

Parental guidance – is it effective? A status of knowledge

Summary of

Foreldreveiledning – virker det? En kunnskapsstatus

Fafo-rapport 2016:29

This report presents a systematic review of literature on parental guidance as part of a strategy for intervention at an early stage. The guiding question has been how universally-oriented parental guidance works.

A distinction is commonly made between *universal* parental support aimed at most parents, *selective* parental support aimed at families that are at risk for one reason or another, and *indicative* parental support aimed at families that already have an established challenge. All of these can be seen as part of an “early efforts” strategy, meaning that they can all contribute to prevention and assistance at an early stage. The focus in this report is on parental support that is universal in its scope, i.e. which is intended to be a support for parents with no identified risk or challenge.

Our approach is founded on social science, and the report reviews parental support in the context of the Norwegian welfare state. We not only examine whether the different measures work, but also focus on how their degree of success can be measured. We argue that while examining whether a measure works is primarily a question of methodology, the question of how this is measured impacts on how these measures are developed and the political and administrative approach towards parental support. This leads us to the argument that what is measured and how it is measured is more than simply a question of methodology.

Parental support is about human relations, about the relationship between parents/care givers and children/youth, but also the relationship between the support providers (the agents of the welfare state) and the individual parent. Thus, the effects of parental support are also linked to questions of power, and the lines between the public and private spheres in a society.

The Norwegian summary provides a more thorough review of the report. This English summary is limited to key bullet points.

Parental guidance and support – a task for state authorities?

- Parental responsibility is clearly enshrined in international and national legislation. Notwithstanding, it is equally clear that public authorities have a responsibility to

safeguard the security and safety of children during their adolescence. The question is where to draw the line.

- This report takes a historic approach and illustrates that this line has been drawn and redrawn throughout Norwegian modern history.
- The increase in parental support measures today can be interpreted as *defamilisation* – where public efforts to support parents are seen as a way to undermine the position of the family in society. However, it can also be seen as *refamilisation* – where the public efforts are interpreted as a strategy to strengthen and support the family.
- Parental strategies do not evolve in a purely private vacuum. They are influenced by norms, clear societally rooted expectations on how to parent and how not to parent.
- Knowledge about child development and child-rearing is increasingly professionalized based on new knowledge in psychology and pedagogy. A key challenge is to deliver state-run parental support to an increasingly diverse parent population without converting certain social and cultural versions of what is good and right into universally applied norms.

Parental support aimed at most parents

- Norwegian parents are offered a range of different parental guidance programmes. Most of the programmes are developed to meet the challenges of families at risk. In our review, we address four programmes that are offered to parents with no pre-defined risks or challenges – programmes that are open to all parents. These are International Child Development Programme (ICDP), Circle of Security (COS), Marte Meo and The Incredible Years (IY). A thorough presentation is given in each programme.
- We have not identified any Norwegian studies that provide an overview of how widespread these programmes are, where they are offered and by whom, or how local authorities choose between the different programmes. As far as we know, no study has mapped the prevalence of the programmes, the number of Norwegian parents that have participated in such a programme, or the characteristics of those that have participated.
- The programmes offered to Norwegian parents have many similarities, but a main divide is between behaviour-based programmes and attachment programmes. The difference is discussed in this report.

Does parental guidance and support work?

- This question can be addressed by simply referring to the research conducted on the four aforementioned programmes. While some programmes have been subject to more scientific scrutiny than others, and while the quality of research conducted varies, most parental guidance programmes seem to work (with some exceptions). Parents report participation as a positive experience, and when measuring their parental capabilities studies generally find that they have in some way or another become better parents. Yet it must be stressed that the approaches, research designs and quality in this literature all vary.
- With regard to other measures such as home visits the general picture is that the experiences are good, but there is a lack of research that can prove above a reasonable doubt that these measures are effective.
- When reviewing the international and Norwegian studies, we have consistently found summaries that conclude that there is uncertainty with regard to evidence. This is linked to the fact that measuring effects from preventive measures such as parental support is a challenge. We argue that the focus on randomly controlled trials, which is currently seen as the ultimate test of effects within this field, should be complemented by other research designs.

How to measure effects with regard to parental support

- Measuring the success of parental guidance is complex. What defines a good parent is open to interpretation, which means that measuring improvement is not an exact science. These are normative questions, even though some principles are universal, such as the use of violence. There is also disagreement among professionals with regard to how to best provide parental advice.
- There is a drive towards measuring effects in this field. Not only with regard to parental guidance programmes, but also in other measures, such as home visits. Being able to show documented effects is in some contexts becoming the dominant factor when selecting the appropriate initiatives and methods.
- Evidence-based studies focusing on measurable results are important, but such studies also have their limitations. While they can identify isolated and measurable results, they are rarely able to provide knowledge on why the result occurred, or did not occur. Hence the focus when assessing parental guidance should not merely be on result studies, but on studies that focus on processes and outcomes more broadly.

A broader approach

- A common feature of both efficacy studies and experience-based studies is that the parents referred to are usually the mothers. Mothers dominate as respondents in surveys, in observations and as informants in interviews. This is often made explicit in the studies, but is rarely commented on. The impression is that there is an expectation that it is the mothers who participate in parental guidance, and that the absence of fathers in research only reflects the absence of fathers in the measures. This may well be the case, but this reinforces the astonishing absence of awareness that both mothers and fathers exist. This is remarkable given the amount of attention given to fathers in other welfare measures and in research on such initiatives.
- Optimal measures aimed at parents should take into account that there are both mothers and fathers, and that this may require special attention and organization of the universally-oriented measures. This also demonstrates that research into how the measures work should also be concerned that the parents are both mothers and fathers.

The report points out the need to address the different social and cultural backgrounds of today's parents. Some studies of parental guidance programmes highlight the experiences of immigrant parents and the meeting between the parent and instructor. They show that the experiences of parents with a minority background may differ from those with a majority background. However, this is rarely addressed in the literature on parental guidance and support measures.