

Parenthood Support: the Italian Governmental Experience Since 2000

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Parenthood Support

The concept of parenthood support has a variety of meanings. It may be financial support and services due to the families, as it may refer to all those support measures, also of an educational nature, designed to facilitate the proper exercise of the parental role. In particular

Recently, with Judgment no. 385 of 14 October 2005, referring to what had been stated in the motives of a previous judgment, the Constitutional Court stated again that, as can be seen from the ratio under national regulatory measures to support motherhood, «the institutions established to protect motherhood, in particular maternity leaves and days off, no longer have, as it was in the past, the main and exclusive objective to protect the woman», but are destined to the protection of the primary interest of the child «who must be protected not only for that which affects the most properly physiological needs, but also with reference to relations and affective needs that are linked with the development of his personality».

Parenthood Support – Financial Support

The economic intervention in favour of families in situations of economic difficulty are a priority in the social inclusion strategy for 2008-2010. This is translated into actions which aim to compensate the principal factors of imbalance which affect Italian families' material living conditions, both because of the particular economic situation (the growing condition of economic difficulty of a segment of families due to the increased cost of consumer goods, concentrated in two main areas: housing and the food sector), and owing to factors which traditionally contribute to the risk of impoverishment (single mothers, large families or where there is a disability or lack of self-sufficiency).

The government has moreover implemented actions aimed at reducing the impact of the factors on the segments of the population in greatest difficulty. Among the others those specifically dedicated to single parents are:

- a) the housing plan provided for in Law n. 133 of 6 August 2008, converting Decree Law n. 112 of 2008 responds to the need to guarantee the essential housing requirement throughout the national territory, increasing the real estate availability by offering public residential building and introducing measures to regenerate the existing housing and implementing integrated urban re-qualification measures. These actions will need to bear in mind the different situations throughout the territory and are primarily intended to provide housing for low-income families (including single parent or single income family units), young, low-income couples, elderly people in disadvantaged economic and social conditions, students living away from home, people subject to eviction orders with notice to quit, regular immigrants on a low income.

- b) special guarantee fund for first-time home buyers (regulated by art. 13, sub-paragraph 3 bis, of law n. 133/2008 cit.) – which will function according to decrees that are to be issued – and which may allow access to subsidized funding for young couples and single parents with children who are first-time home buyers, giving priority to people who are not permanently employed. The fund’s endowment is 4 million euro for 2008 and 10 million for the following years. The definition of liability for this measure is under completion, but will be followed by the logic of a means test to allocate the benefit to particularly disadvantaged segments of the population, with particular reference to elderly people and children in early infancy.

The policies for the reconciliation of work and family life

The policies for reconciling work and family life provide tools that, making the work sphere compatible (in particular that of the mother) with the family, allow each individual to live in the best way the multiple roles that he/she plays within a complex society. In this context, Art. 9 of Law 8 March 2000, n. 53, as implemented by Legislative Decree 26 March 2001, n. 151, Consolidated Text on the Legal Provisions on the Protection and Support of Motherhood and Fatherhood in Pursuance of Art.15 of Law No. 53 of 8 March 2000, envisages the allocation of contributions, of which at least 50% for enterprises with up to 50 employees. This is in favour of those companies which try to initiate positive action for flexibility, and the self employed or company owners who wish to develop projects to reconcile family life and work. The aim of this instrument is to facilitate the reconciliation of time for family life and work through the financing of projects which introduce new forms of organization and management of work time or services able to qualify the company as family friendly.

In recent years projects for positive action have been promoted for the testing of forms of flexible working time, part-time, teleworking, replacement, training and assistance for a return to work after periods for family-related care needs. Applying Art. 9 of Law 53/2000 in 2007 143 projects were submitted and funded by the Government.

