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*Promoting Complex Needs, Partnership and Parenting  
in Child Protection*

ABSTRACT:

This study examines the trends in international child protection practice since the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, what type of child protection orientations can be distinguished. Families living on the edge of child protection face a number of problems at the same time. Complexity of service needs requires a much more client-centric approach and assumes that service providers are able to adapt to the changed socio-economic environment. The study draws attention to the importance of some topics in international discourse, such as complex needs of the clients, importance of partnerships, support of parenthood.

KEYWORDS: child protection, professional skills, support of parenthood, partnership, community resources

*Introduction*

In recent years, significant changes occurred on an international level in the field of child protection, since global competition, extensive mobility of capital and workforce, acceleration of economic processes, interdependency of national economies, as well as the economic crisis dating back to 2007 had an impact on the functioning of welfare systems<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> N. GILBERT, N. PARTON, M. SKIVENES, *Changing Patterns of Response and Emerging Orientations*, in N. GILBERT, N. PARTON, M. SKIVENES (eds.) *Child Protection Systems - International Trends and Orientations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, pp. 243-258.

See more about the impact of the economic crisis on children and youth in international context: EUROPE CHILD, *The impact of the economic crisis on children: lessons from the past experiences and future policies. The proceedings of the ChildONEurope*

The first part of the present study<sup>3</sup> sets the conceptual framework by presenting the current trends in child protection; then it draws attention on the importance of certain issues in relation with international challenges, which are central in the international discourse. These issues are the following: the handling of the complex needs of service users, the importance of cooperation within partnerships, the supporting of parenting and the sphere of professional skills and competences needed for the carrying out of these objectives.

*Trends in child protection: towards community based approaches*<sup>4</sup>

In their study published in 2011, Gilbert, Parton and Skivenes examine the child protection system and practice in ten countries (USA, Canada, England, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Netherlands, Norway) since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, with the intention to identify the child protection trends in the field of state provided services. Basically they found that in the examined countries, despite care aiming child welfare and more extended prevention services being in place, the number of children growing up without a family did not decrease; additionally, there is a difference regarding the age of children entering the child care system. The USA, the UK and Canada place in institutional care rather younger children, while in the Scandinavian countries rather older children get into institutional care. In most countries the form of the placement outside institutions changed as well. Foster care placements are becoming increasingly frequent, and there is an increasing interest towards placing children at relatives as well. According to the research findings, children belonging to minority groups are over-

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*Seminar on the Impact of the Economic Crisis on Children*, Florence, Istituto degli Innocenti, 9 June 2011; S. RUXTON, *How the economic and financial crisis is affecting children & young people in Europe*, Eurochild, Brussels, December 2012; UNICEF, *Children of the Recession The impact of the economic crisis on child well-being in rich countries*, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence, September 2014.

<sup>3</sup> This paper was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and by the ÚNKP-18-4 New National Excellence Program of the Ministry of Human Capacities.

<sup>4</sup> For more details see: A. RÁCZ, *Gyermekvédelem, mint fragmentált társadalmi intézmény*, Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó, Debrecen 2016, pp. 41-47.

represented in the child protection system. A further general tendency is that upbringing tailored to individual needs became a basic expectation, and that professionals apply specific methods in the development of children<sup>5</sup>. The analysis identified four child protection trends, into which the examined countries were included. It is important to note however, that these are not rigid categories, since certain countries can show the marks of several orientations, especially when the changes in child protection policies are examined over time as well.

The 'child protection approach' was typical of liberal countries (USA, Canada, United Kingdom), where the state imposes sanctions for the sake of the child's protection (in case of abuse and neglect), and where the state operates as an observer in order to guarantee the child's safety. Its objective is to ensure protection and decrease harm. The relationship with the parents is typically hierarchical, and rights are enforced through legal means.

