



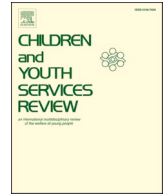
Provided by the author(s) and University of Galway in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite the published version when available.

Title	A social justice perspective on the delivery of family support
Author(s)	Devaney, Carmel; Mac Donald, Mandi; Holzer, Julia
Publication Date	2024-03-01
Publication Information	Devaney, Carmel, Mac Donald, Mandi, & Holzer, Julia. (2024). A social justice perspective on the delivery of family support. <i>Children and Youth Services Review</i> , 159, 107494. doi: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2024.107494">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2024.107494</a>
Publisher	Elsevier
Link to publisher's version	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2024.107494">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2024.107494</a>
Item record	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10379/18071">http://hdl.handle.net/10379/18071</a>
DOI	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2024.107494">http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2024.107494</a>

Downloaded 2024-05-19T23:32:39Z

Some rights reserved. For more information, please see the item record link above.





## A social justice perspective on the delivery of family support

Carmel Devaney<sup>a,\*</sup>, Mandi Mac Donald<sup>c</sup>, Julia Holzer<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Galway, Ireland

<sup>b</sup> University of Vienna, Austria

<sup>c</sup> Queens University Belfast, United Kingdom

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Family support  
Children  
Parents  
Social justice  
Europe  
Practice  
Policy

### ABSTRACT

Family support as an approach to working with children, youth, parents, and families is widely practiced across Europe albeit with a range of diverse meanings and interpretations. This paper responds to this ambiguity and provides a conceptual understanding of the delivery of family support in Europe. In doing so it applies a social justice approach critically examining the extent to which Family Support reflects the right of families, children, youth, and parents to be supported. It identifies and critically examines similarities and differences in the meaning and application of family support as a key concept in the European context. It is based on a comprehensive review of literature, mapping multi-disciplinary approaches to the provision of support, based on academic material from 2015 to 2020 and adopting a broad and inclusive definition of family. The paper considers the complexities in developing a universally accepted understanding of family support that: has value for practitioners and managers; is selected as a focus by policy makers; is open to evaluation and research; is compatible with academic research; and most importantly provides responsive and effective support to children, youth, parents and families.

### 1. Introduction

Family support is widely practiced across Europe as an approach to working with children, youth, parents, and families. Most family support (FS) interventions and programmes prioritise the welfare of the family as a means of promoting child well-being and development, recognising the significant impact the family and home environment have on this (Bulling and Berg, 2018; Littmarck et al., 2018; Devaney, 2017). It accepts that in the main parents and families are well intended and make every effort to ensure their children thrive and develop but can be challenged in this role due to individual or environmental factors. Overall, approaches to family support reflect a strong commitment to social justice and addressing the needs of families and children who are at risk or in uncertain situations in an aim to prevent social exclusion and promote equality of opportunity for all families and children (e.g., Devaney et al., 2013; Darra et al., 2020; Littmarck et al., 2018; Tunstill and Blewett, 2015). According to Rawls (1971), social justice is concerned with fair or just distribution of social primary goods in society. He suggested that social justice should be based on three principles. First, each person in society should be entitled to equal rights to basic liberty (the equal liberty or freedom principle). Second, social and

economic inequalities are unacceptable or unjustified unless they are arranged to the greatest benefits of the least advantaged (the difference principle). Closely related the third principle, refers to the equal opportunity principle which indicates that the differences or inequalities in society should be 'attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity' (p.302). Rawls's three principles of social justice have impacted on practitioners working for families and disadvantaged groups in society with an emphasis on upholding the principles of human rights, liberty and equal opportunity (Kam, 2014). Watts and Hodgson (2019) emphasise how social justice is seen as a core value of the efforts of practitioners from a wide range of disciplines working to support families. Cournoyer's (2014) explanation of different types of social justice also resonates with supporting families who are in need within their broader environment. He includes distributive justice (the fair and just distribution of a society's resources, opportunities and burdens), procedural justice (the fair and just means of decision-making in institutions, organisations and policies), retributive justice (fairness and justice associated with punishment and reparations for harm done to others), restorative justice (the repairing of damage done through compensation or rehabilitation), and intergenerational justice (the benefits or burdens left from one generation to

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [carmel.devaney@universityofgalway.ie](mailto:carmel.devaney@universityofgalway.ie) (C. Devaney), [m.macdonald@qub.ac.uk](mailto:m.macdonald@qub.ac.uk) (M. Mac Donald), [julia.holzer@univie.ac.at](mailto:julia.holzer@univie.ac.at) (J. Holzer).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2024.107494>

Received 20 May 2023; Received in revised form 18 December 2023; Accepted 15 February 2024

Available online 16 February 2024

0190-7409/© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

another). Many initiatives, services and programmes supporting families at an individual and wider contextual level are informed by, or directly based on one or more of these approaches to social justice (Devaney et al., 2013; Churchill et al., 2021). Family members are also increasingly included as key stakeholders in determining the most appropriate response to meeting their wide-ranging needs (Tierney et al., 2022). Aligned with these perspectives Kam (2014) suggests a way of keeping social justice as central to the mission and purpose of supporting families. The framework proposed by Kam includes: being informed and aware of what is happening at a social and political level; ensuring practice reaches the most disadvantaged and oppressed groups in society; using systems and person-in-environment theories and perspectives; recognising that many social and individual problems are the result of socially constructed forces; seeking change at the level of community and society, rather than merely focusing on the individual; and striving to achieve equality and human rights. However, this framework, whether delivered by practitioners trained in social work (as discussed by Kam) or other aligned and related disciplines, ensures a central focus on social justice priorities in the thinking about and doing of family support. Kam also notes the requirement for practitioners working with families to advocate on their behalf with the aim of achieving positive change and bringing about social justice (2014).

In their report on Social Justice in the EU and OECD, Hellmann, Schmidt, and Heller suggest that establishing social justice depends less on compensating for exclusion than it does on investing in inclusion (2019). Instead of an “equalizing” distributive justice or a simply formal equality of life chances, their concept of justice is concerned with guaranteeing each individual genuinely equal opportunities for self-realization through the targeted investment in the development of individual capabilities (p.131). Drawing upon Wolfgang Merkel’s conceptual and empirical groundwork (2001), the Report differentiates several dimensions for measuring the construct of social justice including poverty prevention, equitable education, labor market access, social inclusion and non-discrimination, intergenerational justice and health. With its broad reach and wide-ranging focus family support actively promotes these social justice dimensions at the level of the individual and the wider family unit.