Year 2007

| Deadline | Total projects presented | Total projects approved | % approval | Finance requested | Finance granted |
|--------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Feb-07 | 90 | 50 | 55,56% | € 6.846.708,44 | € 3.052.326,69 |
| Jun-07 | 76 | 46 | 60,53% | € 6.290.216,39 | € 1.597.024,38 |
| Oct-07 | 66 | 46 | 69,70% | € 8.258.822,81 | € 4.055.166,20 |
| Total | 232 | 142 | 61,21% | € 21.395.747,64 | € 8.704.517,27 |

Source: Prime Minister’s Office – Department for Family Policies

The social and educational services for early childhood

The development of socio-educational services for early childhood, or for nurseries and integrated services, is a Government priority, creating an essential component of the development and implementation of policies aimed at reconciling family and professional life and encouraging the participation of women in the labour market.

Through the 2007 Budget Law an extra-ordinary plan of intervention for the development of the territorial system of socio-educational services for early childhood was launched, with the dual objective of reaching within 2010 the objective of 33% territorial coverage, fixed by the European Council in Lisbon in 2000. Also part of this was the plan to lessen the imbalances between the different areas of the country. The National Plan is part of a context that is differentiated by coverage for the supply of services for infants. The national territory is divided into three areas, North, Central, Southern and islands, the Service covers 15, 7% for regions in the North, 15, 5% for the four regions in the Centre and 4, 4% for the eight regions in the South, including the islands. The plan is developed over a three-year period 2007-2009, and shall be implemented by the regions and autonomous provinces in response to a separate agreement, of 26 September 2007, between the Government, the regions and the autonomous areas in which essential levels are established together with the criteria and modalities of implementation. This agreement is aimed at creating an "integrated, extended, qualified and differentiated" network throughout the territory of nurseries, ancillary services and innovative services in work places, to promote the welfare and the development of children, the support of the educational role of parents and the reconciliation of working time and care.

For the triennium 2007-2009, 604 million euro have been initially allocated, of which 340 from the State and 264 from the Regions and local bodies, the latter contributing to the Plan for not less than 30% of the resources allocated by the State. With the 2007 Budget Law a project has therefore been launched to extend services for children and for the family which has no precedent in Italy: 340 million, of which 250 million distributed among all the Regions (Lisbon objective), and 90 million exclusively allocated to the 11 Regions with a covering rate lower than the national average (objective regional adjustment). These are all the Regions of the South, in addition to Veneto, Friuli and Latium¹.

The extra-ordinary plan of intervention for the development over the territorial system of social and educational services for infants and the national strategic framework 2007-2013.

It is important to highlight that in the implementation of the plan a synergy has been realized with the strategy of NSF 2007-2013, which develops and describes the unified regional policy, with a view to overcoming and removing the excesses of economic and social imbalances in the country. The NSF 2007-2013 sets four objectives for the Regions of the South, with reference to a limited number of services deemed essential.

The NSF also establishes a reward mechanism to encourage the Regions of the South to achieve quantifiable objectives (targets) by 2013, equal for all. In particular, the objective of increasing health services for people has been identified, distinguishing the two specific objectives relating to

¹ In particular, € 250 million of State resources were shared among all Regions using the following criteria: demographic rate 0-3 years, 50%, employed women, 20%, unemployed women, 15% and service coverage, 15%. In addition, 90 million were allocated in proportion to the difference between the national average coverage until 2004 and the coverage calculated for each region in proportion to population criterion relative to the population 0-36 months.

The Regions of the Centre and North contribute to the plan with a co-financing of 30%, equal to about a further 53 million euro. To these resources are added 211 million that the Regions of the South, within the national strategic framework (NSF), undertake to allocate to the development of socio-educational structures, for attaining the objectives and targets required by NSF. The quantification of co-financing for the South has been calculated and fixed according to the objectives set by NSF, and is therefore greater for Regions whose current figures are distant from the target set. In particular, an increase of 25% was calculated for the distance from the point of departure and 12% fixed for the bonus mechanism.

the services of care for children and for the elderly population in the conviction that increased frequency and quality of performance contribute to lighten the weight on the family and encourage the participation of women in the labour market.

