A Positive Parenting Policy for Malta

2014-2018

Draft Copy for Public Consultation
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Invitation to Participate in the Public Consultation Process of the Positive Parenting Policy 2014 - 2018

The government, through the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity, has launched its Positive Parenting Policy for public consultation.

Positive parenting refers to behaviours that are carried out by parents or others designated to this role. It prioritizes children's best interests, helping them grow in an environment that is free from violence and conducive to their healthy development.

It is being proposed that this policy will be embedded in a cultural context where work-family balance is prioritised through family friendly measures which empower both parents to participate in the upbringing of the children and where parents are supported to have their ideal number of children. The policy also depends on more specialised training being offered to professional staff working with children and families. Widespread awareness and education on positive parenting through different means of communication will reach Maltese families as part of the implementation of this policy.

A number of universal interventions build on the services already on offer and cut across different departments and ministries thus creating a better synergy and a seamless continuation of services from one entity to another. These will be complemented by targeted interventions, where necessary. The latter will be especially aimed at parents who are considered hard to reach and to be most at risk. An increase of professionals working with parents is considered important for the implementation of the policy.

The general public and other interested parties are invited to participate in the consultation process by sending their feedback to The Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity, Palazzo Ferreria, Republic Street, Valletta, Malta or via email to positiveparentingpolicy@gov.mt by the end of December, 2014.

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Executive Summary

A Positive Parenting Policy for Malta 2014-2018 is based upon the premise that a positive approach to parenting constitutes an investment in the future of Maltese society. Such an approach is considered to be both cost-effective as well as a major support to parents as they face today’s challenges. Positive parenting refers to behaviours that are carried out by parents or others designated to this role, who prioritize children’s best interests, helping them grow in an environment that is free from violence and conducive to their healthy development, whilst providing all the necessary guidance and support. The policy on positive parenting specifically aims at helping to build and sustain a positive culture and infrastructure for parents and their children, where parents are supported in different ways to fulfill their role to the best of their abilities.

The development, dissemination and implementation of this policy will be embedded in a cultural context where work-family balance is prioritised through family friendly measures which empower both parents to participate in the upbringing of the children and where parents are supported to have their ideal number of children.

The policy also depends on more specialised training being offered to professional staff working with children and families. Widespread awareness and education on positive parenting through different means of communication will also reach Maltese families as part of the implementation of this policy.

A number of universal interventions build on the services already on offer and highlight the importance of preventive work with parents and children. They cut across different departments and ministries thus creating a better synergy and a seamless continuation of services from one entity to another. These will be complemented by targeted interventions, where necessary. The latter will be especially aimed at parents who are considered hard to reach and to be most at risk. An increase of professionals working with parents is considered important for the implementation of the policy.
1.0 Introduction and Justification

Considering that the family is fundamental to the well-being and development of its individuals, and that “family relationships in general and the parent-child relationship in particular have a pervasive influence on the psychological, physical, social and economic well-being of children” (Sanders, Markie-Dadds, & Turner, 2003, p. 1), developing a positive parenting policy would be a major contribution to the wellbeing of society.

There are a number of indicators that point towards the pressing need for a Positive Parenting Policy in Malta and Gozo:

• The latest HBSC survey carried out in 2009 among 40 participating countries presented some alarming findings, where Maltese children between 11 and 15 ranked 37th in terms of their relative ease to confide in their mother and last in all three age brackets with regard to confiding in their father. Children who find it difficult or even impossible to confide in their parents are more prone to put themselves at risk (Currie et al., 2008).

• Qualitative research carried out by Abela, Farrugia, Casha, Galea and Schembri (2013) which aimed to explore the above findings in more depth revealed that children yearn for a meaningful connection with their parents and value confiding in them. They wished for their parents to be calmer and better able to listen to them. The parents, on their end, wished for more support to be able to build more positive and meaningful relationships with their children. Both children and parents highlighted the challenge of combining parenthood and work-related obligations.

• In the 10th edition of EkoSkola Parliament Session (www.ekoskola.org.mt) held on the 30th of May, 2014 where a total of 76 students from 38 different schools had the opportunity to participate in a live debate in Parliament focusing on the quality of life of Maltese citizens, the students also specifically asked for more time with their parents.

• In their memorandum prior to the general elections, the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT, 2012, August) emphasized the crucial role played by the family in the education of the children and highlighted the need for more professionals working with families in schools.

• The number of children in out of home care has doubled, from the year 2000 to 2014, from 350 in 2000 to over 750 in 2014 (C.Farrugia Bennett1, personal communication, August 6, 2014). In 2013 alone 235 unaccompanied minors arrived in Malta (A.M. Pisani2, personal communication, September 4, 2014). This rapid increase of children in care calls for more supportive and preventive services that specifically cater for these children.