The present paper applies a social justice approach by critically examining the extent to which family support reflects the rights of families, children, youth, and parents from various backgrounds and with diverse needs to be equally supported. In doing so, it systematically examines similarities and differences in the meaning and application of family support as a key concept in the European context. Based on a systematic literature review, it aims to derive inferences to achieve a shared understanding of family support that is inclusive, responsive, and effective in meeting the wide-ranging needs of diverse family forms across Europe. This contribution intends to enrich the evidence-based discourse on family support and provide valuable implications for policy, practice, and research across Europe for promoting equity and inclusion in the field of family support.

## 2. Methodology

This paper is based on a systematic review of academic literature carried out to understand how family support is conceptualised in the European context (Devaney et al., 2021). All authors of the present paper were involved in this review process which was carried out as part of the work of a formal Network working to enhancing the role of family support research, policy, and practice to promote children’s rights and family welfare (further detail will be provided if paper is accepted for publication). The Network is dedicated to enhancing the role of family support research, policy, and practice in order to promote children’s rights and family welfare, and partnership in practice. Under the auspices of [name] and funded by [name] scheme, the Network completed a four-year (2019–2023) programme of research and knowledge exchange activities.

Two overarching research questions informed the systematic review of research and literature which this paper is based upon: *What are the main conceptualisations of, and approaches to family support across Europe?* and *What are the main forms (types) and modalities (genres) of family support services delivered in European countries?* Three separate systematic literature searches were completed, firstly in March 2020 and updated in September 2020 and January 2021, all using the following social science databases: Academic Search Complete; EconLit; Education Full Text (H. W. Wilson); ERIC; International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS); Ovid Medline; PsycArticles (APA PsychNet); PsychINFO; Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection; Scopus; Social Sciences Citation Index; Social Sciences Full Text (H.W. Wilson); and SocINDEX. Search terms included family, child or parent in conjunction with key words such as ‘informal help’, ‘formal support’, ‘welfare’, ‘well-being’, ‘programme’, ‘modalities’ and ‘services’. The review included empirical research and discussions in the academic literature that: articulated a conceptual understanding or theoretical framing of family support; described a family support intervention or programme; or evaluated a family support intervention or programme. The review excluded papers that did not focus on children or young people and their parent/carer/family; papers that did not focus on Europe; papers written in a language other than English; papers published before 2015; and conference proceedings and dissertations. Following a systematic screening process (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005), as outlined in Fig. 1, a total of 82 peer-reviewed articles which conceptualised FS and FS services, provided theoretical, disciplinary or political perspectives on FS and discussed applications, limitations and complexities of the concept for research, policy and practice were included see (Devaney et al., 2021) for further details and the full literature review.

The systematic review revealed a range of differences and inconsistencies in conceptualisations of FS, posing a challenge for all stakeholders concerned with the delivery of FS. Two main strands for consideration emerged as underlying these differences: (1) whether FS is focused mainly on children, on parents, or involves the family unit as a whole, which is explored further by (see reference removed 2023), and (2) the underlying approach to social justice embedded in FS delivery. These considerations prompted us to critically re-examine the obtained conceptualisations of FS delivery in the European context with respect to these underlying issues. Having analysed the consequences for the involved stakeholders and the implementation of services when support and interventions are targeted at the child, the parents or at the family as a whole (Devaney et al., 2023), the present paper focusses on implications of underlying approaches to social justice in an attempt to infer assets to achieve a shared understanding of FS that is inclusive, responsive, and effective in meeting the needs of diverse families across Europe.

Section 3 presents selected findings from the literature review focusing on those themes that are particularly pertinent for considering whether, and to what extent, the way Family Support is conceptualised in European literature reflects a social justice approach.

## 3. Findings – Thematic review of the literature

### 3.1. Purpose and aims of family support

Family support is broadly recognized as an approach to assist parents and family members with their role in safeguarding children and promoting their well-being (Hidalgo et al., 2018; Rác & Bogács, 2019). Accordingly, most FS interventions and programmes are based on the principle of the well-being of the family as a prerequisite of child well-being (Bulling and Berg, 2018; Littmarck et al., 2018). Family support thus aims to help parents create a stimulating environment for their children, based on the recognition that the family and home environment have an immediate and long-lasting impact on child well-being and development (Wilke et al., 2018). This may encompass a variety of interventions, ranging from information and advice to education and

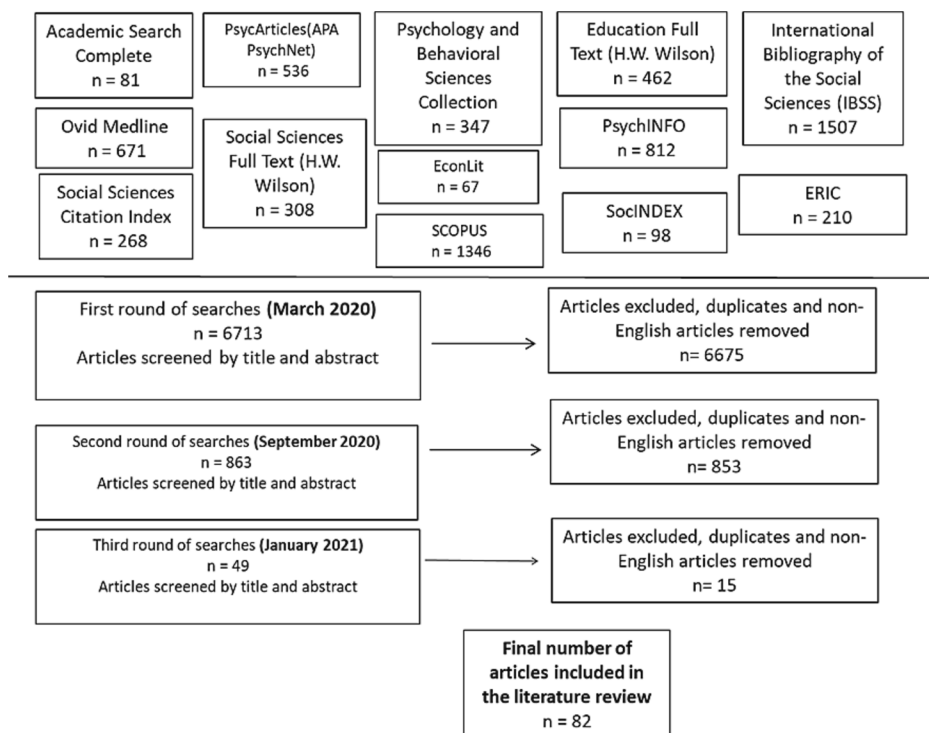


Fig. 1. Flowchart of the search and screening process.