The resources allotted to help the overall achievement of the four objectives is € 750 million, which will be allocated to those Regions of the South which by 2013 have reached the target set for the objective. A share of the premium will be assigned already in 2009 on the basis of improvement on the starting point for each Region.

The target set for services for children is subdivided into two indicators: the percentage of municipalities which have activated services for children, which in 2013 must reach 35%, and the percentage of children aged 0-3, which have benefited from the services for infants (of which at least 70% in nurseries), which in 2013 must reach 12% for all the regions of the South.

Finally it should be recalled that, with reference to the objectives of the NSF service, as part of the Action Project for systems and technical assistance 2007-2013, 2 million euro have been allocated to the Department for Family Policies and the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Policies in order to achieve the objectives of the increase of services for infants.

Moreover, With the Decree no. 159 of 1 October 2007, on urgent economic-financial measures for development and social equity, converted by Law 222/2007, the government has allocated more than 25 million euro to increase the plan for extra-ordinary socio-educational services, to which there have been added a further 25 million euro from a remodelling of the Fund for the Family 2007. In addition, the 2008 Budget Law adds to the resources already allocated by the 2007 Budget Law, equal to 340 million for the three years, 66.4 million euro in the current year, of which 10 are for the financing of "Spring sections" for 2008.

Therefore, to date, the resources that were dedicated overall to the development of the sector of socio-educational services for infants have come to more than 747 million: 446.4 million of State resources to finance the extra-ordinary three-year plan, 281 million of regional resources for co-finance of the plan, and a further 20 million of State resources for the financing of the spring sections.

Resources allocated to services for early childhood

| NURSERY PLAN | | Resources |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------|
| STATE FUNDS | Financial Bill 2007 | 300.000.000 |
| | Family Fund 2007 | 40.000.000 |
| | Integrated Nursery Fund 2007 | 25.000.000 |
| | Integrated Family Fund 2007 | 25.000.000 |
| | Financial Bill 2008 | 56.462.000 |
| | Total State Funds | 446.462.000 |
| REGIONAL FUNDS | Regions of the North Co-financing 2007 | 53.008.952 |
| | Regions of the North Co-financing 2008 | 16.598.350 |
| | Regions of the South Co-financing 2007 | 211.550.940 |
| | Total Regional Funds | 281.158.242 |
| Nursery Plan Total | | 727.620.242 |

Source: Prime Minister's Office - Department for Family Policies

Parental Responsibilities: Family upbringing and parental responsibilities

Family upbringing is directed at promoting a more mature culture of parenthood and as one of the contexts of support for parental experience. Among the experiences already acquired in this context are to be remembered those promoted by family centres, childhood-adolescence-family centres as well as networks of family solidarity, the councils and local alliances for families, created in almost all the regions of Italy from the early financing provided for in the Law 285/1997 or on specific regional rules.

The social objectives of the Law no. 285/1997, focusing in particular on prevention, are:

- the basic right of the child to receive emotional, relational and material support from his/her family;
- the protection of the minor in education, in training, at work and in recreational activities;
- the promotion of the participation of children and adolescents in the definition of priorities and contents;
- the protection of families and children in trouble;
- the well-being of adolescents;
- the fight against juvenile deviance and delinquency;
- the fight against abuse, sexual exploitation and domestic violence.

The law clearly describes the best approach to promote the well-being of children and to prevent any form of privation: preventing violence means promoting knowledge, culture and well-being and supporting the processes of growth and change of children, of adolescents and of the adults taking care of them.

The State funds allocated according to the Law no. 285/1997 and to art. 17 of the Law no. 269/1998 have provided the basis for the development and strengthening of innovative programmes. In general, the Regions and the local authorities elaborate long-term plans and follow a multidisciplinary approach involving a wide range of professions, institutions, NGOs and associations.

