are no universal services and resources specifically addressing parents' needs but rather services are devoted to child protection or towards families facing

**Table 1** The context of parenting support: statistical indicators for seven European countries

	Czech Republic	Germany	Netherlands	Poland	United Kingdom	Norway	Portugal
<b>Migrant/ethnic minorities<sup>a</sup></b>							
% foreign-born population	4.1%	13.3%	12.1%	1.7%	13.3%	14.9%	8.4%
% foreign-born children (<5 years-old) relative to the total population	5.2%	4.4%	5.2%	5.0%	6.1%	5.9%	4.2%
% foreign-born children (<5 years-old) relative to the total children	0.4%		2.8%	1.1%	2.7%	4.2%	1.4%
<b>Parental leaves<sup>b</sup></b>							
Public expenditure on parental leaves <sup>c</sup>	23086.3	11121.3	643.0	34382.9	8825.6	4940.6	7904.5
Total paid leave available (in weeks of full-rate equivalent) <sup>d</sup>							
Mothers	53.1	42.6	16.0	45.0	20.4	12.1	41.6
Fathers	0.0	5.7	0.4	9.8	12.5	0.4	2.0
<b>ECEC attendance rates<sup>e</sup></b>							
Children under 3 years-old	2.9	25.9	46.4	5.3	30.4	52.2	47.2
Children 3–5 years-old	77.5	89.6	90.7	43	72.8	91.1	89.9
<b>Childcare fees and out-of-pocket childcare costs<sup>f</sup></b>							
Gross childcare fees	17.1	10.5	57.1	24.5	64.1	10.2	26.0
Net couple	8.3	5.4	25.4	20.7	55.3	6.7	5.7
Net single	17.1	0.7	7.1	20.7	16.5	0.5	1.0
<b>Income inequalities<sup>g</sup></b>							
2007	3.5	4.9	4.0	5.3	5.3	3.5	6.5
2008	3.4	4.8	4.0	5.1	5.6	3.7	6.1
2009	3.5	4.5	4.0	5.0	5.3	3.5	6.0
2010	3.5	4.5	3.7	5.0	5.4	3.4	5.6
2011	3.5	4.5	3.8	5.0	5.3	3.3	5.7
2012	3.5	4.3	3.6	4.9	5.0	3.2	5.8
2013	3.4	4.6	3.6	4.9	4.6	3.3	6.0
2014	3.5	5.1	3.8	4.9	5.1	3.4	6.2
2015	3.5	4.8	3.8	4.9	5.2	3.5	6.0
Relative income gap children <sup>h</sup>	45.7	43	42.3	52.2	42.3	37.1	62.4
<b>At-risk-of poverty rate for children (0–17) by country of birth of their parents<sup>i</sup></b>							
Nationals	13.6	13.5	12.0	22.5	16.8	8.9	24.0
Foreign-born	28.9	20.0	20.4	5.0	28.3	18.5	26.6
Reduction in the rate of child poverty due to social transfers <sup>j</sup>	43	50	43	24	54	64	24

<sup>a</sup>Source Eurostat data (for the year 2016)

<sup>b</sup>Source OECD's Family Database for the year 2013

<sup>c</sup>Source OECD's Family Database (for the year 2012). Public expenditure (at current prices and current PPPs, in US dollars) on maternity and parental leaves per child born. To improve comparability across countries, public expenditure is adjusted for price differences between countries by using purchasing power parities (PPP)

<sup>d</sup>Source OECD's Family Database. (for the year 2016)

<sup>e</sup>Source EU-SILC survey (for the year 2015)

<sup>f</sup>Source OECD (Family Database for the year 2015)

<sup>g</sup>Source EU-SILC survey ; Eurostat data (for the years 2007–2015); The specific indicator used here is the difference between the average income of the 20% richest and the 20% poorest of the population

<sup>h</sup>UNICEF Innocenti Report Card (for the year 2014). According to Innocenti Report Card (UNICEF, 2017), relative income gap ('bottom-end inequality') is measured as the gap between household income of a child at the 50th percentile (the median) and that of a child at the 10th percentile, reported as a percentage of the median

<sup>i</sup>Eurostat data (for the year 2015). Eurostat definition: At risk of poverty or social exclusion refers to the situation of people either at risk of poverty, or severely materially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity

<sup>j</sup>Source Innocenti Report Card 14 (for the year 2014). Percentage reduction in the rate of child poverty due to social transfers

extreme economic conditions. Universal benefits for families granted by the social security system only include paid maternity and paternity leaves.

In respect to public expenditure in parental leaves, Portugal spends almost 10,000 US Dollars (at current prices and current Purchasing Power Parities, which adjusts for price differences between countries, improving the comparability across countries). Although this might seem low in comparison to the countries that spend more, Portugal does spend substantially more than the UK and the Netherlands. Nevertheless, if one looks at the paid leave available, Portugal is still distant from the four countries that provide more than 40 weeks (Czech Republic, Norway, Germany, and Poland). In contrast, when one looks at father-specific paid leave periods, Portugal stands out as the country with the longest period allocated to fathers (see Table 1).