1. C. Farrugia Bennett is coordinator of the Looked-after Children service at Aġenzija Appoġġ
2. A.M. Pisani is an official of the Ministry of Home Affairs
Promoting positive parenting as a national priority is being perceived and proposed as a critical driver of increased momentum towards:

- an acknowledgment of the wisdom and wealth bred within Maltese families
- widespread awareness and acceptance of the need for investment in becoming better parents, whilst striving for higher standards in parenting and recognizing that everyone can contribute towards positive parenting
- a celebration of parenting including recognition of parents’ contribution towards economic growth and social development
- sensitivity towards culturally and socially diverse parenting patterns while upholding the rights of the child
- action which proactively supports parents who are at risk
- an investment in children as active citizens and future parents

2.0 Definition

Parenting refers to “all the roles falling to parents in order to care for and bring up children. Parenting is centered on parent-children interaction and entails rights and duties for the child’s development and self-fulfilment” (Daly, 2007, p. 144). Although parents are mentioned as being the normative caregivers of society, this policy also recognises that parenting behaviour is taken up by other individuals who have significant roles in children’s lives. This is in fact recognised by Daly (2007, p. 144) who defines positive parenting as:

“parental behaviour based on the best interests of the child that is nurturing, empowering, non-violent and provides recognition and guidance which involves setting of boundaries to enable the full development of the child”

3.0 What does Research say about Positive Parenting?

Most persons choose to parent their children based on their own experiences of being parented, which may not necessarily have been ideal. Some parents choose to invest in parenting skills courses, but not all do, and a majority learn by trial-and-error (Risley, Clark, & Cataldo, 1976; Sanders, 1999).

Along the years, the importance and responsibility given to the role of parenting has helped to sensitize efforts to support parents and caregivers in their role. Substantial research also indicates that a positive style to parenting strongly contributes to good mental health in children, as well as having a preventive role in the development of socio-emotional and behavioural problems (Biglan, 1995; DeRosier & Gilliam, 2007; Gardner, Sonuga-Barke, & Sayal, 1999; Hutchings & Lane, 2005; Morawska, Winter, & Sanders, 2009; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2003) hence the development of parenting skills programmes.
Nowadays a much greater shift has occurred towards positive parenting (Daly, 2007) and supporting families that are defined as being at risk (Daly, 2013).

3.1 Why is it a Good Idea to Introduce Positive Parenting?

In view of the evidence that shows the impact of parenting quality on both emotional and behavioural child outcomes, introducing positive parenting within our society can be expected to have far-reaching and important implications at different levels.

Families in general are valuable to society, and focusing on supporting these to function well, is ultimately beneficial not only to parents and their children, but also to the whole of society. Families need to be the main focus of policy makers because it is families that produce productive workers, and it is from families that “rearing, caring and committed citizens” (Bogenschneider, 2014, p. 373) arise. Moreover, when policies focus on families, efficient investments are made that help society reach its goals, as well as promote a more positive development of young persons, that inevitably impacts the well-being of society (Bogenschneider, 2014).

3.2 Investing in Positive Parenting is a Cost-effective Measure

We know that early experiences of children within their families tend to be strong predictors of their future development and behaviour (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005). Thus by focusing and introducing positive parenting within Maltese society, one would be investing in positive future behaviour of its citizens. Research shows that securely attached children, who are more likely to be a result of positive parenting, can be expected to be “more empathetic, more self-reliant, and less hostile to their peers” (Sroufe as cited in Bogenschneider, 2014, p. 374). Englund, Levy, Hyson, and Sroufe (2000) also found that securely attached infants had the characteristics of good citizens. They were good leaders, had better self confidence and were socially competent in problem solving amongst other things.

A number of studies also show that investing in programmes that enhance positive parenting is a very powerful intervention and a cost-effective measure (Foster, Prinz, Sanders, & Shapiro, 2008; Sanders, Calam, Durand, Liversidge, & Carmont, 2008). Substantial evidence points at how reducing risks and reinforcing protective factors helps avert the development of early onset mental health difficulties (Saxena, Jané-Llopis, & Hosman, 2006). In a systematic review of the economic evidence connected to parenting interventions and programmes, Charles, Bywater and Edwards (2010) pointed out that programmes with parents of children at risk of developing conduct disorder were cost effective. This is is because if untreated conduct disorder may have lasting negative effects. On the other hand, children tend to benefit well when parents attend such programmes. This finding was also confirmed in an evaluation of parent training/education programmes which included children with oppositional behaviour by Dretzke et al. (2005).
3.3 The Crucial Importance of Early Intervention

Danziger and Waldfogel (2000, February) discuss at length how cost–effective early childhood interventions are. They state that “a consensus has recently emerged, among economists, developmentalists and others, that investments in early childhood are cost-effective” (p.3) and conclude that investing in children is the best way to break the cycle of poverty and inequality. Early childhood interventions are essential for children in disadvantaged families, whose average cognitive scores before starting Kindergarten are estimated to be 60% lower than those living in families of high socio-economic status (Lee & Burkam, 2002). Waldfogel (1999, February) makes the point that early childhood interventions and childcare are not synonymous. Early childhood interventions are active interventions that take place in a childcare centre but also in a home setting. Home visits have the potential to reach parents who are on the margins of society. Stimulation needs to occur in a relational context where parents and their children have the opportunity to form a secure bond between them and children are not simply relegated to child care. These interventions are meant to start from birth when the mother is feeling particularly vulnerable and may not readily access help. These first months are crucial for the child’s brain development and lack of stimulation because of an impoverished environment as well as parental stress due to poverty including problems related to mental health, may have adverse effects on the cognitive and emotional development of the child.

Outreach services led by nurses or trained health visitors have also been found to be highly beneficial and effective with young mothers. Evidence shows that an intensive programme that was initially developed in the United States and further developed in Scotland offering support to teenage mothers with their infants, improved the families’ life chances and overall health (Trueland, 2012). Another study showed that home-visiting attachment-based interventions held by clinical workers that aimed at reducing the risk of maltreatment on children, proved to be very effective in helping to improve the mothers’ sensitivity to their children, creating better attachments and reducing risk (Moss et al., 2011). Such an approach can be further developed to involve the whole system rather than only mothers.