In fact, the area plans involve the collaboration of the local health care authorities, municipalities, provinces, judicial authorities, regional education authorities, associations and cooperatives.

In recent years, the outcome of the investments made in social policies for the prevention and fight against abuse and sexual exploitation had been based on the analysis of the data concerning the projects funded by the Law no. 285/1997².

² The degree of implementation of the Law no. 285/1997 has been constantly monitored through a database of the existing projects, which is managed by the National documentation and analysis centre for childhood and adolescence, and through joint assessment mechanisms.

The Law 285/1997 has allowed the financing, among others, of projects designed to support parental responsibilities, in particular by the provision of a vital minimum in favour of children in need placed in families or entrusted to one of the parents (Art. 4); activities of information and support for the choices of maternity and paternity, by facilitating access to assistance services for the family and to motherhood, and action to support the child and components of the family in order to achieve effective action for the prevention of crises and psychosocial risk; family mediation services and advice for families and children in order to overcome relational difficulties. With reference to the period 2001-2004, of a total of 2,818 projects submitted, more than 500 are reported as supporting parenthood.

In the context of the preparation of a new national action plan, as already noted, must be recalled the activity of the working group that has examined the issue of relations between the generations and the educational relationship.

Motherhood support as tool of prevention of child abuse phenomenon

In the field of the support to motherhood in the perspective of child abuse prevention, the law 285/1997 promoted several typologies of interventions, from a primary level through the organization of courses on parenthood, establishment of family centres and community for mother and children at risk or victim of violence. Among the ones aimed to the support in case of risk and family violence, it is worthy to remember that the law allowed the development of new counselling services for the detection, diagnosis, evaluation and treatment of cases all over Italy.

This typology of services includes a variety of concrete initiatives: the creation of specialist teams of experts in maltreatment in the local services; the opening of specialist centres; the setting up of coordination groups for the diagnosis of situations of suspected sexual abuse. Depending on the cases, counselling may be given to the local social workers in charge of the case, or the case may be evaluated directly by the specialists, who may also deal with the minor and his/her family. The facilities are managed either by the public services or by specialized third sector organizations.

Among the services which help decrease the risk of maltreatment, we shall include also the family support centres, whose main target is the family at risk (at a psychological and at a social level). Such centres guarantee the protection of children by involving families in socialization events and by providing support in facing any social, economic and relational difficulties.

Other services which provide protection also to minors are the anti-violence centres for women victims of psychological, economic, physical and sexual maltreatment. In particular, these centres also take measures to protect children who have witnessed violence and report also all forms of maltreatment and abuse suffered by the children of ill-treated women. The anti-violence centres were originally set up by voluntary women's organizations which developed professional skills and gradually got the recognition and support of the local authorities. The work done by the anti-violence centres has made it possible to highlight the serious issue of children witnessing domestic violence. The monitoring of this particular form of abuse has recently become a new research field and practices based on the coordination between centres for the protection of minors and anti-violence centres have been experimented to deal with it.

The women shelters have experimented some specific psychological and educational measures to help children who witnessed violence and to provide support to parents. Moreover, new forms of treatment have been launched, such as the psycho-educational groups for children who witnessed violence and the psycho-social groups for abused mothers whose children have witnessed violence or have suffered maltreatment or sexual abuse.

The so-called “neutral places” are another instrument to evaluate and deal with situations of risk or of actual violence against children. The “neutral places” were originally created to favour the adult-child relationship in the cases of contrast and separation. Today, they are being used also as a way to monitor how the situation evolves in the cases in which a child has been removed from the family because of intra-family violence. In these cases, the adult-child relationship is observed and evaluated in order to decide whether the child can be reunited with his/her parents or with the non-abusing adult, as well as in the judicial proceedings to investigate allegations of abuse. The main functions of the “neutral places” are:

- observation and evaluation of the relationship, as well as of parenting skills, in the diagnostic phase;
- support and assistance to the adult-child relationship;
- monitoring and protection of the minor;
- “protected” meeting between children and adults.