One aspect related to the comparably shorter paid leaves for mothers is the percentage of mothers working. In fact, Portugal has one of the highest rates of mothers working full time in the European Union: in 2011, 76% of Portuguese mothers were in the workforce, which contrasts with the average of 57% of the European Union (OECD, 2011).

Another crucial issue when analyzing support services to parents is the provision and attendance of formal Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). As shown in Table 1, the enrollment rates are far superior in the 3–5 range than before 3 years old across countries. That said, one finds significant differences between countries in enrollment rates for both of the referred age cohorts.

Below the 3 years-old threshold, Portugal has one of the highest percentages, along with Norway and the Netherlands, with around 50% of the children enrolled in ECEC. This high percentage of enrolment within the Portuguese context is related to several investments in the expansion of day-care services, with the coverage rates having increased substantially over the last few decades (GEP & Ministério do Trabalho, 2015).

Crèches are mainly organized at the local level and almost all are private institutions. The vast majority (nearly 75%) are non-profit, public-subsidized, although in some regions, especially in Lisbon, for-profit crèches can reach a total of 40%. Indeed, the distribution of crèches throughout the country is not homogenous and, in some regions, especially in the larger urban areas, demand is higher than supply (GEP & Ministério do Trabalho, 2015). In cases in which demand is higher than supply, the Institute of Social Security recommends that priority should be given to families with fewer economic resources, single parents or large families, and working parents (ISS, n.d.). However, crèches have the freedom to set up their own criteria for allocating available places (Portaria n. 262/2011). In fact, according to OECD's Family database, participation rates vary by family's income, with higher participation rates among the most

economically advantageous families (59,5%) compared to the lower income families (36%). Compared to the other countries, Portugal shows a high rate of participation and moderate levels of participation inequalities by income.

The overall picture regarding children between 3 and 5 years old is, to some extent, similar, but the differences between countries are not as great as for children below 3 years of age. Of note is that Portugal, along with Norway and the Netherlands, present the highest percentage of enrollment (see Table 1).

A related aspect with participation rates is the cost of attending ECEC. Portugal does not have comparatively high fees, around 25% of the average earnings, in line with Poland, and far less than UK's and Netherlands, although above the remaining countries. Nevertheless, when the net costs are considered (taking into account childcare benefits and tax reductions), Portugal is in line with the countries with the lowest costs (see Table 1). The relatively low ECEC costs taken together with the high percentage of mothers working full-time might explain (at least partially) the (comparatively) extensive opening hours of crèches in Portugal. In 2015, the average hours of provision were 39.5 h per week, which again contrasts with the average of 26.5 h in the European Union.

## Income Inequalities, Children Poverty and Support for Families in Need

To tackle social inequalities, it is important to know the level of income inequalities and how Portugal compares to other countries. Looking at inequality (Eurostat) over the period 2007–2015, Portugal systematically shows greater inequalities, in comparison to the seven aforementioned countries. If the focus is on children, Portugal again appears as the country with the worst gap (UNICEF, 2017). Regarding rates of children under six at risk of poverty or social exclusion, Portugal has the second highest percentage of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (see Table 1).

Nevertheless, if one looks at the rates of at-risk-of poverty for children (0–17) by country of birth of their parents, the picture is more complex. Three facts are noteworthy in respect to Portugal: one, the differences in risk between foreign-born and nationals are smaller; second, foreign-born percentages are not comparatively high, appearing after the UK and Czech Republic; third, Portugal has the highest percentage of (national) children (below 17) at risk, with almost 25% of the children being at risk. It is also important to stress that, in addition to being one of the seven countries with worst indicators (of the above presented), Portugal is one of the least successful countries in reducing the rate of child poverty due to social transfers (see Table 1).

National social benefits and support to meet family needs are dependent upon family's income and have changed considerably in the past years. After a period that favored a pro-family and pro-egalitarian perspective, in 2010 cash benefits for families changed with (a) increased selectivity, and eligibility criteria focusing on support for families with very low income, and (b) reduction in the amounts of benefits (Wall & Correia, 2014). Tax reliefs for families were reduced (Wall & Correia, 2014). These developments in family policies had an impact on public spending on benefits and services for families, both of which have dropped (Wall & Correia, 2014). Even though benefits for families were available during the recent economic crisis, (e.g., increase of unemployment benefits for couples where both parents were unemployed; "Social Emergency Program", providing food, clothes for families in extreme poverty), the economic vulnerability and child poverty rates of families has increased (Wall et al., 2013).

Targeted social measures currently implemented in Portugal providing parenting support for families include (a) Social Integration Income, designed to support extremely poor families, and (b) Family Support and Parental Counseling Centers, designed to support children and young people in situations of danger and their families.

