



INTESYS

TOGETHER / Supporting vulnerable children through integrated early childhood services



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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS for strengthening integration in early childhood systems¹

FLEMISH SPEAKING COMMUNITY

INTESYS in short

Importance of integrated working

The needs that children and families are facing today are often complex, especially for families in vulnerable situations. Moore and Skinner (2010)² even call it ‘wicked problems’, because the needs are related to different domains. Hence, in order to answer to the needs collaboration on multiple fronts and levels is required. Also, Katrien Verhegge (2015)³ stated that problems of children and families are never isolated, it’s always holistic. So, services should work holistic as well. It is clear that integrated working is gaining importance, and this in practice, research and policy.

- Practice: examples are the children centres in the UK⁴, the family centres in Scandinavian countries, the Flemish Huizen van het Kind (Houses of the Child) and buurtgerichte netwerken (local networks).
- Research: examples are INCh⁵, ISOTIS⁶.
- Policy: with examples on the European level⁷.

Integrated working, however, is a hard to define concept. First, because different terms are used interchangeably, all similar, but slightly different. Think of cooperation, collaboration, inter-agency working, comprehensive working, interdisciplinary working, integrated approach, networking, integrated services... Second, integrated working starts from the local context (i.e. the needs of families and the services in the local context), which makes a clear, unambiguously definition difficult. In order not to hollow the concept, the INTESYS project tried to capture the concept, describing it as follows: *‘the professional cooperation within some kind of network or partnership, providing different types of supportive services for families, with the participation of parents/carers as first*

educator and their children and an guaranteed access for all’. In the INTESYS project it is also seen as a continuum going from ‘cooperation’, ‘collaboration’, over ‘coordination’, to ‘full integration’⁸.

Integrated working should have an added value for all children and families. But it can also have an added value for professionals, services, policy.

Added-value	
For families and children	Higher accessibility, easier to find what you need Services better linked to needs and diversity of issues More community cohesion Smoother transitions from one service to another Shared ownership and strengthened partnerships
For professionals and organisations	Combining strength and capacities in dealing with challenges Co-learning and professional development Higher efficiency
For the policy level	Less overlap, gaps and fragmentation Better use of scarce resources

In order to reach the added value, conditions on four levels should be met:

- shared vision and goals, starting from the needs of children, families, society;
- participation of families;
- competent system with strong leadership and reflective practitioners, which are sufficiently supported;
- political will and sufficient funding.

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² Moore, T. and Skinner, A. (2010). An integrated approach to early childhood development, Benevolent Society. Available at: https://ww2.rch.org.au/emplibrary/ccch/TM_BenSoc_Project_09.pdf. Accessed 16.10.2018.

³ Verhegge, K., 2015. <http://www.europe-kbf.eu/en/projects/early-childhood/transatlantic-forum-on-inclusive-early-years/tfey-5-dublin>

⁴ bvb. Pen Green <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ieUopMQR1g>, <https://www.kindengezin.be/img/keynote-margy-whalley.pdf>

⁵ https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container33822/files/Final%20report_Integrated%20networks%20to%20combat%20child%20poverty.pdf

⁶ <http://www.isotis.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/D6.2.-Review-on-inter-agency-working-and-good-practice.pdf>

⁷ Bvb. ECEC European Quality Framework http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/experts-groups/2011-2013/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf

⁸ Cfr. INTESYS. Results of a European Survey and Literature review (2016): <http://www.europe-kbf.eu/en/projects/early-childhood/intesys/european-review-report>

INTESYS project

INTESYS, *Together supporting vulnerable children through integrated early childhood services*, is a European project (2015-2019). The central aim is: promote ECEC systems which are responsive to and inclusive of vulnerable children and their families due to better integration of services and a more holistic child- and family-centred approach.

In concreto, there were four goals in the INTESYS project:

- Describe the current European situation on integrated working in ECEC services, with inspiring practices.
- Follow up of cases in four countries: Portugal, Italy, Slovenia, Belgium (in Brussels, with a Flemish case on the Huis van het Kind Brussel and a case for the French speaking community on vertical transition).
- Development of a toolkit to promote integrated working.
- Policy recommendations on the level of the four countries and European level.

Recommendations for integrated working

Recommendation 1: shared vision and goals, starting from the needs of children, families, society.

- Integrated working should always start from the needs and requirements of children, families, society.
- The shared vision should be defined at different levels. At national/regional level the general framework should be designed. At local level, the framework should be coloured, based on the local story.
- Integrated working is demanding for all involved partners. Therefore, the added value should be clear and shared, priorities should be set and the shared vision should connect the partners.
- Time, clear and constant communication, and a combination of vision and action are needed.

Recommendation 2: Participation of families

- Involvement and participation of families is part of the DNA of the integrated network. It is not limited to an instrumentalised tool. Families are seen as partners.
- All partners, as an integrated network, question and improve their accessibility.
- Time and sufficient support are needed.

Recommendation 3: Competent system with strong leadership and reflective practitioners, which are sufficiently supported

Management structure

- Integration starts from the needs and requirements of children, families and society, leading to integration of different living domains, different services, and different policy levels.
- A management structure with clear mandates, clear roles, clear responsibilities. This management structure is known and agreed by all partners.

Leadership

- The role of the coordinator(s) is not fixed. It depends on the needs of the network.
- The coordinator(s) set(s) the direction, lead(s) the integrated network, define(s) the 'common flag' under which all partners should work and colour their own story.
- The coordinator(s) is/are approachable and reachable.
- The coordinator(s) is/are sufficiently supported in their leading role.

Workforce

- Right person on the right place and a continuity in partners part of the integrated network.
- Each partner has the required competences and is willing to collaborate. They have autonomy in working in an integrated way.
- Each partner takes into account different perspectives: the individual perspective, the perspective of the families, the perspectives of the own service, the perspective of the network.

Support

- Competent system.
- Tailored support of the coordinator and the staff, based on the needs of the different perspectives.
- Opportunities peer learning and professional exchange.

Monitoring and evaluation

- Structural reflection: Are we, as an integrated network, doing the right things? Are we, as an integrated network, doing the things right? Does our integrated working really create and added value for children and families?
- Evaluation as improvement (self-reflection) and accountability.

Recommendation 4: Political will and sufficient funding

Political will on different levels

- Clear framework on national/regional level and a clear mandate of the higher level to the local level to give it a 'colour local'.
- Invest in sufficient support (time, funding ...).

Structural and sustained funding

Only if these recommendations on the four levels are taken into account integrated working can do what it should do: in a participative way supporting children and families in order to meet their needs.

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