Family guidance centres

Among the activities covered by the National Fund for family policies – introduced by the 2007 Budget Law – specific attention was given to the reorganization of family guidance centres, created by Law 405/1975, to foster development towards real centres for the family, taking into account the notable experience in recent years in Italy.

In this light, thanks also to specific agreements with the Regions, the multidisciplinary nature of the activities has been promoted with respect to the families, with regard to educational issues, legal, psychological and the promotion of health, through the performance of duties of continuing education and family mediation. The promotion of social support in favour of the parents in the stages preceding and subsequent to childbirth and within the paths of growth and training of the children, the promotion and dissemination of interventions of listening and support, also through the development of initiatives of solidarity and mutual help, as well as operative integration with other services, such as family centres³.

³ The centres for health and social services came into being as the first challenge to health integration. The experience of many Municipalities and local administrations allowed the development of a relationship between the centres (place of socio-health integration) and the family centres (place of reference for families), with the goal of reviving integration between the various professions that take care of families.

One needs these facilities to be open to new experiences, in a position to help couples to know how to handle and continually enrich interpersonal relationships. This is precisely why centres are desirable to act preventively beforehand and not only afterwards to resolve problems.

In this respect one also highlights the opportunity to go beyond the traditional transmissive character of the initiatives of training parents to be able to have real experiences of apprenticeship.

The family guidance centres can do a lot to help young people to acquire knowledge to enable them to live the experience of a couple in an understanding way.

With reference to specific "young people's spaces" in centres, the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Policies carried out a review in all the Regions. The database, updated to December 2007, is published at www.ministerosalute.it.

The "young people's spaces" carries out its activities through the teams of different professionals, in different times and places from those of adults, and in close liaison with the world of school.

Work in schools, carried out by personnel with appropriate and specific skills, is the way to bring attention to and accredit the service for young people. There are many situations in which are provided meetings and talks about health education and affectivity with the involvement of teachers and possibly of parents (so that they are able to ask questions and receive answers) and young people can be invited to the centres to talk about personal issues.

Some of the more frequently treated aspects of the age of adolescent concern the sexual sphere, conflict with parents and the prevention of unwanted pregnancies.

Separation of Parents

On maintaining relations between parents and children, Law no. 54 of 8 February 2006 has recently intervened with Provisions on the Separation of Parents and Shared Custody of Children. The new Law implements a turning point in the culture of custody as a result of separation and divorce, reaffirming the principle according to which all children (legitimate and biological) have the right to preserve a continuing and balanced relationship with both parents, even in cases of disintegration of the family unit. The law provides a regulatory framework, which is strongly protective towards the weaker spouse, where he/she finds a full upholding of the principle of "biparenthood" as recognised by natural rights.

Particular cases of separation of the child from their family are also due to their detention. The Italian legislation provides for a series of actions for the protection of parental relationships, particularly when the detention regards the mother. Amendments have been made in this sense to Law n.354/75 "prison system rules", with the introduction of home detention for pregnant women and mothers (but also fathers) of children of less than 10 years of age (4 law 165/98).

Italian Law n. 40/2001 extends the application of the law (special home detention) also to subjects with sentences of over 4 years, in addition to the possibility of release from prison, during the day, to take care of their children. When these rules are not applicable, the children of the detainees may remain with the mother until reaching three years of age as the relationship with the mother in the first years of life is considered crucial to a balanced growth. It must be also noted that the Ministry of Justice, in cooperation with local authorities and the third sector, poses agreements and measures to ensure the equality of treatment for women held and/or subject to measures of the judicial authority, specifically with respect to efforts to ensure that children up until 3 years of age with mothers in detention (contained in the cited law n. 354/75) may have access to prisons, access to social and educational services in general (in particular to nurseries), ensuring transport services also through the use of organizations from the third sector.