The Social Integration Income (Rendimento Social de Inserção) is a special social and financial benefit for families in extreme poverty, designed to meet families' basic needs and to promote social integration and participation in society. State protocols were established with publicly funded private institutions, which are responsible for implementing the program. The service aims to facilitate access to social and economic autonomy through an individualized support to families that includes, a cash benefit, participation in training courses, school attendance, active job search, or participation in parental education courses. However, there are no specific guidelines for the procedures and interventions. The number of individuals and families benefiting from this social measure has been continuously reduced since the economic crisis, as a result in changes in eligibility criteria, from nearly 500 000 in 2010 to 287 473 in 2015 (PORDATA, 2015). In 2017, eligibility criteria changed again, in order to justify the program and reinforce its inclusive aim (Decreto-Lei 90/2017), which will result in an increased number of beneficiaries. In October 2017, 213 649 individuals were benefiting from RSI and 32,2% had less than 18 years (GEP, 2017).

The Family Support and Parental Counseling Centers (r CAFAPs) created in 2007 to provide a social response for families with at-risk or maltreated children. These private publicly subsidized institutions offer targeted services to children and families in situation of danger or risk, and since 2013 their intervention focuses on positive parent-hood principles, with the aim of strengthening families.

Multidisciplinary teams are responsible for the assessment and development of an intervention plan, tailored to families' needs. In 2016, 80 centers were operating in Portugal (Alves, 2017). However, in a recent study involving 46 centers, it was found that professionals lack supervision, intervention guidelines, and opportunities for professional development (Alves, 2017).

Comparatively, Portugal does not face particular pressure from high migrant or ethnic minorities' diversity. ECEC attendance is one of the highest and its net cost is reasonably low. Although maternal leaves are still at distance from the best performing countries, the leave period exclusively reserved to fathers is the highest among the other countries. These are the bulk of the good news. The bad news lie in the inequality levels, child poverty, and the relative lack of systematic services/programs to tackle the inequalities that may hinder the nourishment and development to all children's full potential. In fact, Portugal is the country with higher inequality levels (either income inequalities as well as inequalities in households with children). Furthermore, social transfers are (comparatively) unsuccessful in diminishing the poverty gaps.

## The Need for Positive Parenting and Families Services/Programs to Tackle Social Inequalities

In this context, support to families specifically addressing parents' needs seems to be minimal and mainly through voluntary initiatives. Additionally, the first nationwide study aimed at identifying the variety of ongoing parenting interventions was undertaken in 2009, developed through a collaborative protocol between the Commission for the Protection of Children and Adolescents at Risk, the Institute of Social Security, and a network of five public universities (Abreu-Lima et al., 2010; Almeida, Santos, Caldas, Ayres-de-Campos, & Dias, 2014). The study intended to provide empirical data to inform policy on child protection and family. At that time, 68 parental education interventions were identified and evaluated (Abreu-Lima et al., 2010). The results suggested overall positive results, but interestingly, the vast majority of programs identified at that time are not in operation anymore. An ongoing nationwide study that is being conducted by the University of Porto, in collaboration with other universities (Cruz, personal communication, October 20, 2017), gives a good account of this fact. This study identified more than 200 actions across several education and social agencies, although the vast majority referred to single seminars or workshop and only a very few used a systemic, standardized approach, with clear identified goals and activities framed in a theoretical model.

Lastly, in Portugal, even publicly subsidized programs are rarely evaluated in terms of effectiveness on tackling equality issues. Rather, information on family and equality issues is scarce and scattered. In summary, the above outlined Portuguese reality justifies the need to review of the existing parent and family services/programs.

## Methodology

As previously explained, one of the ISOTIS consortium tasks was the development of an inventory and analysis of promising and research supported parent- and family-focused support programs for the seven countries that participated. From the onset, one overarching distinction between promising and research supported programs was made, with the inventory's twofold objective. On the one hand, the inventory aimed at documenting implemented programs that are supported by high standards efficacy studies (namely RCTs or Quasi-experimental studies, which included matched comparison group designs, single-case designs, and regression discontinuity designs). On the other hand, there was the concurrent general aim to document emerging innovative practices that may not (yet) have established evidence, but that experts considered to be promising. Therefore, the inclusion criteria allowed for promising programs to be included.

As detailed in the task's manual, each country's expert(s) could consider a programme or service promising for different reasons, namely: (i) existence of established evidence that is unpublished or is published in the grey literature; (ii) the programme/service being innovative, even if there were no high quality studies at the date for the inclusion to sustain its effectiveness. For the current purpose, innovative was defined as new or unusual, in a given context. Therefore, a programme or service considered non-innovative in a context, could be considered innovative in a different context, for example, because it questions and challenges the status quo. Established effectiveness was not a required condition for a programme or service to be considered innovative, given that the newness of the nature of innovative can also imply that it is still untested. Nevertheless, there would need to be reasons to believe that it would be successful if tested (for example, because of its strong programme design); (iii) still, and although innovative is frequently associated with novel (in the sense of newness), a service or programme could be considered innovative despite the fact that it exists for some time, since the innovative character is given according to its unusualness within a context; (iv) highly consideration among academics and/or personnel and/or communities, despite a lack of evaluation through high quality studies; (v) ability to reach "hard to reach" groups; (vi) being "in place" for a very long time and integrated into the

network of community resources, although lacking enough (if any) evaluations; (vii) addressing a particular challenge of a specific country or context; (viii) existence of high quality studies (that establish their effectiveness) conducted in a different country than the one where it is being implemented (and reviewed).