Sweden is one country where universal services have a very strong focus on early intervention and prevention. From the very beginning of an infant’s life there is emphasis on breastfeeding and the provision of highly subsidised maternity and paternity leave to enable parents to be with their infants during the child’s early life. Furthermore all hospitals are baby-friendly and early parenting training is provided to the vast majority of parents in the population (Hosking, Walsh, & Pillai, 2010).

In implementing early interventive and successful practice, introducing parenting as part of the school curriculum alongside other taught subjects is an excellent initiative. A programme called Roots of Empathy is used to train young school children to learn how to attune themselves to babies, adopting positive attitudes towards early child care, receiving information and understanding (Hosking et al., 2010).
3.4 Parenting Skills Programmes vs Couple Relationship/Co-parenting Programmes

Given the importance of positive parenting, a number of programmes were developed over the years, and the outcome of these brought about a recognized improvement in the way parents communicate with children (Sanders, 2008). Most of these programmes focused directly on parental skills. Currently a shift towards enhancing relationships in a family rather than simply focusing on parental skills is taking place. This is because of the positive impact this has on the child (Carlson & McLanahan, 2006). Research shows a consistent positive correlation between how well children fare and the quality of the parents’ relationship (Davies, Cummings, & Winter, 2004; Emery, 1999). This connection was also supported by Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Brown, and Szeweczyk Sokolowski (2006), who state that the couple’s relationship quality ultimately impacts the rest of the family system and hence cannot be ignored. The importance and impact of the parenting relationship on the ability to cope and on the infants’ emotional development was highlighted by Belsky, Putman, and Crnic (1996) who stated that both the quality of parenting received as well as whether mutual support was present between the parents impacted the child’s early emotional development.

In their research, Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, and Wong (2009) suggested that when involving the father in coparenting groups, it was possible that “the parents’ experience of the groups themselves, the discussions of children’s development, and the relatively greater couple satisfaction and couple communication combined to protect the children against the rise in aggression, hyperactivity, depression, and shy or withdrawn behaviors” (p. 676). According to the same researchers, by giving more importance to developing a co-parenting framework in parenting programmes, attention is also given to the quality of the couple relationship and not simply to parental skills. Moreover, it is also mentioned that children’s adjustment is to a great degree impacted by the parenting quality, as well as the parent-child relationship. This includes the relationship quality between the parents and other family resources, such as financial and social ones (Lamb, 2012).

Co-parenting does not only take place in the context of having both parents on board. Co-parenting with the grandparents needs to be taken into consideration. Once again no local research is available in spite of its relevance to our context. McHale and Lindahl (2011) report that in single mother-grandmother “coresidence” coparenting in residences where the grandmothers coparented with adult single mothers, children showed positive developmental outcomes, that were comparable to two-parent homes. On the other hand, in households where the grandmothers coparented with adolescent single mothers, the impact and influence of the grandmothers appeared to be more ambiguous.

A qualitative study carried out by Cauchi (2013) on a small sample, focused on the lived experiences of Maltese grandmothers in a near-parenting role. The study elicited a number of themes, amongst which was the development of a positive relationship with their own children and grandchildren. On the other hand, according to Abela, Casha, et al. (2012), many grandparents find themselves feeling obliged to take care of their children’s children, in spite of the fact that it may prove to be extremely stressful for them, and not necessarily always in the best interest of the children’s development. In a study by Lumpkin
grandparents who were in a near-parenting role experienced stress, and frequently relied on social support in order to cope with this. Abela, Casha, et al. (2012) point out that a monthly lecture, specifically for grandparents, is now being held as part of the Parent Craft courses in Malta.

In Malta, this shift from teaching about parenting skills where mostly mothers attend, to focusing on the couple relationship as co-parents, has not yet happened. The focus still remains on the traditional teaching of parenting skills.

3.4.1 Making use of the different modes of media to deliver parenting courses.

Anglo-American literature connected to parenting programmes has in recent years focused on how positive parenting may be made accessible to a bigger number of families through different modes of media which include programmes offered on television and on the internet (Sanders et al., 2008; Sanders, Montgomery & Brechman-Toussaint, 2000). These programmes have been found to have far reaching positive effects on diverse parenting situations in different cultural contexts (Morawska et al., 2011).

4.0 The Philosophy Informing the Positive Parenting Policy

• The 2012–2015 Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of the Child are an important source of inspiration for the Positive Parenting Policy. The guiding philosophy is also in tune with the main recommendations by nine member states attending a peer review of the European Commission which focused on the building of a coordinated strategy for parenting support (Daly, 2011).

• A systemic theoretical framework is indispensable for taking into account a relationship perspective when thinking about parenting. It will provide a more holistic understanding of the family system and helps us to look at family situations from a non blaming stance. Such an approach gives the possibility of understanding the impact of outer systems including those of the socio cultural context in which parenting is embedded.

