



Valuing children, valuing parents

*Focus on family in the fight
against child poverty in Europe*

A presentation

Valuing children, valuing parents: **a tool for a European transnational exchange programme_____**

Valuing children, valuing parents is a response to the European Union's commitment to fight child poverty.

This discussion paper reviews issues by focusing on family life from different perspectives:

- **Part 1** Experiences of child poverty, emphasising the views of the children and parents who are most affected by poverty.
- **Part 2** The family as a vital resource in the fight against poverty, and the need for it to receive appropriate support – focusing, in particular, on the experiences of children and parents who are living in poverty, especially those who are affected by child protection measures.
- **Part 3** Schemes and practical initiatives that support family life and parenting.

It takes account of the work of ATD Fourth World over the course of many years in nine countries in western Europe and (since 2001) in Poland, where teams from ATD Fourth World support and bring together parents and children who live in conditions of severe poverty and social exclusion in both rural and urban areas.¹

Numerous contacts and exchanges with academics, field workers and policy-makers in ten project countries also contributed to the information and evidence on the issues and practices presented in this paper.

The issues are therefore considered from a variety of viewpoints:

- findings within the field of social and political science: demographics, sociology, psychology and law
- the views of those with direct experience and practical knowledge of the issues: families, field workers and project leaders
- different levels: transnational, macro-social, micro-social and individual.

The intention is to stimulate debate and to set the agenda for further action; each major section therefore ends with a series of key points and issues for discussion.

¹ *Valuing children, valuing parents* project countries are Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

This discussion paper has been prepared within the framework of phase 1 of a transnational exchange programme supported by the European Commission, and funded by the Community Action Programme to Combat Social Exclusion 2002– 2006. The transnational exchange programme aims to promote and support exchanges and mutual ties concerning European policies to fight poverty and social exclusion. ATD Fourth World in Europe will use this document as a tool for transnational exchanges and projects in the future. The *Valuing children, valuing parents* project welcomes new contacts. We would like to hear the thoughts and suggestions of anyone involved with the issues addressed here who wants to contribute or to highlight an opinion, a concern or an experience (contact : valuingchildren@atd-fourthworld.org).

Valuing children, valuing parents is a translation of the discussion paper *Précieux enfants, précieux parents* published in French in November 2003. This French version can be found at: www.atd-quartmonde.org/europe/precieuxenfants/index_pepp.htm

Some key points and issues for discussion_____

- **Focus on family**

Changes in family structures and challenges to parenting across Europe have left families trapped in poverty and social exclusion "over-exposed". The parents are, however, the first line of support for their children. The birth family is the fundamental inalienable basis of ties, roots, transmitted values, affection as well as influencing behaviour and individual or group mobilisation. Creating a family can be considered a "project" requiring the support based enhancement of individuals' skills and networks, as well as true access to basic rights. Emphasis should be placed on "**family ties**" and "**basic rights**" in eradicating child poverty. Conditions in the community and the direct surroundings of families and their children must also be guaranteed and supported to enable all of them to develop their skills and fulfil their potential.

Within this context, it is necessary to develop an understanding of how poverty affects children, in partnership with the children concerned and their parents. This poses ethical and methodological issues. The child's role as a key partner in eradicating poverty and social exclusion needs to be recognised and supported, as does that of his/her the family and the immediate environment.

The discussion paper describes more than 40 initiatives and projects acting as tools for supporting families, particularly where poverty undermines the relationship between children and their parents and their future prospects. The richness of these initiatives does not hide a concern which is often at the heart of such projects: how to reach those families in greatest need - those who participate the least and yet theoretically have the most to gain? The discussion paper concludes by illustrating the "quality of service" required to facilitate the participation of families living in severe and persistent poverty.

- **Combating child poverty and safeguarding children**

Children looked after by child welfare and protection services come mainly from the lowest socio-economic categories. Despite this evidence, **we still lack in-depth research of the overall picture in Europe**. Literature shows that many initiatives and measures taken to protect children tend to devalue the family and to weaken its ties. Other available studies seem to indicate that looked after children are some of the most vulnerable children in Europe. Many of these children fail at school. They develop a feeling of guilt and lack of control over their own lives.

The role of poverty must therefore be discussed when developing measures and policies for child protection and welfare. Lack of consistent and in-depth statistics in Europe is part and parcel of the problem in formulating and assessing the exact link between anti-poverty strategies and child protection

measures. In the context of poverty, the design and assessment of measures to safeguard children must include the major stakeholders: principally the families involved, both children and parents.

The concept of "**Family continuity**", described in the discussion paper, could be acknowledged by researchers and practitioners as a guiding principle wherever possible in child protection. In the context of poverty, this requires finding ways and means to harmonise the challenges faced by the family to meet material needs and as a result of their social exclusion, with the wish of the parents to protect the children from danger and "to live as a family". With this approach in mind, care measures could cease to be seen as threatening (especially when they involve care orders) and become tools which permit all the stakeholders to work together in partnership (temporary respite care,...).

EU Challenges

"Valuing children, valuing parents" puts forward **challenges in relation to the fight against poverty and social exclusion in the EU** :

- **To involve children and families living in poverty and social exclusion, in research and monitoring efforts.** It is vital to support research and the elaboration of qualitative and participatory indicators that aim to understand what is important in the lives of children today and subsequently how this can be guaranteed for all children.
- **To recognise and reinforce the role of children themselves in the fight against poverty and social exclusion.**
- **To move away from seeing the family in poverty solely as a risk factor in focusing more on the potential of the basic ties, attachments and strengths that exist within families.**
- **To support professionals in changing and developing social and educational practices.** To work in partnership with families experiencing a lot of difficulties, to identify and work on solutions together are hard challenges.
- **To stimulate positive links between child protection policies and policies to fight against poverty.**

In Europe, children from families at the bottom of the socio-economic scale, represent the majority of children taken in charge by child protection services. Despite this evidence, we still lack in-depth surveys on the global situation in Europe. For policies concerned with child protection to be coherent with policies aiming to fight against poverty, research and connections need to be done. For example, it might be necessary to identify on European level : the children and families affected by child protection systems, their social and economic background, the reasons why and the ways in which children are taken in charge by these systems, the short and long term impact of these measures on the family and its members.

Full text of recommendations can be downloaded from :

www.atd-fourthworld.org/europe/valuingchildren/index_vcvp.htm

Full discussion paper can be ordered from : ATD Fourth World Europe, 107 avenue du Général Leclerc, 95480 Pierrelaye France (price 18 Euros incl. postage) **or downloaded from :**

www.atd-fourthworld.org/europe/valuingchildren/index_vcvp.htm