Although these services/programs (research supported or promising) did not need to target the ISOTIS vulnerable groups (low-income, ethnic minorities and/or immigrant groups), they did need to show efficacy for (one or more of) these groups.

All countries followed a common search protocol as well as inclusion criteria defined through PICOS (Participants, Interventions, Comparisons and Outcomes) approach (Higgins & Green, 2008). The search protocol included consulting with national stakeholders and experts and a thorough search in university databases, national specialized journals, governmental and non-governmental websites or publications, general search engines (e.g., Google), as well as online databases. A list of keywords and search terms was provided to all partners for the search strategy within databases. Partners were asked to detail the list of stakeholders/experts and resources consulted and within each, to list the number of services/programs initially identified. Subsequently, the inclusion of the programs/services was contingent upon meeting the eligibility criteria.

## Eligibility Criteria (According to PICOS Approach)

In terms of the target population, programs had to be primarily a parenting/family support service or program and be directed to parents of children under 10/12 years-olds (according to each country's age of the end of primary school), including parents-to-be. Either universal or targeted services/program were eligible, as long as outcome data on one or more of the three general ISOTIS target groups existed. Programs or services that targeted either signs of child development problems or family problems (e.g., neglect; child abuse); or identified as currently suffering from a recognizable disorder (i.e. 'treatment') were not eligible.

Regarding intervention, services/programs had to be primarily a parenting/family support service or program. Furthermore, they have to be ongoing—regardless the initial date of implementation or development—or set up within the last 10 years. Programs/services that focused primarily on other dimensions, such as anti-obesity programs or post-natal depression programs were not eligible.

The comparison group could mean no treatment or a reference treatment ("treatment as usual"). Single-case designs did not require a comparison group. In the case of studies that were to be selected due to its promising character, a comparison group was deemed unnecessary.

Several outcomes could be considered adequate, as long as coherent with the definition of a parenting/family support service or program. Several examples were provided:

- Quality of learning home environment;
- Parental sensitivity and attachment,
- Socio-emotional development, language and communication;
- Knowledge and use of resources and support services available (for example ECEC attendance);
- Engagement in social networks and community;
- Child development and school readiness.

Study design requirements were contingent upon the selection being through research supported or promising criteria. For research supported, RCTs and Quasi-experimental studies (incl. matched comparison group designs, single-case designs, and regression discontinuity designs) were required. For promising programs/services, other study designs could be included, provided that the reasons for being considered promising were defended.

## Analysis Methods

After identifying the interventions, country teams coded each intervention based on a predefined coding scheme containing several aspects (e.g., level of implementation, sector & agency; eligibility and recruitment criteria; Age group; Years in operation; Goal(s), Theoretical framework; Locale). To extract and classify the information relative to the specific programs, country teams received a coding framework and manual providing codes, definitions and procedures. This coding procedure constituted a first level of content analysis. Then, the information underwent a qualitative thematic content analysis (Burnard, 1991; Ezzy, 2002).

## Results

We will begin by presenting a description of the identified parenting support services/programs in Portugal, discussing subsequently how the Portuguese panorama compares to the other countries involved in the same task.

Portugal has identified 11 services/programs, with 4 meeting the research supported criteria and 7 evaluated as promising. The research supported programs were as follows: (i) Playgroups for Inclusion or “Grupos Aprender, Brincar, Crescer” (GABC, Groups where children Learn, Play and Grow); (ii) Incredible Years for Parents; (iii) Triple P—Positive Parenting Program—Level 4; (iv) A Par program—an adaptation of UK’s (Oxford) Parents

Early Education Partnership (PEEP) program. The seven programs that did not match the research supported criteria but were assessed as promising by the Portuguese experts were: (i) Traveling Preschool Education—Below and Beyond Glass Rooms; (ii) Municipal Parental Education program; (iii) Escolhe Vilar—E6G; (iv) CIGA GIRO—E6G; (v) Projeto Raiz—E6G; (vi) Tasse—E6G; (vii) ReTrocas—E6G. Tables 2 and 3 present a summary of the main characteristics and respective findings.

## The Research Supported Programs

Four programs assessed as research supported are not services that are (or have been) accessible to the general population, but rather programs implemented by or jointly with academic teams. These programs correspond to programs developed within the academic setting, resulting either in a single study/intervention or multiple ad hoc studies/interventions, but not in any degree to a provision of a systematic and consistent service/program during a determined period of time (see Table 2).

