

The time is ripe for evidence-based child policy in the EU



Earlier this year, the European Commission renewed its commitment to promoting child well-being and made a recommendation entitled ‘Investing in children – breaking the cycle of disadvantage’ as part of the Social Investment Package to promote that goal. One of the guidelines was to strengthen the use of evidence-based policy. This particular recommendation is noteworthy, because it represents one of the first times that a European Commission has specifically advocated the use of evidence in policymaking.

This brief discusses some of the reasons why decisionmakers in the field of child policy in the EU may wish to employ evidence-based resources to support decisions. Reasons for this interest include the current economic, political and research climate in Europe, greater expectations when it comes to improved outcomes for children and their families, programmatic decisions, greater quantity and quality of research studies in child policy, and more resources that summarise and disseminate the evidence.

Evidence-based decisionmaking has its roots in medicine

Professionals in the medical field pioneered the idea of using ‘evidence-based decisionmaking’ in order to improve practice. Europe’s Cochrane Collaboration led evidence-based practice in medicine by demonstrating the feasibility and utility of systematically pooling and synthesising research information in order to identify best practices for specific diseases. Their definition of this process is:

“Evidence-based medicine is the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients. The practice of evidence-based medicine means integrating individual clinical expertise with the best available external clinical evidence from systematic research.” (Sackett, et al., 1996).

The Cochrane Collaboration celebrated its 20-year anniversary in 2013, and it has seen its library grow to nearly 5,000 reviews over the last two decades. In the

wake of the transformation of health care towards more widespread use of evidence to inform practice, other human service fields have begun to follow suit. The field of education initiated several research synthesis projects early in the century, including the Best Evidence Encyclopedia and the What Works Clearinghouse. More recently, the European Commission established the online European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC), which screens and summarises evidence-based information related to children and their families across the EU and also provides a pan-European mechanism for individuals to share lessons learned in child policy and practice.

Greater supply of evidence

The demand for information about what works in the field of child and family services has grown due to the desire to ensure that tighter budgets are used effectively, coupled with the greater accountability that decisionmakers face. In the early 1990s when the Cochrane Collaboration began gathering and pooling medical studies, an analogous project in the field of child and family policy would have been unthinkable due to a dearth of studies that would have met the criteria for high-quality evidence. But now there is a growing supply of research accumulating to inform child and family policy, and that research is increasingly meeting high standards of evidence. It employs rigorous methods, such as randomised trials, and there is now a sufficient quantity and quality of evidence to enable the aggregation of evidence-information in a systematic way.

As the supply of rigorous studies in the field of child and family policy has grown, so too have the resources that summarise evidence-based information for decisionmakers. In the United States, at least nine evidence-based practice platforms (EBPs) present information and EBP resources that include evidence that relates to child and family services there. In the EU, EPIC provides information on policies and practices which can help children and families cope with the current challenges which emerged due to the European economic climate. A central component of this

project is an online repository of evidence-based practice. The 'Practices that Work' section of EPIC gathers, reviews and summarises evidence on effective strategies across the 28 member states.

Austerity raises the stakes

Today's austerity measures are unprecedented in the history of the EU. In 2013, EU leaders cut its seven-year budget for the first time ever. Additionally, major stakeholders such as Eurochild have noted that the well-being of children across the EU has deteriorated in the last year as result of the economic crisis. Recognition of the impact of the financial crisis on children, and the lingering austere economic climate, has led public and private supporters of child and family services to further scrutinise expenditures. Decisionmakers want to ensure that their limited funds are being used for policies and services that are effective. At the same time that funding for child and family services has come under strain, policymakers at all levels of government have also been subject to greater accountability than in the past.

Using evidence to inform decisionmaking

Decisionmakers now have much easier access to a growing amount of evidence-based information related to children's issues than in the past. A number of considerations can help put this information to best use:

- First, even though the supply and quality of evidence-based information is greater now than ever before, it is not necessarily the case that evidence-based information should be given more weight than other factors that contribute to decisionmaking. Evidence is an important piece of the policymaking puzzle, but other factors, such as political considerations, values, funding and experience will necessarily also need to contribute to decisionmaking. Innovation also matters greatly, as does facilitating the exchange of experience and practical lessons learned. Still, evidence has a place at the policymaking table, and platforms such as EPIC

are but one of the strategies for making evidence more useful for decisionmaking.

- Second, the supply and quality of information is highly variable across sub-fields of child policy. In an age of burgeoning availability of information, decisionmakers can take advantage of evidence platforms to help understand what is the 'best available evidence' that relates to children's issues.
- Third, decisionmakers will need to adapt evidence to meet local conditions, as evidence from around the EU is generated in differing contexts. The User Registry located within the 'Practices that Work' section of the EPIC website enables the capture of a number of practices and information on innovative practices to be shared with users and stakeholders. In doing so, it recognises that a variety of approaches may be chosen by stakeholders and practitioners.
- Finally, decisionmakers can contribute to better policymaking by sharing experiences and innovations in children's policy, aggregating lessons learned in using evidence in the same way that the research evidence itself is aggregated. Evidence-based platforms (EBPs) such as EPIC recognise the importance of collective experience with features to capture and share this type of information in addition to aggregating the research evidence.

A way forward may be for not-for-profit organisations and charities to encourage funders (be they government or alternative sources) to increase the share of funds available for evaluations. This approach would help meet requirements to provide evidence from evaluations where it is needed, and strengthen the evidence base. In countries such as the United States, approaches to evaluations have shifted from a pass/fail typology to a focus on Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) and program improvement. Evidence-based platforms favour such an approach, which can help individual programs and entire fields of intervention to become more effective through evaluation and evidence.

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