

**EVIDENCE-INFORMED FAMILY EDUCATION AND SUPPORT IN  
CONTEMPORARY EUROPE. CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE EUROPEAN  
FAMILY SUPPORT NETWORK**

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**Abstract**

The European Family Support Network (EurofamNet) is a bottom-up, evidence-based, multidisciplinary network funded as an Action (CA18123) under the COST program. EurofamNet aims to inform family policies and practices by reflecting common goals across participating countries, while recognizing the specific nature of families' cultural and socio-economic contexts within them. In this chapter, some of the most salient outputs developed in EurofamNet up to now are briefly described. These outputs cover three key areas that currently constitute research challenges in family support agenda: (1) quality assurance in child and family support services and in the standards for best practices in matters of design, implementation and evaluation of family support programmes; (2) agreement on the skills qualification for family support workforce necessary for a high quality services delivery in working with families; (3) and frontier-knowledge responses to parenting across the life-course and in particular to challenges faced by families in difficult situations. In these areas, contributions from EurofamNet are summarized and remaining challenges are highlighted.

*Keywords:* family support, evidence-informed practices, European Union, network

## Resumen

La Red Europea de Apoyo Familiar (EurofamNet) es una red *bottom-up*, basada en evidencias y multidisciplinar fundada como Acción COST (CA18123). EurofamNet está dirigida a informar las prácticas y políticas en materia de apoyo familiar, reflejando las metas comunes de los países participantes a la vez que reconociendo las especificidades de los contextos culturales y socioeconómicos de cada país. En este capítulo se describen algunos de los resultados más importantes producidos por EurofamNet hasta el momento, relativos a tres retos de investigación actuales en materia de apoyo familiar: (1) estándares de calidad y buenas prácticas en el diseño, la implementación y la evaluación de programas de apoyo familiar; (2) acuerdo en materia de competencias para el ejercicio profesional en los servicios de apoyo familiar; (3) respuestas en la frontera del conocimiento para apoyar a las familias que afrontan situaciones complejas. Se resumen las contribuciones de EurofamNet en estas áreas y se destacan los retos pendientes.

*Palabras clave:* apoyo familiar, prácticas basadas en evidencias, Unión Europea, trabajo en red.

### **Quality standards in family support programmes' design, delivering and evaluation**

Family support services in Europe require a more advanced evidence-based and culturally informed approach that offers practitioners effective programmes and practical toolkits relevant for specific family contexts. To advance in this challenge, one of the key goals of EurofamNet is to develop and disseminate a novel quality standards proposal that identifies the basic characteristics to develop, implement, test, and disseminate high-quality family support programs in the European context. Despite the emphasis on evidence-based practices informed by frontier-knowledge, the quality in practices varies across and within the member states and the vast majority of the family support programs lack or have limited evidence-base as well as weak implementation quality (Özdemir, 2015). Recommendations and guidelines that facilitate advancing the current state of family support programs are needed. Özdemir et al. (2020) have

identified quality standards and the characteristics of high-quality programmes by performing an extensive review of the published quality standards documents and scientific publications focusing on preventive interventions for families and children. A thematic analysis of this review has revealed the importance of four phases in conceptualizing standards for family support programs: program formulation, program delivery, program evaluation, and dissemination. The processes and the outcomes of these four phases are guided by five fundamental considerations: responsive, feasible, ethical, inclusive, and sustainable (Özdemir et al., 2020). It is expected that this quality standards proposal offers a set of guiding principles for practitioners and researchers who work with family support programs that are accessible and in line with the latest advances in research and praxis. A full map of international agencies on programmes' evaluation and quality standards will be available in the EurofamNet website (<https://eurofamnet.eu/toolbox>).