All the legislation in force provides, moreover, the possibility for the mother detainee to take advantage of a series of benefits for a quick release from prison facilities. In relation to what has

been expressed and in consideration of the commitments expressed during the Conference State–Regions, the Ministry of Justice is strongly committed to urging the Regions and local administrations to ensure access to socio-health and socio-educational services for mother detainees also through the realization of structures of a family character to allow for this type of use.

Policy Suggestions:

- the Mother and Child Foundation could development of instruments to assess the effectiveness of the programmes and organizational models adopted by the specialized services, as well as to establish quality criteria and transferable practices;
- Elaboration of national and European surveys on resilience mechanisms, in order to identify the most adequate and effective measures to be taken;
- the Mother and Child Foundation could develop closer ties between the local training agencies and the welfare services, between the police and the welfare services, between the social and the healthcare services, between the welfare services and the judicial authorities, between the juvenile courts and the other judicial authorities. All this requires the engagement of both the central government and the regional authorities;
- pay a particular attention to the planning of interventions and provide enough time and resources, in order to prevent children and mother from paying for badly organized, untimely, repetitive or occasional actions;
- the Mother and Child Foundation could support within the European and German contest the spreading of best/effective practices from their niches to different, larger contexts. It is important to be helpful and ready to support all those initiatives which have not reached the same degree of excellence, but which are no less important and vital;
- Pay more attention to the needs of migrant families. In Italy this is demonstrated also by the considerable number of voluntary organizations working in this sector, which are inspired by principles of solidarity and social responsibility that it is particular important take in to account the specific necessities of migrant families while planning the interventions;
- The evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of welfare services is fundamental and two key questions should be addressed: (1) have we been able to do what we wanted to do? Have there been economic, legislative or objective constraints which have caused delays or obstacles?; (2) if we have been able to do what we had planned, has it been effective? Some public and private services have experimented different models, methodologies and instruments for the evaluation. Such experiences should be studied more closely and compared in order to identify a minimum set of indicators and criteria for the assessment of results and processes;
- The choices concerning the priorities, the allocation of resources, the organizational models and the types of services should be evidence-based, i.e. based both on the systematic collection and analysis of data coming from the services and the institutions. The lack of adequate information can significantly hinder both monitoring and evaluation. There is still an

informative debt. The systematic collection of qualitative and quantitative data remains a goal yet to be fulfilled in the social and health sectors;

- Specific qualitative requisites for services providers need to be identified at the national. The administrative mechanism of accreditation can help to establish some common minimum requirements for services being provided by different bodies in different geographical areas;
- In order to be more effective, the child protection system must adequately inform citizens of the available services and the availability of language and cultural mediators for migrant children and families, and at an institutional level, the establishment of regional ombudsman for children;
- Training is a key instrument for the development of the system, the acquisition of knowledge on the issue, however, must take place since the basic training curriculum for future operators.

Attachement

Number of family guidance centres by Region (2007)

| Regions and Autonomous Provinces | Family Guidance Centres | with "Young People's Spaces" |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| Piedmont | 179 | 41 |
| Aosta Valley | 20 | 1 |
| Lombardy | 151 | 42 |
| Province of Bolzano | 14 | 6 |
| Province of Trento | 21 | 2 |
| Veneto | 124 | 46 |
| Friuli Venezia Giulia | 1 | 0 |
| Liguria | 97 | 16 |
| Emilia-Romagna | 204 | 30 |
| Tuscany | 240 | 47 |
| Umbria | 77 | 9 |
| Marche | 71 | 11 |
| Latium | 164 | 46 |
| Abruzzo | 75 | 11 |
| Molise | 7 | 2 |
| Campania | 170 | 42 |
| Apulia | 162 | 36 |
| Basilicata | 35 | 19 |
| Calabria | 72 | 35 |
| Sicily | 192 | 93 |
| Sardinia | 80 | 15 |
| Total | 2186 | 553 |