training directed at caregivers to improve parental competence and self-efficacy (Álvarez et al., 2020; Daly et al., 2015; Knijn & Hopman, 2015; Lundqvist, 2015; Ivan et al., 2015; Tunstall & Blewett, 2015; Saunders et al., 2020), as well as approaches with a more holistic focus on family well-being and functioning (Roberts, 2015; Franco et al., 2017; Rácz & Bogács, 2019).

Ultimately, approaches to FS reflect a strong tendency towards social justice, highlighting the needs of families and children at risk or in precarious situations particularly, and emphasising prevention and social inclusion (Darra et al., 2020; Littmarck et al., 2018; Tunstall and Blewett, 2015; Roberts, 2015; Jiménez et al., 2019). Early interventions (including pre-birth) are highlighted as especially effective in reducing health and social inequalities and challenging the link between early disadvantage and poor future life chances (Darra et al., 2020; Franco et al., 2017). At the same time, however, there is criticism that an approach to social justice with a focus on precarity may lead to families with ‘average’ levels of need failing to meet service thresholds and missing out on support (Mc Gregor and Devaney, 2020a). Moreover, it must be considered that asymmetrical power relations are in place, with mainstream middle-class parenting norms are imposed on families in need (Jones et al., 2020), regardless of their individual backgrounds and realities. Accordingly, the following section will present and debate relationships between different stakeholders of FS, explicitly referring to the power relations in place, thus pointing out complexities and potential pitfalls within approaches to family support currently in place.

### 3.2. Relationships and power relations between stakeholders

In most European countries, family support is regarded as a social priority for government bodies, as it is considered to be a child welfare measure that can improve children’s health, educational outcomes, future prospects, and reduce social exclusion (Daly & Bray, 2015; Hidalgo et al., 2018). As a political agenda item and a solution to social and political problems, FS is defined by Littmarck et al. (2018) as a partnership between the state and individual family members, with the family unit being a crucial focus for social policy. Investment in FS to

achieve children’s optimal life chances viewed as means of reducing public costs and achieving economic and human gains. The authors also emphasize the importance of supporting parental responsibility, recognizing parents’ rights to make decisions for their children, enabling parents to be empowered, and acknowledging the child’s dependency on their family. Some authors question whether the individualization of social problems and placing the responsibility for child outcomes more fully on parents permits retraction of state-sponsored supports (Knijn and Hopman, 2015; Sundsbø and Sihvonen, 2018) with interventions disproportionately targeted to changing the behavior of individual families eclipsing the impact of structural inequalities (Jones et al., 2020).

Undoubtedly FS services are influenced by a country’s welfare orientation and the relationship between the family and the state, with the prevailing political climate shaping the orientation towards social justice and implementation of services provided (Zakirova et al., 2016; Hall et al., 2015). This also includes orientations towards either social care or social control (Churchill & Sen, 2016). Relatedly, family support intersects with legislative duty, for example in terms of mandated support for families or children in need at risk (Nethercott, 2017).

Both conceptually and practically family support is closely aligned with child protection. McGregor and Devaney have challenged a tendency to present child protection and family support as two individual strands and noted that almost every country in the world is in some way attempting to work out this relationship between the two tasks (2020a, p. 283). Coining the concept of ‘protective- support and supportive- protection’ they highlight that by supporting parents and wider family units we protect children and that in order to protect children we need to support parents and families. Furthermore, the authors critique the notion of thresholds for various levels of intervention and suggest a more nuanced model to capture the complexities of family realities, particularly for families who present with high levels of need and concerns for child safety. Recognising there needs to be more work done in the conceptualisation of the relationship between FS and child protection that reflects the complexity and reality of child and family needs and risks they expand the ‘Hardiker’ tiered model (Hardiker Exton and

Barker, 1991, p. 284) of support provision (i.e., universal, targeted to specific need, targeted to safeguarding children at risk, intensive forensic intervention) to present a novel way of thinking about support for families in the middle tiers of this continuum. Significantly, this approach aims to ensure that children and families, no matter [at] what point they come into contact with “the system” or “the state”, are responded to in a manner that promotes strengths, offers partnership working, supports while it asserts and prosecutes as needed to protect. They further highlight that this requires 1) governmental and societal commitment to properly resourcing supports for children and families, and 2) reorientation of all aspects of child welfare work towards the core principle of child-centred practice and the principles of strengths, partnership, and a commitment to promoting rights, supporting families and protecting children in circumstances where this is not happening within their own natural systems. This strengthens the argument that FS needs to be provided to all families across the levels of need they are experiencing and that it can make a positive difference across this continuum of need (McGregor and Devaney, 2020b; Devaney, 2017). Supporting this viewpoint, Brady et al. (2018) suggest that FS services are not homogenous, and that support strategies rely on the existence of a range of services that will help families to attend to the care and protection needs of their children when statutory intervention from child-protection services is neither appropriate nor necessary.