The model 'built on services provided to families' was typical to social-democratic countries (Denmark, Sweden, Finland) and to conservative countries (Germany, The Netherlands, Belgium). In this model the aim of the intervention is to preserve the unity of the family, and the state endeavours to support the parents in keeping together the family and to eliminate family dysfunctions. Unlike the previous orientation, it basically adopts a perspective of structural problems, like poverty, rather than an individual or moral framework. The aim of the intervention is prevention, related to this the widening of the family's social relationships; in order to achieve this, an extensive assessment of needs is indispensable. The child protection services are part of the programs destined to preserve the unity of the family, and the cooperation with parents is built on a partnership between equal partners, where the problems inside a family are settled through the mediation of a professional. The difference between the approach supporting the families and the child protection approach is that the latter is much more regulated, and puts the emphasis on an investigative approach, therefore it requires more bureaucracy-related activities on the part of professionals. In most countries the state imposes bureaucratic obligations and introduces tools and techniques,

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<sup>5</sup> See GILBERT, PARTON, SKIVENES, cit., pp. 243-258, and C. BURNS, F. FEILBERG, I. MILLIGAN, *A to Z of residential child care*, Scottish Institute for residential Child Care, Glasgow 2010.

through which the professionals and the employees of child welfare organizations are better accountable. Although the examined countries acknowledged the importance to engage several professionals in child protection interventions, the greatest part of the obligations and the responsibility still relies on the social worker in charge of the respective case. Thus, since the birth of the rights of the child, several factors have determined the evolution of the child protection system: a higher number of children and families receive support, and the number of interventions increased too; there is a more considerable emphasis on the supervision of the professionals, which in some cases calls into question their ability and the quality of their work, thus making it more difficult to hire and maintain the employees in social work and child protection; at the same time normative functioning along formal rules (standards, protocols) also was given a significant emphasis<sup>6</sup>.

The third orientation is the 'child centred' approach; due to changes in child protection from the beginning of the 2000s, the researchers included into this group the USA, the UK, Norway and Finland. The child centred approach uses elements of the approach built on the support of the families and of the model relying on child protection, thus on one hand it puts into practice the idea of the social, investing state which creates chances, on the other hand this system takes into account the individualization processes too. One of its features is that both the child's present and future are central, therefore early interventions, developments have a great emphasis; the aim of social investments is to ensure equal opportunities and the welfare of the children and their families. In case of the removal of a child, foster care, care provided by relatives and adoption are the primary options. Within this model, the state ensures substitute protection, if needed, but basically it establishes a partnership with the family, since the child protection system is embedded into an extended child welfare system. Thus, on one hand investment into children includes those services, which are built on prevention, and treat the problems at an early age, on the other hand this model prescribes stricter rules of conduit both to professionals who are responsible for the implementation of specific policies,

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<sup>6</sup> E.R. MUNRO, *The Munro Review of Child Protection. Part One: A Systems Analysis*. Department for Education, London 2010 <[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/175391/Munro-Review.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175391/Munro-Review.pdf)> (last access 02.07.2017).

and to parents and children, since it expects changes on behalf of the child in the family environment and context, and in the field of the treatment of children<sup>7</sup>.

In 2012 the UNICEF and the Save the Children updated the 2011 model of Gilbert and his co-authors, and introduced as a fourth approach into the interpretation of the role of the state the taking into account of the resources of the community, the opportunities encompassed by community care, which, in my opinion, can be a development trend to follow not only by the examined countries, but also by Hungary. The 'community based approach' is built on the view that the community is responsible in a broader sense for the welfare of children, it implies a partnership with the enlarged family, and fosters the mobilization of local resources. It is important that the children receive quality care, and the state supports the families in order to allow them access to protection services, thus enhancing the family's flexibility and coping ability. In this model the state recognizes parenting, and the child protection services are embedded into a broad system of family and community preservation system<sup>8</sup>. This approach points to a multi-dimensional framework, which takes into account the immediate need of a child for protection, their long term needs for a home providing security and love, and ponders the possibilities of the parents, and the resources available in their psycho-social environment that can be used up<sup>9</sup>.

Taking into account these considerations, five key elements can be highlighted, which are related to the protection of child rights and the putting into practice in child protection of community based approach: child centred, contextual, collective action, reciprocity and family capital. Regarding actual functioning, this means that the

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<sup>7</sup> GILBERT *et al.*, cit.

<sup>8</sup> UNICEF – SAVE THE CHILDREN, *A better way to protect all children. The theory and practice of child protection system*, Conference report 2013 (India, New Delhi 13-16 November 2012) <<http://www.socialserviceworkforce.org/system/files/resource/files/A%20Better%20Way%20to%20Protect%20ALL%20Children-%20The%20theory%20and%20practice%20of%20child%20protection%20systems.pdf>> (last access 24.07.2017).