A specific domain in quality standards of family support programmes in which EurofamNet has deeply focused is related to evaluation strategies. Balancing the experimentalist perspective, EurofamNet advocates a pluralistic approach that emphasizes methodological adequacy and robustness, but also utility, feasibility and ethical considerations (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011). In addition, this approach is based on a rights' promotion perspective, which considers the voice of children and families. Finally, this approach establishes a two-way relationship with professional practice (European Family Support Network, 2020b). By a narrative review of available evidence on evaluation strategies in family and parenting support programmes, Almeida et al. (2020) point out a list of principles and criteria for an evidence-based evaluation proposal. This proposal adds to the previous literature by providing clear guidelines for family support programme evaluation in line with the principles of implementation science, while discussing the particularities and practical implications of programme evaluation for family support policy and delivery. The policy-makers-oriented version of the evaluation strategies EurofamNet position will be available in the EurofamNet website (<https://eurofamnet.eu/toolbox>).

### **Skills qualification for family support workforce in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

A challenge in the family support field is diversity in conceptual assumptions and epistemological frameworks. Various paradigms of intervention, different sectors and disciplinary involvement and a diversification of services indicates the need for systematization and clarifications in the field (Frost, Abbott, & Race, 2015). Since many disciplines and professionals are working in the family support field, there is need for agreement on the skills qualification for family support workforce necessary for a high quality service delivery in working with families.

EurofamNet aims to advance a shared framework on skills qualification for family support workforce in the 21st century. To this end, a systematic review of literature has been developed by Zegarac, Burgund, Nunes, & Antunes (2020), from an initial sample of 8,489 papers resulting in 40 studies from five countries meeting the review inclusion criteria. The workforce skills described were the qualities of the professionals, technical skills, and specific knowledge. Most of the studies were literature reviews, did not define specific skills, had very small samples and presented bias problems. Family support workforce skills is an emergent concept and research related to it needs to be intensified to allow the establishment of standardized guidelines for family support workforce skills. EurofamNet is currently committed to it hoping this paper contributes to the first steps on that matters.

Moreover, international organizations working in the field and catalogues available on basic professional skills of family support workforce have been searched by Buciuceanu-Vrabie et al. (2020), identifying family/children support international organizations/agencies (46 organizations); family therapy, occupational therapy, family educators and family support paraprofessionals (12 organizations) and youth support work (30 organizations). The information gained from a content analyses of organizations' websites highlighted some gaps related to acknowledgement and broad representation of skills used in family support work. This content analysis showed that further efforts are required, for example, in terms of promoting and disseminating a framework for standardizing the professional skills for the workforce in family support; or developing a comprehensive and collaborative approach between all actors involved at public, civil and community level, from a multi-disciplinary perspective. The full list

of international agencies on family support skills standards will be available in the EurofamNet website (<https://eurofamnet.eu/toolbox>).

### **Frontier-knowledge responses to face the challenges of families. A national example about the COVID crisis**

EurofamNet is aimed at enabling frontier-knowledge responses to parenting across the life-course and in particular to challenges faced by families in difficult situations. There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a salient challenge that has obliged children, adolescents and families around the world to face a fundamentally altered situation not only with respect to schooling, but also with respect to their lives as a whole (UNESCO, 2020).

One of the strategies used by the network to provide frontier-knowledge responses to face the challenges of families is following a bottom-up process, feeding European-level proposals from the knowledge and evidence-based initiatives that country representatives are developing at national level (European Family Support Network, 2020a). Colleagues from Austria have provided a good example of frontier-knowledge responses to face the challenges of families related to the COVID crisis. Following self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008), Holzer et al. (in press) are working in identifying psychological characteristics that help maintain adolescents' well-being during that challenging period that can be included in family support initiatives. Structural equation modelling performed on data from 19,337 secondary school students' self-reports revealed the relevance of the three basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness, as well as the relevance of self-regulated learning in a situation in which adolescents have to cope with a sudden loss of daily routines, including regular schooling. To counteract negative developmental outcomes and to foster resilience in times of crisis, these findings provide keys for families dealing with this situation in terms of fostering experienced competence and autonomy, relatedness, and self-regulated learning (Lüftenegger et al., 2012). EurofamNet country-level representatives are feeding up a compilation of toolkits from informed institutions developed to help families and children to face COVID-19 consequences, which is available in the EurofamNet website (<https://eurofamnet.eu/toolbox>).

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