### 3.3. Family support as an educative intervention

Conceptualized as either collaborative, empowering, or governing, FS is often understood as an educative intervention (Ostner and Stolberg, 2015), equipping parents with knowledge and skills to support their children’s wellbeing (Ponzoni, 2015). Parental education is premised on a set of universally valid parenting competencies, drawing on evidence-informed approaches to child development and positive parenting (Freijo and López, 2018). Education can be universalist assisting all parents to recognize and meet children’s needs (Littmarck et al., 2018) or more intensively focused on addressing specific parenting practices that may contribute to child difficulties (Saunders et al., 2020). Scrutiny of parental behavior, however, risks inhibiting parental autonomy and confidence (Ivan et al., 2015) with families feeling pressurized to parent correctly (Ostner and Stolberg, 2015) in accordance with the, sometimes changeable, guidance of experts (Ramaekers and Suissa, 2012) or aligned to class-based cultural norms (Jones et al., 2020). However, increasing parents’ child-rearing resources involves more than knowledge and skills and authors emphasize the importance of improving parental access to social resources (Knijn and Hopman, 2015) and strengthening their social networks and increasing social integration (Daly, 2015; Lundqvist, 2015). Some authors also give attention to parents’ internal resources such as improved parental aspirations, self-esteem, sense of competence, self-efficacy, and stress reduction (Daly et al., 2015; Tunstill and Blewett, 2015; Álvarez et al., 2020). Family support can, therefore, range from universal information and advice to targeted education and training (Ivan et al., 2015); from personal counselling to community interventions aimed at reducing social isolation (Daly, 2015).

Ultimately, how the relationship between families and family support providers and policymakers is conceptualized has implications for service delivery. While the word ‘support’ implies needs-led engagement, in practice FS can entail interventions to address expert-identified parenting deficits (Daly & Bray, 2015). Thus, there is a tension identified in the literature between controlling approaches to parental behavior-change, and strengths-focused partnership working that seeks to empower parents in their role (Join-Lambert, 2016). Empowerment approaches offer support based on voluntary engagement, harnessing parents’ agency for change, establishing shared goals and decision-making, and respecting parents’ perspectives (Sen, 2016) with a balance of power between professionals and parent (Ponzoni, 2015) that recognizes parents as experts and active participants in meeting their

children’s needs (Damen et al., 2020). Rodrigo (2016) describes an empowerment approach to FS as a strengths-focused approach to promoting parental capacities and increasing self-confidence by means of a collaborative alliance with a range of community services. Even within a collaborative approach, Van Houte et al. (2015) identify the ‘instrumental understanding of partnership, stressing the importance of parental involvement for the realisation of the desired outcomes of professional interventions’ (p.122). These are important distinctions to consider both in terms of the delivery and most significantly the acceptance and use of FS interventions or initiatives by family members.

### 3.4. Family support provision along a continuum of need

Diverse forms and modalities of universal and targeted service provision are evident in the literature available across the European context. This is overall a positive approach as according to Hidalgo et al. (2018) the need to attune interventions to specific needs has led to a significant diversification of family support services thereby ensuring a responsiveness to family form and circumstance. Churchill and Sen (2016) demonstrate an emphasis on ‘whole-family support’ and ‘family-centred practice’ where services aim to engage parents, children, young people and broader family and social networks to address intergenerational and multiple needs and adversities. In Family Support, the forms and modalities of service provision can vary reflecting the diversity of families who present with a wide range of needs and complex circumstances. These diverse and flexible forms of provision have implications for service planning, delivery and the outcomes for families who engage with the service.

Three broad types of responsive needs-based FS are identified (Join-Lambert, 2016). These include informal, semi-formal and formal support, the first being provided by extended family, friends and neighbours; the second by the neighbourhood-based and voluntary sector; and the third by professionals working in the universal and targeted services. The approach to and arrangements for FS within the European context varies, as do the forms and modalities of provision, and access to services. Connolly and Devaney (2017) note that families often access their own naturally occurring informal supports to cope; this has been found an effective form of early intervention and prevention. Since this approach means something different for each family, this approach can be viewed as an overarching measure suitable for all families, regardless of membership to social classes or life realities, without imposing potentially inappropriate mainstream norms. Thus, it is important that informal and formal sources of support be recognised and included in the planning of services. Similarly, Sheppard (2009) cautioned that service managers and practitioners must be cognisant of and promote the efforts families make and the resources they avail of before coming in contact with formal services. Melo and Alarcão (2015) also highlight the value of informality and relationships as vehicles of human change and the value of involving the community in the process of building actions and interventions. Churchill and Sen (2016) describe FS in a wider sense, as a range of formal services targeted at children, young people, parents and families, with an alternative conception of ‘family support’ as a ‘continuum of service provision’ suggested by the authors. According to Sen (2016), family support focuses on voluntary engagement, harnessing parents’ agency for change and establishing shared goals. This is achieved through clear communication about what needs to change, while still respecting the parents’ perspectives on their circumstances.

Most countries reviewed have tiered access criteria based on distinct levels along a continuum of need, within which access is not universal but linked to some kind of recognised disadvantage. Mc Gregor and Devaney (2020a) argue that, as a result, children of ‘families in the middle’, those classified as ‘in need’ but not ‘at risk’, with an ‘average’ level of need are often at most risk of not receiving the support they need in a timely and appropriate manner. Their needs cannot be responded to effectively by general universal services yet are not resulting in sufficient



risk to children for their inclusion in the targeted services focussed on responding to particular identified issues and concerns.

#### 4. Discussion – A social justice perspective on delivering family support

The delivery of FS is strongly influenced by the aspiration to reduce social inequalities (e.g., [Darra et al., 2020](#); [Litt Marck et al., 2018](#); [Tunstill and Blewett, 2015](#)). This reflects a strong tendency towards a social justice approach to FS which recognizes the importance of addressing the needs and rights of all families, children, youth, and parents, regardless of their background or circumstances, as resonating with influential theories of social justice, including the three basic principles of social justice as proposed by Rawls (1971). Also, more recent frameworks, such as those applied by the EU and OECD, emphasize a commitment to inclusion within a wider effort to create a more just society by addressing systemic inequalities through tailored policies ([Hellmann, Schmidt, and Heller, 2019](#)). However, the literature also shows how inconsistently a social justice approach to FS is currently realised, with a discourse characterised by controversial debates. These relate, for example, to the fact that invoking a continuum of need may lead to families with 'average' need 'flying under the radar' of services ([Mc Gregor and Devaney, 2020a](#)), or to middle-class parenting norms being imposed on families at need ([Jones et al., 2020](#)). To systematise the debate on FS support and its relation to social justice, the following discussion will reflect upon the complexities in developing a universally accepted understanding of a social justice approach to the delivery of FS. Considering the interdependent relationships between the stakeholders of FS, as well as the complexities of service provision resulting from their different needs and perspectives, we discuss a way of conceptualising FS provision that (a) has value for practitioners and managers; (b) is selected as a focus by policy makers; (c) is open to evaluation and research; (d) is compatible with academic research; and (e) provides responsive and effective support to children, youth, parents and families. This is intended to contribute to the discourse on how family support may contribute to greater equity and inclusion, while also highlighting concrete practical implications to provide policymakers, practitioners, and academics with suggestions for the further co-development of family support as an approach to social justice.