• Attachment Theory is a rich theoretical framework to draw from when conceptualizing the notion of positive parenting. The capacity for parents to understand that their behaviour and that of their children are linked in particularly meaningful ways to the underlying mental states is what is referred to as Reflective Function (Steele & Steele, 2008). Parents that are considered to be high on reflective functioning, are usually less likely to view their children’s behaviour as problematic and more likely to identify what might be the reason for such behaviour. When their children are showing signs of distress, such parents would be more likely to remain emotionally involved, and help to regulate the children’s emotions effectively. Parents with a high reflective function are also more likely to have children that show a secure type of attachment (Slade, Grienenberger, Bernback, Levy, & Locker, 2005).

• The policy considers the participation of children as active contributors. Their participation is regarded as a working method and attitude towards setting standards. It also includes involving children in
monitoring of, and co-operation in, activities. By consulting children and listening to what they have to say, parents will be supported to increase their understanding of their children. In fact, “what young people think is not necessarily what adults think they think” (Madge & Willmott, 2007, p. 12). It is important to keep in mind that in actual fact children have ideas and views on most things, and prefer to be involved in decisions and daily matters. Children also like being consulted despite not necessarily having the final say or decision. Therefore when considering a Positive Parenting Policy, children’s views also need to be taken into account. They must not go unheard and should take part in the consultation process (Madge & Willmott, 2007).

- Empowering parents to have a voice and share their views on parenting is also an important guiding principle. Doing so would enable them to mobilize their resources and use their own skills to buffer and protect themselves against potential risks. Encouraging the discussion of parenting in a positive and open manner helps parents and society at large to become more receptive to parenting information and education. People with childcaring responsibilities are motivated to grow as parents and come to accept the possibility, indeed the necessity, to learn about best parenting practices.

- Promoting resilience as one way of supporting parents to help their children thrive, must be fostered not only among parents and the family, but also by governmental and private institutions and agencies and the community at large.

- The policy development process will involve taking a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach. The community at large will be the basis for such an intervention, which will be multifocused as well as flexible in nature.

- Hosking et al. (2010) refer to the term “galvanizing a community” as a form of intervention. This implies an “approach to building functional, healthy communities whereby the policy would effectively reach a large number of citizens at the same time. This approach would help overcome the challenge of reaching the most at risk, and therefore hardest to reach, potential beneficiaries of support” (p.13). Unlike a selective or targeted strategy, a community approach renders the policy more inclusive, nonjudgemental as well as nonstigmatising. This principle takes on special meaning in work with families coming from minority groups. Interventions with targeted populations (such as outreach home visits by trained health workers, coparenting courses, skills development) especially with those who are hard to reach and who are at risk of social exclusion will complement a more universal community approach.
5.0 Positive Parenting in the Maltese Context

5.1 Recent Changes in the Maltese Context

The Maltese context has been faced with ever-increasing changes and it has become a very different society from that of previous, not too distant, generations. The increase in globalisation; the entry into the European Union in 2004; the introduction of the Divorce Law in May 2011, the IVF Bill in November 2012, and the Civil Unions Act in April 2014, are a few examples of the rapid social changes that are taking place in Maltese society. In tune with a systemic approach, a positive parenting policy needs to be mindful of the cultural context in which it will be implemented.

Moreover, an increasing number of women have entered the labour market and a number of child care centres across Malta operate in order to support the increase of parents entering the labour force. Dual-earner families are on the increase, especially amongst families with younger women. The female employment rate has risen by 15% between 2001 and 2014, currently standing at 47.1% of all working age women (National Statistics Office [NSO], 2001, March; NSO, 2014, June). In absolute terms, this is an increase of 23,827 women in the Maltese labour market, a trend set to continue in years to come. This is true across age groups but particularly for younger women. In fact, according to comparative statistics by the Eurostat Labour Force Survey of 2011, the “percentage of [Maltese] women in the 25-29 age bracket who hold jobs increased from 56.1% in 2001 to 70.3% in 2010” (Abela, Casha, et al., 2012, p. 57). Growth in the employment rate of women is faster than that of men. Between March 2013 and March 2014, the numbers of men in work increased by 1,221 persons while the number of women increased by 2,100 persons (NSO, 2014, June). According to the Labour Force Survey for the first quarter of 2014, the employment rate of young women aged under 25 now exceeds that of young men by one percent (NSO, 2014, June).

With the increase in labour force participation, the importance of child care has evidently been on the increase. Despite a gradual increase in child care settings, Maltese mothers appear to still prefer to leave their children with relatives, such as grandparents rather than sending them to child care. According to childcare figures (NSO, 2014, May) it was indicated that childcare by grandparents, other relatives, friends or neighbours averaged 17 hours weekly.

According to NSO (2011), 25.2% of births happened outside marriage, reflecting an increase in non-traditional family household. It must be noted that the highest risk of poverty among household types occurs among single parent households, of whom 47.6% were found to be at risk of poverty (NSO, 2014, May) which inevitably places greater strain on parenting. Therefore, the need for providing support to Maltese families in terms of parenting, in view of all these changes is inevitable.

According to the last census carried out in Malta in 2011, 8.12% of the total married population had separated; another 1.01% had divorced (NSO, 2014). These families need support. Marital separation is but one major event that the family members go through. The distress and conflict among family members—especially that between the parents – precedes the separation. Moreover it is expected that a number of these families go on to live in a reconstituted family arrangement although there are no demographic
statistics to show this to date. Research shows that “the post divorce adjustment of parents and children over time, as marital transitions and family reorganizations unfold is a stressful time for families and the experience doubles the risk of serious problems in children” (Greene, Anderson, Forgatch, DeGarmo, & Hetherington, 2012, p.103). Research shows that living in reconstituted families can be challenging for children and their parents especially in those families living in adverse circumstances (see Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001; Dunn et al., 1998; McGoldrick & Carter, 2013). However there are families where the experience is a positive one overall (see Farrugia, 2014 for a qualitative study of couples in remarried relationships following divorce in Malta).