These four programs were highly structured, with a set of predefined group sessions covering a range of topics, including early learning and development, parenting skills and parent–child interactions. The Playgroups for Inclusion and the A Par program involved children and parents in play-based activities, whereas The Incredible Years (IY) and Triple P involved parents in groups (see Table 2). Results showed modest to moderate effects on parenting practices and child behavior, although the effects tended to be small or non-existent for some of the outcomes (Baptista et al., 2016; Barata et al., 2016; Costa, 2017; Nabuco et al., 2014).

It is important to highlight that, although the Portuguese effectiveness studies report several gains for the parents and children, these are not services that are available to a large share of the population. Rather, these programs are implemented on a small scale, usually at a local level. Even in the cases of “GABC”, where recruitment for the efficacy study occurred across the country or the “Incredible Years for Parents”, that have conducted multiple (unrelated) interventions at a regional level, the interventions are not intended as a permanent service. Rather, groups are recruited into a particular study or intervention and the intervention is not sustained in the community.

It is worth mentioning that a relatively small number of studies are available to document the effectiveness of these programs. Even more relevant is that only one of the four studies reviewed was published in a “standard” scientific journal (the other 3 were an unpublished master thesis, a scientific proceeding, and a scientific report). This calls upon the importance of reviewing the “grey” literature.

**Table 2** Characteristics of Portuguese parenting programmes identified as research supported

Name/level of implementation	Goals	Type	Sessions duration and dosage	Best available results
Playgroups for inclusion/national level (small set of locations)	Reduce child developmental gaps in cognitive and social domains Enhance the caregiving environment and parenting skills Increase social cohesion, and intercultural dialogue	Parent and child sessions (e.g., Play, group discussions)	10 months twice-weekly sessions (2 h) Diverse settings (e.g., schools, libraries, health centres)	Mixed impacts of the intervention, with small effect sizes for main impact domains and small to medium effect sizes for secondary impacts (Barata et al., 2016)
Incredible years for parents/multiple local initiatives	Promote parenting skills, strengthening families and increasing their understanding of child development Promote children's social, emotional and academic skills	Parent sessions (e.g., role-play, video vignettes, group discussion)	14 weekly sessions (2 h) Diverse settings	Improved parenting practices (increase in appropriate discipline and decrease in strict discipline) and parental sense of competence. Child reduction in behaviour problems and increase in social skills. Effect sizes are not available. (Baptista et al., 2016)
Triple P: positive parenting program (level 4)/local	Prevent severe behavioural, emotional and developmental problems in children by enhancing parental knowledge, skills and confidence	Parent sessions	10 sessions (2 h) Day-care/pre-school facility	Decrease in children's disruptive behaviours and the use of negative parental strategies (moderate effect sizes). Increase in positive parental practices (large effect size) and sense of parental competence (moderate effect size; Costa, 2017)
A Par program/local	Improve children's and families' life chances by tackling gaps in terms of literacy, numeracy and self-esteem, particularly in disadvantaged areas	Parent and child sessions	32 weekly sessions (1 h) Day-care/pre-school facilities	Gains in social support, pleasure in parenting activities, parent-child joint activities, capacity to interact and observe children, recognition the most important moments of interaction. Children gains in cognitive and social development. Effect sizes are not available. (Nabuco et al., 2014)

**Table 3** Characteristics of Portuguese parenting programmes identified as promising

Name/level of implementation	Goals	Main activities and actions	Expert evaluation
Below and beyond glass rooms/local	Family empowerment and responsibility Social integration; Active involvement of local social partners	Parent and child sessions in Roma communities (outdoors or at home) Visits to preschool settings	Preventive community and school based program rooted in the local community Success in reaching hard-to-reach families Play activities developed in familiar spaces
Municipal Parental Education program/municipal	Promote children's well-being and the quality of parent-child relationships Increase parental involvement in schools dynamics to achieve school success Strengthen families' abilities and parental competence	Parent group sessions (e.g., group discussions, group dynamics and role-playing), mostly public schools	Initiative from a public agency (City Council) in partnership with local schools Universal scope Use of parental commissioners and parental guidance counsellors Outcomes/goals have been only measured in terms of participation of the families. Further studies are needed
Escolhe vilar (Escolhas program)/local	Reduce exclusion, isolation and social fragility, promoting resilience, school success, school inclusion and equal opportunities for all Promote community empowerment Combat info-exclusion	Language courses Parent individual and group sessions Cooking workshops	Intersectoral approach, cooperation between agencies and local communities Multiplicity of activities addressing family needs/interests Considerable outreach in the community (170 participants) Outcomes/goals have been only measured in terms of participation of the families
CIGA GIRO (Escolhas program)/local	Promote school inclusion and vocational training Promote parental responsibility Develop the exercise of civic rights in Roma communities Foster digital inclusion	Certified training for school equivalence (6th and 9th grades) Parent group sessions Individual sessions for professional and vocational guidance Punctual information actions Mediation of the relationship between families and local institutions	Intersectoral approach, cooperation between agencies and local communities 62 participants attended training that gives them equivalence to 6th grade (850 h of training) Outcomes are promising in terms of job search rates and employment rates, but need to be further analysed in terms of its effectiveness
Projeto Raiz (Escolhas program)/local	Increase personal, social, academic and parental skills of children/youth and families, promoting normative behaviour, school and social inclusion and civic participation Development of parental skills and on the promotion of parental responsibility in educational processes	Parent group sessions Mediation between families, community institutions and schools, promoting social supports Support for career and employment management Punctual intergenerational activities	Intersectoral approach, community based project Well rooted in the community for 14 years Regular participation of family members in parental education group sessions (40 families) Outcomes are promising in terms of trust relationships and increased parental responsibility and family engagement, but need to be further analyse for effectiveness

