Working to improve child policy in Europe

I n the past decade RAND has acquired extensive experience in maintaining innovative web-based policy platforms to support learning among policymakers. A prominent example is the Promising Practices Network on Children, Families and Communities (PPN), which seeks to draw out 'what works' in interventions to improve the lives of children and families in the United States. PPN was recognised as a finalist in the Harvard University Kennedy School of Government's Innovations in American Government Awards in 2006. In the European context, such platforms similarly have a vital role to play in supporting the use of best practice to shape policy. This is in line with the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), which seeks to spread and monitor best practice among European Union (EU) Member States to support convergence towards EU-wide goals in specific areas.

In 2011, RAND Europe was commissioned by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion to provide content and technical support for the European Alliance for Families (EAF) platform. The EAF was re-launched in 2013 as the European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC). The newly formed EPIC is focused on child policy, and aims to help identify and facilitate the sharing of best practice in this field between Member States. It features practices across five policy areas, with a focus on supporting parenting and childcare, the provision of affordable services, and children's participation. The EPIC website employs a two-pronged approach to presenting child-focused practices across the EU: the interactive Practice User Registry, and the evaluation-centred Evidence-Based Practices.

This document describes RAND's work in support of the EPIC platform and the criteria developed by RAND to ensure only proven and effective practices are included on the website – and thus that the platform achieves policy impact.

An interactive platform: the Practice User Registry
The 'Practices that Work' section of the EPIC website provides a database of programmes that have been implemented across the EU Member States. In line with the conception of the EPIC as an interactive platform, policymakers and practitioners are encouraged to register child-focused practices that they are developing or implementing in the website's Practice User Registry, in order to share knowledge. The Registry enables cross-regional learning and includes over 90 practices which can be searched by name, topic or country. The number of practices will continue to grow, thus reinforcing the evidence base for policy formation and practitioner decisionmaking.

Promoting an evaluation culture: Evidence-Based Practices
The second aspect of the EPIC platform emphasises the importance of evaluation and the nature of the evidence base supporting individual policies and practices. Those submitting practices to the Practice User Registry are encouraged to provide information about any evaluations of their practice, and to notify the EPIC Practices Team when a new evaluation is completed. Those practices that have previously been evaluated are automatically considered for inclusion in the section of the website entitled Evidence-Based Practices, along with other evaluated practices, which have been identified through continuous research conducted by the EPIC Practices Team.

Assessing the evidence: the EPIC evaluation framework
Eligibility for inclusion in the Evidence Based Practices section is determined by an evaluation framework designed by RAND to meet scientific standards of transparency and replicability. The framework comprises quality criteria assessing evidence of effectiveness, transferability, and enduring impact supporting each practice (see Figure 1). In order to differentiate between degrees of supporting evidence, practices are assessed in each of the three categories.

Practices are first assessed by members of the EPIC Practices Team, then reviewed by a member of the EPIC expert panel, comprising leading academics in child and family policy from across the EU. At the end of this process, practices are assigned one of three evidence designations:

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- *Emergent practice* – adequate or strong performance in the 'evidence of effectiveness' category only
- *Promising practice* – adequate or strong performance in two of the three categories, including 'evidence of effectiveness'
- *Best practice* – strong performance in all three categories.

Figure 1. The EPIC evaluation criteria

Evidence of Effectiveness - *does the practice have a solid foundation of supporting evidence?* Each evaluation of a practice is assessed against six evidence criteria, including the presence or absence of a comparison group, significant positive results on at least one relevant outcome, and a sample size exceeding at least 20 in each treatment or comparison group. The Evidence of Effectiveness category is of overarching importance - practices which fail to achieve a pass mark are excluded from further consideration.

Transferability - *can the practice be replicated elsewhere?* This is particularly important in the pan-European context of the EPIC. Breadth of impact is assessed using two criteria: that the programme has been evaluated in at least one other population, and that materials are available to enable replication elsewhere.

Enduring Impact - *does the practice bring about long-term benefits?* Long term impact is assessed by the presence of a follow-up evaluation looking at programme effects over a period of at least two years, with at least one statistically significant positive outcome.

Achieving impact

The EPIC evaluation framework provides a transparent and replicable tool for assessing the evidence supporting practices in the field of child policy. Through its two-pronged approach to content, the EPIC provides a model for engaging stakeholders in the dissemination of learning about 'what works'.

In addition, this platform provides the means to promote a culture of evaluation across the Member States, and presents a transparent approach to appraising evidence in support of individual policies.

Platforms can also play an important role in procuring continued funding for effective policies. It is envisaged that the EPIC approach to disseminating best practice might be successfully applied to other policy fields within Europe, and to child policy in other parts of the world.

References

EPIC website: www.europa.eu/epic
PPN website: www.promisingpractices.net

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Dr Rebecca Kilburn is the Director of the Promising Practices Network (PPN) on Children, Families and Communities. In this capacity, she helped develop the evidence criteria and processes used to conduct reviews, and she has overseen hundreds of systematic reviews of child and family programs. During her 19 years at RAND, much of Dr. Kilburn's research has examined the effects of public and private investments in childhood.
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