A number of children in Malta are in care: 232 children are in foster care, 33 in specialized foster care, 242 in residential care, whereas 85 have other arrangements (C. Farrugia Bennett, personal communication, August 6, 2014). In 2013, 235 unaccompanied minors arrived in Malta (A.M. Pisani, personal communication, September 4, 2014). At present there are not enough foster carers to cater for so many children, especially with regards to specialized foster care. In a series of three studies on Children in Out-of-Home Care in Malta that was commissioned by the Office of the Commissioner for Children in Malta (Abela, Abdilla, et al., 2012), it was highlighted that in the majority of cases, the major reason for children’s entry into care was because of issues that were directly related to parenting. This indicates that some parents face extensive and intense challenges and need to be supported.

The total number of adoptions to Maltese couples reached 74 in the year 2011. Parents need support when going through these difficult and/or challenging circumstances.

According to NSO (2010) the total fertility rate at present stands at 1.4 which is amongst the lowest fertility rates in Europe (see Demographic Report of the European Commission of 2010). Demographers such as Kohler, Ortega and Billari (2001) point out that with a total fertility rate of 1.3 the population of a country would be expected to decline by half in forty five years time. This sudden drop in the population is expected to have a “falling off-a-cliff effect” from which it will be impossible to recover. Encouraging parents to have more children by providing them with more support is therefore a very important consideration. The positive correlation between fertility rates and the existence of supportive infrastructures for parents is well known (Rovny, 2011). Tanturri (2014) points out that emerging evidence suggests that the support of the father in the upbringing of the first born increases the chances of the couple having a second child. The provision of good quality childcare is also helpful whereas long working hours discourage childbearing.

The introduction of the Malta Civil Unions Bill in April 2014, brought forth the issue of parenting by gay couples. With 41% of the Maltese population in favour of the Bill (Vella, 2012, June 5), adoption by gay parents was nevertheless criticized. A certain degree of stigma towards parenting by persons with a homosexual orientation needs to be addressed through education (Zammit, 2014, February 18). Research on the lived experience of these families can extend our thinking and inform our policy and practice.

The increase of intercultural marriages and the number of multicultural families living in Malta, call for a more culturally sensitive approach to positive parenting. To date 4.9% of the population in Malta is non-Maltese (NSO, 2014) and incorporates a broad array of cultures from different continents.
5.2 Policies that Facilitate Positive Parenting in Malta

A number of initiatives have been set up which reflect the move towards the introduction of positive parenting in our society.

An important change in the Criminal Code has been the recent abolition of what was previously considered acceptable moderate corporal punishment: “Corporal punishment of any kind shall always be deemed to exceed the bounds of moderation” (Article 339(h) of the Criminal Code of the Laws of Malta). This change undoubtedly creates a shift in parents’ limits in disciplining children of any age.

The increased support towards parents who participate in the labour market is an important means of protecting children and ensuring their well-being. This includes the introduction and increase in the number of child-care centres, a measure which gives an opportunity to parents who do not have adequate support to earn a living, thus increasing their quality of life and reducing the risk of poverty. As indicated earlier on, childcare by grandparents, other relatives, friends or neighbours still averages 17 hours weekly (NSO, 2014, May). According to the Income Tax Act (Chapter 123 of the Laws of Malta), article 14C states that parents whose children attend child day care facilities can benefit from a deduction in the tax amount payable to the Inland Revenue Department. Moreover, since April 2014, free childcare centres have been made available to parents according to a new Government Scheme. The free service operates according to the number of hours that parents work. These initiatives aim at enticing parents to become gainfully occupied individuals whilst still caring for their child’s wellbeing.

Over the years, various family-friendly measures have also been setup by the Maltese Government. These include maternity leave, paternity leave, parental leave, responsibility leave, adoption leave, leave to foster children, working on a reduced time-table, marriage leave, flexitime, job-sharing and teleworking. However despite Government’s effort to lead by example, family friendly services, which are not enforceable by law, are still largely lacking in the private sector.

5.3 Current Services for Parents in Malta

• Locally, new parents make their first contact with services on offer through hospital visits. Offered as part of the antenatal service at Mater Dei Hospital, parents can make use of ‘Parent Craft services’. The main aim of Parent Craft courses is to educate and support parents. These courses are usually held at Mater Dei Hospital, Health Centres as well as Unit Għożża (a service for pregnant teenagers). These classes primarily aim at educating and informing parents-to-be about what to expect in early pregnancy, as well as to offer childbirth classes to prepare for safe labour and delivery. New services are planned to include sessions for grandparents and postnatal groups aiming to educate parents on a number of issues related to a new born infant (www.babiesmalta.com/Parentcraft_Malta.php) According to statistics on Parent Craft courses, it is indicated that approximately 96% of parents attend these willingly (Abela, 2009). There is also a similar private programme that takes place. These programmes are run by midwives but do not focus on actual parenting skills, the relationship between parents or whether the child has special needs or presents with a reactive temperament. They focus instead
on the progression of pregnancy, the baby’s biological development, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, labour and breast feeding.