**Table 3** (continued)

Name/level of implementation	Goals	Main activities and actions	Expert evaluation
Tasse (Escolhas program)/local	<p>Promote school and professional inclusion of children, youth and adults</p> <p>Promote parental skills and responsibility in educational processes</p>	<p>Parental education group sessions with individualized (using the Integrated Family Assessment and Intervention Model)</p>	<p>Intersectoral approach, community based program</p> <p>Intensity and structure of the program to address families' individual characteristics</p> <p>Outreach in the community (72 families)</p> <p>Well rooted in the community for 13 years</p> <p>Outcomes are promising in terms of parents as volunteers in children/youth activities and increased participation in their children's school life, but further analyses for effectiveness are needed</p>
ReTrocas (Escolhas program)/local	<p>Promote the development of personal, social, school, professional and entrepreneurial skills in children/youth and families</p> <p>Promote parental, learning and training skills</p> <p>Promote entrepreneurship, training and employability</p> <p>Promote community participation</p>	<p>Certified training for school equivalence (6th and 9th grades) for Roma parents</p> <p>Individual support (individualized family interventions plans)</p> <p>Family mediation sessions</p>	<p>Intersectoral approach, community based project</p> <p>Multiplicity of activities addressing family needs/interests</p> <p>Outreach is promising because culturally diverse families (Roma and African descendants) participate</p> <p>Individualized plan that is closely monitored and readjusted (27 families)</p> <p>Outcomes are promising in terms of family finances management, hygiene, school and health</p> <p>Further studies are needed to assess the effectiveness</p>

## The Promising Programs

As previously referred, there were seven programs identified in this review via expert evaluation as promising. However, five of the seven programs are in fact small-scale interventions under the umbrella of a nationwide program named “Escolhas” (Choices). The other two refer to, original (unexpected) programs within the Portuguese context. One is a (very) small-scale program implemented at a local level, targeting a disenfranchised gypsy minority within the Portuguese disadvantaged gypsy population. The second refers to a positive parenting service delivered universally at a municipal level.

Generally, Escolhas program aims to promote children and youth’s social inclusion in deprived socioeconomic contexts, with a special focus in areas where there are large portions of immigrants (or immigrants descendants) and/or ethnic minorities (Resolution of the Council of Ministers n. 101/2015; Simões, Figueira, & Calado, 2014). The projects are planned and run locally, through local institutions, namely local authorities, schools, training centers, local commissions for the protection of children and young people at risk, sport and juvenile associations, and private enterprises, based on strong partnership among the institutions within each community (Resolution of the Council of Ministers 101/2015). Currently, Escolhas finances 88 projects and has, since its inception, financed 532 projects, involving a total of 3493 institutions, 2920 facilitators, and reaching a total of 300,000 beneficiaries (Program Escolhas, 2014). Launched in 2001 by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers and under the coordination of the High Commissioner for Migration, the program presents five strategic areas for intervention: (I) Education and Professional Training; (II) Employment and employability; (III) Civic participation, civic rights and duties; (IV) Digital inclusion; and (V) Entrepreneurship and empowerment (Resolution of the Council of Ministers n. 101/2015). Although it is a part of the Escolhas matrix to consider families as key partners in the task of children’s inclusion, only a few projects target parents directly through the implementation of activities for enhancing parenting competencies and/or parenting support. This is why, from the current 88 ongoing projects, only five matched the pre-defined inclusion criteria.

The five programs share key features. The programs aim at promoting school success and parental responsibility in the educational processes, fostering parental skills, targeting specifically one or more of the ISOTIS target groups: in the case of the Portuguese context and Escolhas, this meant targeting low-income and culturally diverse (Roma and/or migrant—mainly African—descendants). Proposed activities usually include some combination of the following:

- Positive parenting education group sessions focused on personal and social skills, parental supervision, child-parent relationships, intergenerational respect, communication, behavior management, rule management, negotiation, reinforcement;
- Meetings with families to jointly discuss strategies focused on their children school success and on family problems, parental education and parental involvement in school activities, and healthy lifestyles;
- Mediation between families, community institutions and schools, promoting social support;
- Social support for parents/caregivers focused on daily life issues families face regarding health, legal issues, food, housing, et cetera.