##### 4.1. Has value for practitioners and managers

Family support represents a transdisciplinary field made up of practices and knowledge from different areas, theories and approaches ([Herrera-Pastor et al., 2020](#)). It can be provided by a range of practitioners working with families with varying levels of need to respond to those needs in a timely and considered manner ([Frost et al., 2015](#); [Churchill and Fawcett, 2016](#)). This in turn means that practitioners and managers need a broad range of expertise that is not confined to one discipline, as well as the ability to recognise and respond to a wide range of distinct needs. This is the prerequisite for FS to respond proactively and flexibly to different needs, deviating from a uniform approach based on formal equality, as discussed in their report on social justice in the EU and OECD by [Hellmann, Schmidt, and Heller \(2019\)](#). In this respect, [Devaney \(2011\)](#) and [Devaney and Dolan \(2017\)](#) emphasise a core set of characteristics fundamental to the provision of family support, i.e., (1) a knowledge and skill base (2) a particular style and orientation for practice and service delivery, and (3) the use of reflective practice and supervision. To adequately and expertly compensate for the disruption to the functions of a family unit as explained above, practitioners must be informed and knowledgeable in a suite of relevant social support theories (for e.g., attachment, social support, resilience, social ecology and social capital). An understanding and appreciation of the issues involved in realising children's rights and upholding their social justice is also required within the knowledge base of practitioners. Knowing the theories and issues involved, however, is not enough to deliver high

quality family support. Practitioners must also have the skills and 'know-how' to apply them in their chosen practice context and with each child and family they are charged with helping. In this context, it is crucial that support does not invertedly apply middle-class norms by default ([Jones et al., 2020](#)) but is able to react sensitively to different realities of life. This versatility and cultural competence are integral components of effective family support in line with principles of social justice. Training in the named theories and perspectives, along with the regular use of a model of reflective practice and good quality supervision is required to develop these skills and the 'know how'. This training is necessary both prior to commencing to practice in children and families' services and as part of ongoing in-service professional development. The manner in which a practitioner goes about his or her business is also a core characteristic of family support practice. Adopting a non-judgmental approach in how practitioners interact with the children and families they are working with portrays a respect for the human being and exemplifies the value base from which family support developed. It needs to be acknowledged that tensions between controlling and empowerment approaches may exist not only between FS interventions, but also within them, especially when defining a broad target group. This, in turn, entails increasing complexity for the provider role, who are challenged to balance control and empowerment. In particular, the approach to FS as educative intervention underlines yet again how politically defined concepts of FS, and the socio-culturally shaped definition of ideal family functioning affect the ways FS is dealt with. It also raises questions about the role of FS services and providers in governing family life and who holds the authority to define desired outcomes or approaches to parenting and practice. Moreover, a key aspect of socially just family support practice is to not only address existing problems, but to actively prevent social exclusion and promote equality of opportunity for all families and children (e.g., [Darra et al., 2020](#); [Littmarck et al., 2018](#); [Tunstill and Blewett, 2015](#)).

##### 4.2. Value for policy makers

FS as a child welfare measure represents a social priority for government bodies in most European countries ([Hidalgo et al., 2018](#)). However, different political ideologies, particularly regarding the relationship between family and state, influence the approach to family support ([Littmarck et al., 2018](#)). Thus, family support intersects with legislative duty, for example in terms of mandated support for families or children at risk (e.g., [Nethercott, 2017](#)). Relatedly, political ideologies may have a direct impact on serving the needs of social groups that receive less or more focus and/or are viewed more positively or negatively by mainstream politics. This is for example reflected, in the latest EU and OECD report on social justice, which points out how in some countries, where a traditional family image dominates, governments hinder the implementation of equality and inclusion in relation to the rights of women, migrants, refugees, ethnic and religious minorities, as well as members of the LGBTQ+ community ([Hellmann, Schmidt, and Heller, 2019](#)). Accordingly, ideological attitudes may hinder ways of adequately supporting vulnerable groups and maintain social inequalities. Implementing solutions in such contexts requires nuanced approaches based on a broad and inclusive view of family. One option might be to advocate for policies and practices that are grounded in evidence-based strategies and emphasize the inherent value of diversity and inclusion. Collaboration between various stakeholders, including advocacy groups, policy makers and community spokespeople, is critical to bridging ideological divides. In addition, emphasizing economic and societal benefits of inclusion and equity could resonate across political ideologies and create common ground for implementing policies to achieve equitable outcomes. These relate, for instance, to the achievement of goals such as children's health, educational outcomes and future prospects as well as reducing social exclusion ([Daly & Bray, 2015](#); [Littmarck et al., 2018](#)). So, while FS is a matter for families themselves, practitioners, managers, and scholarship, it is nonetheless a matter of

policy makers who are responsible for steering services and accountable for the achievement of outcomes. Ultimately, conceptualisations of FS that are not in line with the inherent logic of policy have less chance of being rolled out or scaled up more broadly. Based on the outlined operating principles of policy makers in the field of FS, we argue that the delivery of FS must be conceptualised in such a way that it formulates goals in such a way that they (a) evade day-to-day political debates as much as possible, and (b) represent tangible, evaluable goals, in line with a broader scope of non-contestable public policy objectives such as the promotion of health and education among all members of society. Relatedly, we point out below the advantages of FS being accessible for evaluation and research.

#### 4.3. Accessibility for evaluation and research

The principles of social justice emphasize the right for all individuals, especially marginalized or disadvantaged groups, to access effective support (e.g., Kam, 2014; Hellmann, Schmidt, and Heller, 2019). Evaluating and researching the provision of FS can thus be a crucial factor in the promotion of social justice, offering a systematic approach to ensuring that services are both effective and equitable in addressing diverse needs. Moreover, scientifically evaluating the effectiveness of FS programs holds critical importance for all stakeholders involved. It is the basis to determine whether a programme is achieving its intended goals and objectives and may thus empower practitioners and managers to pinpoint elements that may require adjustments to better meet families' diverse needs. At the policy level, evaluation is a means to monitor the efficient and effective use of public funds, to justify a programme's value for money towards funders, decision makers and the general public. Finally, evaluation in terms of formative evaluation allows for continuous improvement of FS delivery (Janus & Brinkman, 2010). We argue, that if evaluation represents an integral element of any conceptualisation of FS, programmes constantly evolve to better meet the potentially changing needs of the diverse families it serves.

