



Tel:
Fax:

MID-WESTERN
HEALTH BOARD

19th March 2004

To: Cathaoirleach & Each Member Mid Western Health Board.

Report No: 19/04
Item No 7 on Agenda

REPORT FOR THE MEETING OF THE BOARD TO BE HELD ON 5th APRIL 2004

Report on the Mid-Western Health Board's Draft Parent Support Strategy

Dear Member,

Overall Aim

The aim of the Parent Support Strategy is to ensure that by 2010 every parent will have access to:

- A supportive network of other parents;
- Parenting supports at all stages of their children's development;
- Information and education to enhance their parenting skills and knowledge;
- Specialist supports where necessary;
- A forum to put forward their views on the development of parent support services.

Goals and Objectives

The main Strategic Goals are two-fold:

- All parents will have access to flexible, life-long parenting supports, and
- Parents' voices will be central to the development of quality parenting supports.

The Strategic Objectives are divided into five categories as follows:

- Develop Information on Parenting,
- Develop Parent Support Activities and Services,
- Develop a Dialogue with Parents,
- Develop Effective Structures for the Implementation of the Strategy,
- Develop Models of Good Practice.

The key Principles that will underpin the delivery of services are as follows:

- All supports enable parents to build on their own capacity for parenting;
- Supports are available to parents throughout their lives;
- Parent-to-parent peer support is the preferred method of providing generic parent support;

- Referral to specialist parent support services is available in addition to generic parent support for families that need such services;
- Parents have equal access to appropriate parenting supports;
- Parents are encouraged to actively participate in the development of policy and services;
- Priority is given to first time parents and parents with children under five years of age;
- Priority is given to developing integrated parent supports and promoting inter-agency co-operation;
- Service provision is responsive, inclusive, appropriate, holistic and non-stigmatising.

The Need for Parent Support

The National Children's Strategy, 2000 states: *"Parents want their children to have a happy and successful childhood and are quick to act to provide them with the things that will help them achieve this."* The future well being of society is dependent, to a large extent, on the ability of parents to care effectively for their children. Yet the commitment of parents to do their best for their children is frequently under-valued and parents' own need for support in caring for and nurturing their children is often not given adequate attention.

The volume and complexity of family-related concerns responded to by the Health Board has increased enormously in recent years. There has been a significant expansion in the range of child care and family support services available and changes in legislation have placed a higher level of responsibility on professionals to intervene in families as necessary. These developments in services reflect dramatic shifts in Irish society.

Significant changes in family life and wider society include:

- More mothers are in paid employment and employment rates for fathers remain high. This reduces opportunities for participating in informal support networks compared to opportunities for stay-at-home mothers and fathers. This leads to a greater demand for facilities and resources for child care outside the home;
- Parents are more likely to live in a community away from their extended family, reducing opportunities for informal support from family members;
- The increased diversification of family forms. In particular: more parents than ever before are parenting alone and have to cope with the pressures of bringing up children single-handed;
- Family breakdown is increasing, leading to fathers, in particular, having less contact with their children;
- Many families face problems of marginalisation or poverty that are an additional pressure on their health and well-being and that of their children;
- People often do not know their neighbours, hence are less likely to call on them for informal support.
- Parent –child relations are perceived to have shifted with implications for social cohesion.

Parent Support in Public Policy

Parent support is seen as one of a number of essential areas for building healthy families and communities and is increasingly emerging as a key focus of policy in Ireland. It has already become a well-established feature of public policy intervention in several other countries, notably the USA (for example, the Headstart Programme) and more recently, the UK (the Surestart initiative).

A number of national reports have helped give greater focus on family support and support to parents. These include *Strengthening Families For Life: Final Report of the Commission on the Family* (1998), Department of Social and Family Affairs; *Developing a Partnership with Families* (1998), Best Health for Children Project, National Conjoint Child Health Committee; *Investing in Parenthood to Achieve Best Health for Children: The Supporting Parents Strategy* (2002), Best Health for Children Project, National Conjoint Child Health Committee.

Mid West Parenting Initiative

This draft Parent Support Strategic Statement was drawn up by the Mid-West Parenting Initiative Committee. The Committee was made up of people with an interest and involvement in providing support for parents and were drawn from the health services and the community and voluntary sectors.

The committee undertook consultation with key stakeholders, carried out research reviewed literature, national policies and legislation.

Strategic Statement

This Strategic Statement is focused on the development of generic parent support as an effective early intervention strategy that will reduce the need for intensive specialist parent support interventions at a later date. It is recognised that there is a continuum of need for parent support, from generic supports that employ a preventive approach at one end, to specialised, intensive, problem-oriented support at the other end. While the core of this strategy is the development of generic parent supports, the Mid-Western Health Board is also committed to providing and further developing specialist, intensive, problem-oriented parent support services as needed.

This Strategy emphasises that in order to support parents effectively, generic interventions must recognise that parents are concerned with all areas of children's lives – their health, education, social, emotional and spiritual well-being. In this Strategic Statement, services are brought together from the perspective of 'parent support' rather than from the more frequent categorisations of child health, child welfare, family support, health promotion or community development. This requires the adoption of a holistic approach. Parents, state agencies and other interests need to work together to develop effective parent supports that transcend the usual structures of service provision.

The Mid-Western Health Board is well placed to drive the development and implementation of such a strategy given that the Board is vested with statutory responsibility for child protection, welfare and family support within the Child Care Act, 1991. Moreover, the Board has already active links with almost all new parents through post-natal and child health services.

The Strategy Statement examines the needs of parents for parent support and proposes a model of lifelong support – "from womb to tomb" - appropriate for responding to the various needs identified. It is envisaged that this model will be achieved in partnership with parents, communities and other agencies and key features will include:

- A universal approach, complemented by targeted actions;
- A positive preventive approach to family support;
- A developmental approach;
- A community-based approach, enabling flexible access to a range of supports;
- A crosscutting, co-ordinated approach.

The Strategy stresses that service provision will be based around both the life-cycle of children, for example, new-borns, infants, primary school-aged children, teenagers and adult children; and particular issues for parents, for example, breastfeeding, parenting children with addictions, parenting alone, separation/ divorce, parenting troubled/ troublesome children, parents experiencing abusive relationships, parents with literacy difficulties and parents experiencing illness.

Conclusion

The Health Board, consistent with its obligations under the Child Care Act 1991, will take the lead in relation to identifying needs, service planning, promoting inter-agency co-operation, service integration, research, evaluation, quality assurance and policy development. The development and provision of parent support by community and voluntary groups will be encouraged and facilitated by the Health Board.

Effective implementation of the Strategy will require investment in building strategic alliances with key stakeholders and the development of comprehensive review mechanisms. The importance of partnership, between statutory agencies and between the statutory sector and the community and voluntary sector, cannot be under-estimated especially given the need for a cross-cutting, developmental approach to providing parent support.

A Regional Co-ordinator for Parent Support and a Research and Information Officer have been appointed to assist in overseeing the implementation of parent support services in the Mid West.

Yours sincerely,

JAMES O GRADY
REGIONAL MANAGER
CHILDREN & DISABILITY SERVICES.