Despite these commonalities, one project (Tasse—E6G) stands out due to the importance given to the positive parenting component within the program, as well as the degree of structure and frequency of the sessions. The program has 6 weekly (2 h) sessions, followed by dinner to promote group cohesion and a sense of belonging. These support sessions with families aim to increase family well-being and promote inclusion, focusing on the development and monitoring of a family project based on the needs and resources of each family. Each family project was evaluated monthly, and strategies were reassessed whenever needed. The implementation of the “Integrated Family Assessment and Intervention Model” (Teixeira de Melo & Alarcão, 2011) in these sessions was supervised by a researcher from University of Coimbra (Ana Teixeira de Melo).

One shared feature of these programs was their innovative (within the Portuguese context) intersectional approach, promoting the involvement of local communities and partners to provide opportunities and support to low-income children and youth. Additionally, the projects’ focus on family needs and priorities, as well as families’ characteristics (e.g., multiculturalism) and strengths are positive aspects. Furthermore, the emphasis in a community based approach and in building support networks between families was also valued. Lastly, the duration of some of these projects—the shortest being in place for four years, and 3 over a decade now—has also been praised, since it shows a consistent and sustained work with some of the most vulnerable families.

Nevertheless, one common caveat was identified by the expert’s assessment: outcomes/goals have been only measured in terms of participation of the families. Hence, these programs lack a proper evaluation, yielding the need for further studies that gauge the effectiveness on families and child/youth outcomes.

The “Travelling Preschool Education — Below and Beyond Glass Rooms” (Glass Rooms for short) is a (very) small local (at Coruche, a village in the Centre of Portugal) level program, targeting Roma children and their

families. The project is part of an initiative from the Portuguese ministry of Education that designed Priority Intervention Educational Territories (TEIP is the Portuguese acronym) across Portugal in economically and socially disadvantaged communities, where poverty, social exclusion, violence, indiscipline, absenteeism and school dropouts are most evident. This public initiative aims at preventing and reducing early school dropouts, discipline problems and promoting the educational success of all students. Within the TEIP general program, schools have to present their own specific tailored programs that are adapted to the schools' context, resources and challenges. If judged only by scope, Glass Rooms would be dismissed as targeting a very small group. However, the picture does change dramatically if one considers that it is successfully reaching some of the most disenfranchised and disaffected people within the Portuguese society. In fact, we are not speaking about Roma minorities, but rather extreme cases within the (Portuguese) Gypsy's communities. For example, at the time of the beginning of the program's implementation in YEAR children lacked any registration nor official documentation. Thus, these children were unknown to the Portuguese authorities and therefore, legally, not considered Portuguese citizens. Some of the members of these communities live in extreme poverty without access to basic housing conditions. In this scenario, basic care for newborns and children is lacking. For example, vaccination although not mandatory in Portugal but with almost universal coverage, were unknown to some families within these communities.

The program is highly innovative in Portugal, given that there are few opportunities for joint activities for Roma parents and early aged children tackling, preventing educational disadvantages existing in this community. One of the biggest strengths of the program is that activities are conducted inside Roma communities, in familiar physical and cultural places (outdoors, when possible) or at pre-school settings, bringing families and schools closer. Activities were designed as informal and flexible, meeting the interests and needs of participants, through mainly play and pedagogic games. Although Roma families are considered a hard to reach group (and this particular program aimed to engage the most difficult subgroup), this program has reported very promising results, particularly with family engagement in schools.

The Municipal Parental Education program is a positive parenting program delivered universally in the region of Famalicão, in Northern Portugal, since 2007, and is still operating. This feature alone makes it a unique (highly innovative) service/program within the Portuguese context, since, there is no other comparable initiative of this kind in the country. This is the only service that extends beyond regular services provided by the state (namely health services

and ECEC) to the overall population of a vast (i.e., not a disadvantaged area) geographical constituency.

The program, jointly developed by the city council, local schools, local health centers and private non-profit organizations, is delivered in local schools by parental commissioners and parental guidance counselors, managed by a team from the city council educational office under the supervision of a University researcher).

In this review, the program is considered as highly innovative in Portugal, given the collaboration of a public agency (City Council), local schools, and universal delivery universally to families, turning local schools into concrete local resources for families (and not only children). The use of parental commissioners and parental guidance counselors is also innovative as it favors joint action. Hard to reach groups are the main challenge of the program, because participants enroll voluntary and are self-referred to the program.