In order to make evaluation an integral part of conceptualisations of FS, several practical issues need to be considered. Typically, the desire to evaluate programmes or interventions arises in the context of programme termination (for notable exceptions see for example Kalleson et al., 2020; Saunders et al., 2020). Accordingly, programme evaluation is usually carried out retrospectively, e.g., by asking clients about their experiences related to the programme. Smaller, local programmes developed by resident practitioners are often not evaluated at all (Ghate, 2018). However, this not only limits the potential of improving ongoing processes, but also notably restricts the methodologic potential of scientific evaluation (e.g., carrying out longitudinal research designs, see for example Saunders et al., 2020). Therefore, scientific evaluation must be considered right from the beginning in terms of any attempt to the delivery of FS being conceptualised in a way that it incorporates the features necessary to carry out an evaluation. First, this relates to clearly defined goals and specific targets to be addressed by FS delivery. These determine what constructs are to be captured within an evaluation's research design. Second, scientific evaluation requires hypotheses about causal chains in terms of a theory of change model (e.g., Ghate, 2018). In other words, it must be clear which assumptions about the relationship between programme elements and outcomes are expected to test them using scientific methodology. Third, FS delivery should incorporate the elements relevant for evaluation in their schedule. This may include obtaining data from families regarding relevant areas of family functioning before the actual intervention takes place to establish a baseline for detecting programme effects (see for example Gollwitzer & Jäger, 2014).

Finally, it must be acknowledged that current conceptualisations of the delivery of FS are primarily practitioner-developed or originate from academic and political contexts, which may fail to consider the active participation of family members. Given that families who need support often come from backgrounds that are vastly different from academic

and political contexts, it is significant to undertake scientific evaluations that determine whether FS delivery meets the needs of families from different socio-economic backgrounds (see also section 'value for practitioners and managers'). In this respect, considering mixed methods in research becomes essential. Involving families through participation in the scientific process could enable them to actively contribute to defining needs and formulating research questions. This resonates with the approach to increasingly include family members as key stakeholders in determining the most appropriate response to meeting their wide-ranging needs (Tierney et al., 2022).

#### 4.4. Compatibility with scientific evidence

The call for an evidence-based approach to FS provision is unmistakable in the literature (e.g., Brady et al., 2018; Freijo & López, 2018; Hidalgo et al., 2018). However, as Ghate (2018) points out, there is a duality between evidence-based and 'home-grown' approaches to FS. One point in this debate relates to the fact that programs developed from the field by local practitioners are closer to the needs in their respective social contexts. However, the fact that bottom-up designed programs are also more likely to be accepted by stakeholders and implementers (Ghate, 2018) has the downside that any available scientific evidence remains unused. Moreover, if respective programs are not carefully documented and implemented, they remain inaccessible to scientific evaluation and future programmes to be designed based on lessons learned. Ultimately, policy makers who are faced with the decision of whether to continue funding measures or to roll out programs have no basis for justifying their decision and future programmes.

The duality of so-called grassroots programmes and evidence-based programmes as developed in academic contexts reflects not least a social phenomenon according to which an increasing scepticism of science is building up in many European countries (Eurobarometer, 2021). From a social justice perspective, therefore, we argue that compatibility with academic research in the context of FS delivery does not imply a bring debt on the part of practitioners to align programmes wherever possible with scientific knowledge, but also that academics be sensitised to the dissemination and transfer of scientific knowledge into practice and to different levels of society. In this vein, it is necessary to broaden the understanding of and for scientific evidence. Recognizing the value of different research methods (such as qualitative and participatory approaches, see above) stands in line with social justice aspirations, as they ensure that marginalized voices and experiences are heard and considered in the evaluation and further development of FS. Therefore, a comprehensive approach to evidence-based FS incorporates diverse methods and recognizes their contributions in advancing FS for social justice.

### 5. Conclusion - responsiveness and effectiveness in supporting children, youth, parents and families

From our review of the literature, it is apparent that conceptualisations of Family Support across Europe reflect a strong tendency towards social justice, with an emphasis on social inclusion particularly for families and children in precarious situations. However, the way power relations between stakeholders are recognised and managed, and how support provision is filtered through tiered access criteria present complexities for service providers, practitioners and policy makers, even when a social justice orientation is adopted. To provide effective family support services, we have argued for the relevance of its value for practitioners and managers as well as policy makers, for its accessibility to evaluation and research and compatibility with scientific evidence. Thus, effective delivery of family support for social justice requires a comprehensive and evidence-based approach. This will ensure a steadfastness in the provision of family support ensuring its availability despite the ongoing situation of poly-crisis across Europe and the associated controversy or budget cut. Albeit it encompasses different

perspectives; this includes a range of stakeholders engaging in joint efforts to develop effective strategies to meet the diverse needs of families to be served. Only in this way can the expertise and specialisms of all stakeholders and sectors effectively be combined and co-ordinated to ensure responsive and effective service provision to all families who need it. Such distribution is reliant on the steering power and the allocation of resources at the policy level by those who provide the basis for a (re-)distribution of societal resources and a commitment to this approach and these families by those who implement the policies and spend the resources. Service managers ultimately dictate the day-to-day efforts and priorities in their services (in the statutory, community and voluntary sectors) and therefore are instrument in releasing a social justice approach to the delivery of family support.

## Funder

This article is based upon work from COST Action CA18123 The European Family Support Network, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology). [www.cost.eu](http://www.cost.eu).