- A high percentage of infants are taken to post-natal Well Baby clinics in the main hospital Mater Dei, or in community clinics. The attendance is in the region of 83%, which is very high. The focus of these clinics is “Monitoring and recording of children’s development and advice on immunization and feeding” (https://ehealth.gov.mt).

- Parenting programmes in Malta are primarily provided through the Foundation for Social Welfare Services which includes Aġenzija Sedqa. The parenting skills course referred to as ‘Inrabbu ‘l Uliedna Ahjar’ is based on a US programme developed by Michael Popkin (1983), and consists of a total of six sessions held once weekly. The main topics covered include parenting styles, child’s psychological development, effective communication within the family, involving children responsibly in the family, sexuality, and finally substance abuse. Another course that is offered by the same agency is for parents of adolescents, with the aim of equipping parents with skills to cope with this developmental phase. Topics include understanding the developmental phase of adolescence, instilling courage and positive self-esteem, communicating effectively, challenges connected to drug and alcohol abuse, parenting, and sexuality (www.kidsmalta.com). These programmes are attended primarily by mothers, especially when held in the mornings; fathers attend less, although they do tend to be more present when programmes are held in the evenings (J. Agius\(^3\), personal communication, March, 2014). Once again, no distinction is made with regard to socio-economic status, or specific risks or conditions.

- In addition to the programmes within Aġenzija Sedqa, the Cana Movement (a Catholic organisation in Malta), also used to carry out a similar parenting skills programme in the past which is however no longer in force.

- Finally, another programme targets the learning needs of parents whose children are diagnosed with ADHD. This programme, developed by Barnardo’s North East, is offered by the Family Support Group for families having a child with ADHD. It aims at helping these parents understand their child’s ADHD diagnosis. The support group also helps parents develop strategies to support the child and advocate for their child where necessary (www.adhdmalta.org/Barnardo).

- A website also exists which serves as an online parenting resource called kidsmalta.com. This website gives some basic information to parents about pregnancy and schooling amongst other topics.

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3. J.Agius is a counsellor who facilitates a parenting skills programme organized by Sedqa
5.4 Local Challenges Faced

In spite of the services that are on offer, and the infrastructure in place, we face a number of challenges which impact heavily upon the nature and quality of what is offered. The following are highlighted:

- There is no basic infrastructure that facilitates and organises the operation of the diverse services offered in Malta. All the services work independently of each other, lacking co-ordination of services and resulting in fragmentation (Government of Malta, 2002; National Family Commission, 2002).

- There is also a lack of available statistics particularly on specific population groups, including reconstituted families, gay families with children, and remarriages. Research that is carried out in the local context is also very scant, and we are often bound to rely on Anglo-American literature to inform policy and practice. Such literature might not necessarily be relevant to our Maltese sociocultural context.

- Prevention work aimed at fostering and strengthening positive relationships between children and their parents as well as between parents or other parties in the co-parenting relationship, is minimal. As suggested above, parenting skills often attract highly motivated mothers, who have the time to attend in the morning. Golden opportunities for early intervention in terms of preventive work are missed in spite of the fact that a very high percentage of parents attend Parent Craft courses and Well Baby Clinics.

- The lack of coordination amongst services also presents the challenge of monitoring for quality of services. Existing structures with the agencies themselves as well as the Department of Social Welfare Standards (DSWS) need better resources and the use of more sophisticated instruments to take care of different aspects of quality of services.

- Owing to the fragmentation, vulnerable people/groups can easily be missed. Vulnerable groups include families with parents having mental health issues (Abela, Farrugia, Vella, & De Giovanni, 2014), parents with disabilities, families where there is the presence of domestic violence, parents with substance abuse difficulties, parents going through separation and divorce and reconstitution, migrant children and their parents, families where there are child protection issues, and those families lacking time to parent. Owing to the need to devote more time to work, parents are being left with less time available to spend with their children, which unfortunately results in more problematic relationship quality (Abela, Casha et al., 2012).

- Gozo in particular lacks important services and does not have enough professionals available for these to operate well. As a result, people from Gozo either have to travel to Malta or would need to do away with the support they need and deserve. For instance Gozo only has one child care centre to date, which is located in Għarb.
• There is a great lack of human resources to manage and deliver services efficiently and effectively. More professionals, including social workers, psychologists, family therapists, psychiatrists, nurses, and medical staff are needed across the board, which means more money needs to be invested in training and in salaries upon the employment of more trained professionals. At present, as a result of understaffing, burnout is high, and the services delivered do not always meet the needs of the users.

• Supervisors monitoring supervised access visits are not trained in helping children and their parents enhance their relationship.

• There is no early intervention work with children with challenging behaviour or with families in difficult situations. A number of these children end up in Kids in Development Programme (KIDs) or Young People’s Unit (YPU) at Mount Carmel Hospital or in a children’s home. Once these children are in such a placement, there are very few programmes helping these children reintegrate with their families. In the case of children with challenging behaviour where it might be impossible to reintegrate children with their families, there are not enough foster carers who are willing to foster them. Only 34 children have been placed in specialised foster care since 2011 (R. Sciberras, personal communication, August 6, 2014).

• Abela, Farrugia, Casha et al. (2013), Abela, Farrugia, Galea, and Schembri (2012), and Casha (2014) all addressed the difficulties faced by families with experience of court proceedings with regard to the length of proceedings and expenses incurred including fees for child psychologists. The authors of these studies called for these difficulties to be addressed and also noted that services for families and children are minimal.