## Discussion

This paper presented an overview of existing evidence on supporting good parenting practices in Portugal for vulnerable groups, in particular the extent to which programs can narrow the educational gaps. This paper also sought to gather information on ongoing services/programs that, although have not been thoroughly evaluated, might give powerful insights to promising practices for our specific context. In general, empirical data suggests that participation in parenting interventions is associated with an improvement in parenting practices, perceived sense of competence and higher levels of perceived social support. Nevertheless, existing evidence is still minimal, which affects the low spread of parenting programs in our country. From an equity perspective, data relative to the narrowing of parenting quality practice gaps is very limited. A few empirical studies suggested that parents with higher educational levels benefited more from the interventions than parents with low education, raising the issue of the equity of these programs (Almeida et al., 2012). Therefore, there is a great need for developing sustainable parenting programs with rigorous studies on their effectiveness, explicitly gauging the gaps between vulnerable groups and others.

Even though support to families through parenting programs in Portugal is low, it was still possible to identify some programs that present several key features that are relevant for effective parenting support (e.g., Daly et al., 2015; Molinuevo, 2013). Interestingly, programs include both targeted and universal approaches. From an equity perspective, even though the distinction between universal and target provision is often blurred (Boddy et al., 2009; Molinuevo, 2013), there is great discussion over which approach brings more equity to the system. While universal

approaches offer support to all, they may offer less to those who need the most; on the other hand, targeted approaches intend to provide more for those who need the most, but simultaneously can stigmatize or, may miss the families who need the most. While there is no clear answer for what works best, it is important to note that, in the selected programs, even the targeted programs included mechanisms to improve access, namely by offering free of charge services to families and by targeting through geographical areas rather than by family characteristics. The access through low-threshold services may facilitate inclusion and prevent stigmatization (Molinuevo, 2013), and therefore it seems important to stress that identified programs make efforts to reach parents. For example, the use of small, dedicated teams such as The Glass Rooms was an additional mechanism that reached a small but extremely disenfranchised group. It is possible that in cases where families are radically disconnected from the local services, the use of such small, personalized teams are needed so that relationships of mutual trust can start to be built. In sum, at this moment in Portugal, facilitating the access to family and parenting support through active strategies may be one of the most important issues from an equity perspective.

It is also interesting to note that none of the programs included home visiting, although proximity to the community seemed to be included in several programs. Programs such as Escolhas or GABC implemented in the local community, through services connected to children and youth, favored direct contact between technicians and families, representing a first step for relationships of mutual trust. Overall, even though theoretical models vary across programs, all programs aligned with a strengths-based and resource-based approach, acknowledged parents' strengths and resources, and promoted a model of positive functioning.

Moreover, programs were multifaceted, either by combining support to parents and children, (GABC, A PAR, or the Glass Rooms), or by being closely connected to other services through multi-agency work (Escolhas and Municipal Parental Education program). Another key aspect worth mentioning is the attention given to social support networks. Identified programs either developed community-based interventions or promoted group support, suggesting a clear focus on informal social support networks.

In general, key ingredients of the Portuguese programs are similar to other countries' programs and to international literature on parenting support (Boddy et al., 2009; Molinuevo, 2013). One exception is children's age. Apart from GABC, which targeted very young children (under 4), programs tended to target older children, which contrasts with most of programs developed in other countries. Escolhas, even though the programs present several interesting and relevant features such as integrated, inter-sectorial and multifaceted support, preschool-aged children

were not involved and primary school aged children were hardly involved. Even though positive parenting and prevention are part of the programs' vision, this pattern of intervening late together with the almost nonexistence of parenting support for the younger groups merits attention by the national and local authorities.

Overall, even though we were able to identify promising programs that seem to provide some kind of support to parents, this overview shows clearly that support to Portuguese families is very low, possibly because services and resources specifically addressing parents' needs are not part of a public policy.

Even in regard to family protection services, there is no specific governmental body that oversees superintends family protection policies or monitors their impact (Wall & Correia, 2014). In services such as Family Support and Parental Counseling Centers and Social Integration Income, there is a lack of guidelines, which contributes to variations of the type, intensity, quality and duration of interventions from between services. In other words, family support policy in Portugal appears to be fragmented, marked by discontinuity with a strong delegation of state responsibilities in private (not for profit) institutions, without adequate monitoring or supervision (Perista & Baptista, 2014).

The lack of a coherent, long-term family-centered approach to parenting contrasts with other European countries (England, Germany, the Netherlands, and Norway), where parenting support has been incorporated into national comprehensive early intervention strategies, with clear strategic frameworks integrating a broad range of early intervention and prevention services for families.

In contrast, even though Portugal has a child-friendly legislation, family support has not been consolidated into a concrete comprehensive national strategy to oversee family support policies and practices. Similarly, there is no overall strategy for tackling child poverty and social exclusion in Portugal (Perista & Baptista, 2014). Thus, a place to begin in Portugal would be to identify the importance of making available a variety of parenting support services through coordinated and sustained approaches.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** Gil Nata and Joana Cadima declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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