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Carmel Devaney:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.  
**Mandi Mac Donald:** Conceptualization. **Julia Holzer:** Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

## References

- Álvarez, M., Byrne, S., & Rodrigo, M. J. (2020). Patterns of individual change and program satisfaction in a positive parenting program for parents at psychosocial risk. *Child & Family Social Work, 25*(2), 230–239. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12678>
- Arksey, H., & O'Malley, L. (2005). Scoping studies: Towards a methodological framework. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 8*(1), 19–32.
- Brady, E., Holt, S., & Whelan, S. (2018). Measuring success in family support services. *Child Care in Practice, 24*(4), 351–368. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2017.1299113>
- Bulling, I. S., & Berg, B. (2018). "It's our children!" Exploring intersectoral collaboration in family centres. *Child & Family Social Work, 23*(4), 726–734. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12469>
- Churchill, H., & Fawcett, B. (2016). Refocusing on Early Intervention and Family Support: A Review of Child Welfare Reforms in New South Wales, Australia. *Social Policy and Society, 15*(2), 303–316. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746416000038>
- Churchill, H., & Sen, R. (2016). Introduction: Intensive family support services: Politics, policy and practice across contexts. *Social Policy and Society, 15*(2), 251–261. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746416000026>
- Connolly, N., & Devaney, C. (2017). Parenting Support: Policy and Practice in the Irish Context. *Child Care in Practice, 24*(1), 15–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2016.1264365>
- Daly, M. (2015). Introduction: Parenting support in European countries: A complex development in social policy. *Social Policy and Society, 14*(4), 593–595. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746415000317>
- Daly, M., & Bray, R. (2015). Parenting support in England: The bedding down of a new policy. *Social Policy and Society, 14*(4), 633–644. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279419000370>
- Daly, L., Sharek, D., DeVries, J., Griffiths, C., Sheerin, F., McBennett, P., & Higgins, A. (2015). The impact of four family support programmes for people with a disability in Ireland. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities, 19*(1), 34–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744629514564584>
- Damen, H., Veerman, J. W., Vermulst, A. A., Westerdijk, I., & Scholte, R. H. J. (2020). Parental Empowerment and Child Behavioral Problems in Single and Two-Parent Families During Family Treatment. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 29*(10), 2824–2835. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-020-01795-1>
- Darra, S., Ward, M. R., Jones, C., & Jones, S. (2020). Young parents' experiences of a multi-agency young families project: Findings from a co-produced study. *Children and Youth Services Review, 105*146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105146>
- Devaney, C. (2011). *Family Support as an Approach to Working with Children and Families in Ireland*. Lap Lambert Publishing.
- Devaney, C. (2017). Promoting children's welfare through family support. In P. Dolan, & N. Frost (Eds.), *A global reader in child welfare* (pp. 99–109). London: Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Handbook-of-Global-Child-Welfare/DolanFrost/p/book/9781138942752>.
- Devaney, C., & Dolan, P. (2017). Voice and meaning: The wisdom of Family Support veterans. *Child & Family Social Work, 22*, 10–20.
- Devaney, C., Canavan, J., Landy, F., & Gillen, A. (2013). *What works in family support? UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre*. University of Galway.
- Devaney, C., Christiansen, Ø., Holzer, J., MacDonald, M., Matias, M., Piessens, A., Salamon, E., Kealy, C. (2021). The conceptualisation and delivery of family support in Europe: A review of academic literature. [www.eurofamnet.eu](http://www.eurofamnet.eu).
- Devaney, C., Christiansen, Ø., Holzer, J., MacDonald, M., Matias, M., & Salamon, E. (2023). Child, parent or family? Applying a systemic lens to the conceptualisations of Family Support in Europe. *European Journal of Social Work, 26*(2), 335–347.
- Eurobarometer. (2021). *European citizens' knowledge and attitudes towards science and technology*. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2237>.
- Franco, V., Melo, M., Santos, G., Apolónio, A., & Amaral, L. (2017). A national early intervention system as a strategy to promote inclusion and academic achievement in Portugal. *Frontiers in psychology, 8*, 1137. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01137>
- Freijo, S. E. B., & López, R. M. J. (2018). Positive parenting in Spain: Introduction to the special issue. *Early Child Development and Care, 188*, 1503–1513. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2018.1501565>
- Frost, N., Abbott, S., & Race, T. (2015). *Family support: Prevention, early intervention and help*. Wiley.
- Ghate, D. (2018). Developing theories of change for social programmes: Co-producing evidence-supported quality improvement. *Palgrave Communications, 4*(1), 90. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0139-z>
- Gollwitzer, M., & Jäger, R. S. (2014). *Evaluation kompakt* (2nd ed.). Beltz.
- Hardiker, P., Exton, K., & Barker, M. (1991). The social policy contexts of prevention in child care. *British Journal of Social Work, 21*(4), 341–359. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.bjsw.a055771>
- Herrera-Pastor, D., Frost, N., & Devaney, C. (2020). Understanding contemporary Family Support: Reflections on theoretical and conceptual frameworks. *Social Work and Social Sciences Review, 21*(2), 27–45. <https://doi.org/10.1921/swssr.v21i2.1420>
- Hall, J., Eisenstadt, N., Sylva, K., Smith, T., Sammons, P., Smith, G., & Hussey, D. (2015). A review of the services offered by English Sure Start Children's Centres in 2011 and 2012. *Oxford Review of Education, 41*(1), 89–104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2014.1001731>
- Hidalgo, V., Pérez-Padilla, J., Sánchez, J., Ayala-Nunes, L., Maya, J., Grimaldi, V., & Menéndez, S. (2018). An analysis of different resources and programmes supporting at-risk families in Spain. *Early Child Development and Care, 188*(11), 1528–1539. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2018.1491560>
- Ivan, G., Da Roit, B., & Knijn, T. (2015). Children first? Changing attitudes toward the primacy of children in five European countries. *Journal of Family Issues, 36*(14), 1982–2001. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X13519255>
- Janus, M., & Brinkman, S. (2010). Evaluating Early Childhood Education and Care Programs. In *International Encyclopedia of Education* (pp. 25–31). Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-044894-7.01197-0>
- Jiménez, L., Antolín-Suárez, L., Lorence, B., & Hidalgo, V. (2019). Family education and support for families at psychosocial risk in Europe: Evidence from a survey of international experts. *Health & Social Care in the Community, 27*(2), 449–458. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.12665>
- Join-Lambert, H. (2016). Parental involvement and multi-agency support services for high-need families in France. *Social Policy and Society, 15*(2), 317–329. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746415000706>
- Jones, D., Lowe, P., & West, K. (2020). Austerity in a disadvantaged West Midlands neighbourhood: Everyday experiences of families and family support professionals. *Critical Social Policy, 40*(3), 389–409. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018319840923>
- Kallesen, R., Jahnsen, R., & Østensjø, S. (2020). Empowerment in families raising a child with cerebral palsy during early childhood: Associations with child, family, and service characteristics. *Child: Care, Health and Development, 46*(1), 19–27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.12716>
- Knijn, T., & Hopman, M. (2015). Parenting support in the Dutch 'participation society'. *Social Policy and Society, 14*(4), 645–656. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746415000329>
- Littmarck, S., Lind, J., & Sandin, B. (2018). Negotiating Parenting Support: Welfare Politics in Sweden between the 1960s and the 2000s. *Social Policy and Society, 17*(3), 491–502. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746417000574>
- Lundqvist, Å. (2015). Parenting support in Sweden: New policies in old settings. *Social Policy and Society, 14*(4), 657–668. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746415000238>
- McGregor, C., & Devaney, C. (2020a). Protective support and supportive protection for families "in the middle": Learning from the Irish context. *Child and Family Social Work, 25*(2), 277–285. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12683>
- McGregor, C., & Devaney, C. (2020b). A framework to inform protective support and supportive protection in child protection and welfare practice and supervision. *Social Sciences, 9*(4), 43. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci9040043>
- Melo, A. T., & Alarcão, M. (2015). Building future communities: Strengthening relational bonds for a positive future. *Journal of Community Psychology, 43*, 878–884. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21718>