• The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014) has recently published the results of its large-scale survey with a random sample of 42,000 women aged between 18 years and 74 years of the EU 28, who were asked about their experiences of physical, sexual and psychological violence including incidents of intimate partner violence. Seventy-three per cent of these women indicated that the children were aware of the violence between the partners. No specific figures of how many Maltese children have witnessed violence are given for the Maltese sample. However, 15% of Maltese women reported physical or sexual violence from their current and/or previous partner whilst 37% of women revealed that they experienced psychological violence. These figures highlight the need to focus on families where there is violence, particularly in light of the past three decades of literature that have documented the impact of exposure of domestic violence on children and the overall negative consequences on the social, emotional, physical and psychological development of children and young people (Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008; Wood & Sommers, 2011). Moreover, literature on parenting in the context of domestic violence indicates that parenting may be undermined by several factors including the assaults on self esteem by the perpetrator, the substance misuse if any, and the mental health needs of the parents in the midst of distress and the high conflict environment (Stanley, 2011).

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At the same time, research also has shown that a strong relationship with and attachment to a caring adult, can mitigate the negative consequences of children being exposed to domestic violence (Holt et al., 2008) which further emphasizes the importance of supporting such parent-child relationships where possible.

6.0 Policy Goals and Principles

The policy aims to enhance a common understanding of what constitutes positive parenting, and what needs to happen differently for it to be strengthened. It will be embedded in a cultural context where work-family balance is prioritised through family friendly measures which empower both parents to participate in the upbringing of the children. Moreover in tune with the Lisbon strategy the State should do its utmost to support parents to have their ideal number of children by implementing family friendly policies that encourage childbearing (see Tanturri, 2014).

The general principles governing this policy undoubtedly include building on an already existing infrastructure that would facilitate and organise the operation of services in Malta. The way forward calls for better synergy between Government ministries, experts and other entities. Such coordination would help to avoid duplication of efforts and services, as well as make the best use of existing services and resources.

- An important part of the policy would need to emphasize the consolidation of universal services across Malta and Gozo, making support accessible to all through different means. This approach will be complemented with more targeted services for those who need more intensive help. Particular emphasis needs to be put on early detection of difficulties where intervention needs to occur between parent/s or those designated to that role and the child. The provision of appropriate and timely support is indispensable.

- In order to increase services and render these accessible, more efficient and effective, an increase in training offered to all staff at different levels, as well as an increase in the number of professionals staffing services is a must. Specialised professional training on positive parenting and how professionals intervene with parents and their children in hospitals, in schools and especially in contexts of intense difficulties with regard to co-parenting is crucial for the implementation of a positive parenting policy. A key recommendation put forward by Casha (2014) in her study on the needs of families where the father defaults on child maintenance payment was for the training of police, mediators, Judicature, and staff in the helping professions at agencies such as Appoġġ in basic systemic concepts and the importance of building secure attachment relationships between parents and their children. Training also needs to take into consideration the new reality of migration and the importance of training in cultural diversity and must be part of the continuous professional development of all those working with parents and their children. It should start with the training of the trainers themselves. This would necessitate a substantial increase in Government expenditure.
• Outreach services which involve the whole system rather than only mothers should be implemented. These should include home visits which have the potential to reach parents who are living on the margins of society and may not come forward and make use of the services available.

• A computerised system that would include basic information about the clients’ access to the various services would avoid fragmentation and foster better coordination of services between professionals. Such a system needs to be set up in conformity with regulations stipulated by the Data Protection Authority.

7.0 Putting it into Practice

In this section the various policy initiatives are highlighted:

• The health setting has an important role to play in this, not only with passing on key messages about positive parenting, but also with regard to its great opportunities to be in touch with parents. Empirical research in the local context (Borg Xuereb, 2008) recommends the implementation of a holistic approach to preparation for parenthood, which would take into account not only the relationship between the parent and child (the bonding), but also the relationship between the parents. Ideally, this should start happening at antenatal care within Parent Craft courses.

• The Perinatal Clinic needs to be better resourced in order to help parents who are exhibiting psychiatric problems. Practitioners who are specialized in parent-infant psychotherapy can play a very important role in supporting the parents, helping them in their parenting and enhancing the parent-infant relationship (Barlow et al., 2010). Caruana (2013) reflected that whilst a lot of valuable work was being carried out with the mother, the infant’s wellbeing, attachment with its mother and/or coparent, was sidelined.

• More specialised attention can also be given through postnatal visits and the Well Baby Clinics. In fact, alongside monitoring physical development, staff such as health visitors or nurses, or even graduate psychologists could be trained in observing other aspects of the child’s development, as well as the parents’ wellbeing and the parenting experience. In the case of babies with a difficult temperament, more could be done to support parents to help regulate the baby’s emotional well-being.

• Moreover, the booklet used at the Well Baby Clinic that records the baby’s weight and vaccinations can be developed into an important tool that would also look into and record other important developmental aspects of the child as well as the parents.

• Of great importance is reaching those who require specialised attention early on. Outreach should take place in the case of those parents who do not visit the Well Baby Clinics or paediatricians in private practice. Referrals to other services such as the Perinatal Clinic, the Department of Social Services, FSWS, the Family Resource Centres and others including NGOs are to be made where needed.
• As children grow, childcare centres and the school setting become important settings that could have a crucial role in identifying further difficulties, offering relevant support and outreach. These would include the school medical services, and the psychosocial services, that whilst already instrumental in the work they carry out, are still not systemic in their approach. Implementing a family-based approach, where the whole family or system is empowered in order to be able to provide support to each other, is considered to be of utmost importance (Hughes, 2010). Some parents would benefit greatly from having the opportunity to attend self-help groups, thus being able to meet and speak with other parents (Abela, Farrugia, Casha et al., 2013).

• Schools are a gold mine that can be exploited to provide a wealth of opportunities and services to parents and families. These include parents whose relationship is distressed and who need support to be able to parent their children better, and parents from reconstituted families who need support to parent the children in their care. Parents may also need support as children grow older and want to individuate themselves from their parents especially in their teen years, and in situations where children exhibit behaviour usually diagnosed as ADHD. In all these situations, there is more need to focus on the coparenting relationship and the quality of the parents’ relationship with their children.

• Personal and Social Development (PSD) in schools should stress the importance of relationships. Sensitising children about parenting including preparation for parenthood is to be considered as a vital component that would enhance the quality and value of relationship education.

• Locally, the Child Guidance Clinic (CGC) deals mostly with problems of a psychiatric nature, whereas Appoġġ and Sedqa deal mostly with social problems. Both these agencies have long waiting lists and need more staff to give a more timely service to children and their parents. It is also being hoped that early interventive work with parents and their children will prevent a number of problems from escalating and this will reduce the number of children and families attending the above mentioned service.

• The treatment of adolescents with challenging behaviour needs to take place in a therapeutic community away from a psychiatric setting. A structured therapeutic programme with a preset finite duration would put the focus on the young persons, and their reintegration at school and with their family. Specialised foster care needs to be further developed to welcome those youngsters that cannot go back to their own families. Such a setting is similar to MultifunC in Norway which has had a very good track record in the Scandinavian countries.

• Specialized services; adoption and fostering services in particular need to develop further. The setting up of a Centre that would cater for Adoption and Fostering Services is highly recommended.

• The Family Court needs better support for children and their families. Abela, Farrugia, Casha, et al. (2013), Abela, Farrugia, Galea, et al. (2012), and Casha (2014) suggested that mediation services staff receive training in innovative mediation strategies. They also recommended strengthening the Office
of the Child Advocate as well as investing in helping professionals such as psychologists and family therapists trained in systemic work at the Family Court. Abela, Farrugia, Casha, et al. (2013) and Abela, Farrugia, Galea, et al. (2012) discussed the importance of giving a voice to the child during separation proceedings. The need for separating parents to receive parental education was addressed by both Abela, Farrugia, Galea, et al. (2012) and Casha (2014).

• There is nevertheless still a great need to offer other services within the community. Thus Aċċess Centres which are seen as hubs of social welfare services and Family Resource Centres can offer important and invaluable services at community level. Besides broadening the services offered, they can serve as the link between services in the community, thus avoiding duplication.

• The importance of the media in promoting good examples of early parenting cannot be underestimated. Advertising spots could include key parenting messages promoting positive parenting. Children themselves will be given an opportunity to make their voice heard on the parenting experience. Apart from religious organisations, faith groups, the voluntary sector, and agencies for children and families (such as Appoġġ) can also be actively involved in spreading similar key messages about parenting.

• Different modes of media should also be used in order to make literature connected to parenting accessible to a bigger number of families. This can be done through the creation of online, easy-access websites, parent blogs and e-magazines through which parents can discuss common concerns.

• Parenting programmes that focus not only on parental skills but also on the relationship between the parents and their relationship with the children should continue to be offered both by the Foundation for Social Work Services as well as in schools. Moreover given that many parents may find it difficult to timetable such courses in their busy schedules, such programmes can also be offered through the media. The successful outcomes abroad should augur well for running these courses on the media in our country (Morawska et al., 2011; Sanders et al., 2008).

• Given the important role grandparents play in the upbringing of their children, courses that specifically target grandparents should also be offered.

• A forum for children should be set up in primary and secondary schools whereby children would have the opportunity to express their views on their family and on society in general. This would require an administrative setup of trained teachers in order to facilitate discussions in such fora. Children’s views should be analyzed and utilized for policy development.
8.0 Making it Happen

- The setting up of a Task Force led by the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity which would also include key persons responsible for working with children and their parents in other Government departments (health, education and justice in particular) as well as academics who are specialized in this area from the University of Malta is called for, and could be one way of implementing the policy in a multisystemic way. The Task Force should take responsibility for the rolling out of the positive parenting policy. For this purpose clear terms of reference need to be laid out to the task force.

- Budgeting of each measure will be co-ordinated by the Task Force.

- A timeline is to be set for the various initiatives being proposed. The setting of the timeline will be the responsibility of the Task Force. Early intervention measures are to take priority.

- The DSWS together with academics from the Department of Family Studies within the Faculty for Social Wellbeing of the University of Malta as well as other experts would take responsibility to evaluate and monitor all services as part of an ongoing evidence-based practice, improving already existing settings to create more co-ordination and effectiveness amongst them.

8.1 Our Commitments

| Setting up of the Task Force - January 2015 |
| Media campaign |
| Training of professionals |
| Setting up of a computerised system |
| Policy initiatives in the social service setting |
| Policy initiatives in the health setting |
| Policy initiatives in the education setting |
| Policy initiatives in the justice system |
References


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