- Nethercott, K. (2017). The Common Assessment Framework form 9 years on: A creative process. *Child & Family Social Work*, 22(2), 751–761. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12292>
- Ostner, I., & Stolberg, C. (2015). Investing in children, monitoring parents: Parenting support in the changing German welfare state. *Social Policy and Society*, 14(4), 621–632. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746415000287>
- Ponzone, E. (2015). Reframing cooperation: Challenges in overcoming tensions between professional services and volunteer organizations providing parenting support in immigrant communities. *Social Service Review*, 89(1), 40–76. <https://doi.org/10.1086/680044>
- Rácz, A., & Bogács, E. (2019). Towards an integrative and inclusive child protection practice. *Journal of Regional Research*, 44(2), 143–160.
- Ramaekers, S., & Suissa, J. (2012). The Claims of Parenting. *Springer, Netherlands*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-2251-4>
- Roberts, L. (2015). Meeting children's needs within a family focused agenda: The case of support care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 53, 105–112. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2015.03.024>
- Rodrigo, M. J. (2016). Quality of implementation in evidence-based positive parenting programs in Spain: Introduction to the special issue. *Psychosocial Intervention*, 25(2), 63–68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psi.2016.02.004>
- Saunders, R., Brack, M., Renz, B., Thomson, J., & Pilling, S. (2020). An Evaluation of Parent Training Interventions in Scotland: The Psychology of Parenting Project (PoPP). *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 29(12), 3369–3380. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-020-01817-y>
- Sen, R. (2016). Building Relationships in a Cold Climate: A Case Study of Family Engagement within an 'Edge of Care' Family Support Service. *Social Policy and Society*, 15(2), 289–302. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746415000615>
- Sheppard, M. (2009). Social Support Use as a Parental Coping Strategy: Its Impact on Outcome of Child and Parenting Problems -A Six-Month Follow-Up. *British Journal of Social Work*, 39, 1427–1446.
- Tierney, E., Rodriguez, L., Kennan, D., Devaney, C., Brady, B., Canavan, J., ... McGregor, C. (2022). Children's participation in practice: comparing the views of managers and practitioners in an early intervention and prevention programme. *Journal of Children's Services*, 17(1), 73–93.
- Tunstall, J., & Blewett, J. (2015). Mapping the journey: Outcome-focused practice and the role of interim outcomes in family support services. *Child and Family Social Work*, 20(2), 234–243. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12073>
- Van Houte, S., Bradt, L., Vandenbroeck, M., & Bouverne-De Bie, M. (2015). Professionals' understanding of partnership with parents in the context of family support programmes. *Child & Family Social Work*, 20(1), 116–124. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12067>
- Wilke, F., Hachfeld, A., & Anders, Y. (2018). How is participation in parent-child-interaction-focused and parenting-skills-focused courses associated with child development? *Early Years*, 38(4), 411–428. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2017.1288089>
- Zakirova, V. G., Gaysina, G. I., & Raykova, E. (2016). Professional support for families in difficult life situations. *International Journal of Environmental and Science Education*, 11(5), 633–639. <https://doi.org/10.12973/ijese.2016.336a>

**Dr Carmel Devaney** | University of Galway. Carmel is a Lecturer, Head of the Discipline of Applied Social Science and Associate Director of the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre. Carmel's recent publications and conference presentations are in the area of Family Support, Parenting Support, Child Protection and Welfare, Alternative Care and supporting practitioners who work in these areas. Email: [carmel.devaney@universityofgalway.ie](mailto:carmel.devaney@universityofgalway.ie)

**Dr Mandi Mac Donald**, Senior Lecturer in Social Work, Queens University Belfast. Dr Mandi MacDonald is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at Queens University Belfast. She has extensive experience as a social worker in statutory children's services, and her teaching and research focus on the needs and rights of children and young people who are in out-of-home care or adopted, especially the experience of family life in permanent placements. She has a particular interest in the application of trauma-informed and life-course approaches to enhancing the supportive social networks of care experienced young people and their families. Email: [m.macdonald@qub.ac.uk](mailto:m.macdonald@qub.ac.uk)

**Dr Julia Holzer**, Educational psychologist with focus on adolescent well-being at the Institute for Applied Psychology, University of Vienna. Julia Holzer is an educational psychologist and pedagogue. She holds a PhD in psychology from the University of Vienna and is currently a post-doctoral researcher at the same university. Her research focuses on youth well-being, motivation, and educational equity. Julia Holzer is particularly committed to the transfer of scientific findings into practice, politics and society. Her activities therefore focus on projects in close cooperation with stakeholders in the education and child welfare sectors. Email: [julia.holzer@univie.ac.at](mailto:julia.holzer@univie.ac.at)