<sup>9</sup> N. TROCME, *Canadian Child Welfare Multi-Dimensional Outcomes Framework and Incremental Measurement Development Strategy*, in J. THOMPSON, B. FALLON (eds.) *The First Canadian Roundtable on Child Welfare Outcomes – Roundtable Proceedings*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Ontario 1999, pp. 30-54. <<http://cwrp.ca/sites/default/files/publications/en/RoundtableOutcomes.pdf>> (last access 24.07.2017).

child is a competent actor of interventions, their voice being heard is important in order to enforce their rights, and environmental factors, the functioning of the family, the examination of the family's history, the community capacities are also important to be taken into account. Collective action leads to a positive contribution regarding the safety and protection of the child. According to Young, Mckenzie, Omre, Schjelderup and Walker Young, three aspects need to be put in practice, like rights, ethics, the individual and their environment, meaning that the active and productive participation of the individual is presumed; the ethical perspective requires respect in treating individuals, while the examination of individuals in their environment implies that individuals are capable of positive development, and resources of their environment can be exploited<sup>10</sup>.

### *Important skills and competences*

The development of the skills and competences of professionals has to be organized around the triple unity of planning-development-support. Planning basically aims to reveal how the workforce capacities be can planned on a strategic level, who would be the professionals who get involved in the social work with the children and their family members. Strategic planning also means cooperation, a certain coalition with relation to the different institutions and service providers, which points to the importance of training facilities too. Planning takes into account the capacities and potential professionals available over time, it considers who would be needed for which types of care, and what kind of possibilities for restructuring or professional mobility these capacities encompass. Development targets the education and training system, the competences and abilities that eventually need development with relation to certain services or forms of care, the curricula and professional methodologies which are adequate to problem solving, and the compliance of this knowledge with international requirements. Development ranges to the sphere of professional standards and protocols too, which can also give a ground for employees in their everyday

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<sup>10</sup> S. YOUNG, M. MCKENZIE, C. OMRE, L. SCHJELDERUP, S. WALKER, *Practicing from Theory: Thinking and Knowing to "Do" Child Protection Work*, in «Social Sciences», 3, 2014, pp. 893-915.

work. The elaboration of development strategies is also a process with multiple actors, in which the implication of professionals is indispensable. Regarding professional content, the development of leadership competencies and training in those methods which put the emphasis on prevention and family support are of outmost importance. For a proper development, the examination of the employees' own demands is indispensable, thus participation and action research gain an important role in determining the orientations of development. Support means the permanent providing of release possibilities, in which, besides supervision, the exchange of experiences, the sharing of good practices are also helpful to the employees. All these are the tokens to have creative professionals, who are able to solve problems and rely on partnership cooperation in their work<sup>11</sup>. Shared responsibility is fundamental, intense work with vulnerable (or excluded) families is very important, which is also built on collaboration, supported by a high quality management system. Leaders here too have a central role in mentoring and coaching<sup>12</sup>. A document issued by Action for Children<sup>13</sup> highlights that professionals need to have some basic features. They should be child centred, focused on the family, able for action, able to have initiatives, persistent, able to develop trust towards the child and the parent, respectful, friendly, realistic. The range of skills include the following: being able to cooperate, to empower, to communicate properly, while planning and evaluation skills are also important. All this means that in the work with the families, feasible aims need to be set, the continuous development of the child and the improvement of the child's achievements have to be ensured, the evolution of the family needs systematic assessment, and

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<sup>11</sup> BETTER CARE NETWORK - THE GLOBAL SOCIAL SERVICE WORKFORCE ALLIANCE, *Working Paper - The role of social service workforce development in care reform*, IntraHealth International, Washington DC 2015 <[http://www.socialserviceworkforce.org/system/files/resource/files/The%20Role%20of%20Social%20Service%20Workforce%20Strengthening%20in%20Care%20Reforms\\_0.pdf](http://www.socialserviceworkforce.org/system/files/resource/files/The%20Role%20of%20Social%20Service%20Workforce%20Strengthening%20in%20Care%20Reforms_0.pdf)> (last access 26.07.2017).

<sup>12</sup> HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL, *Working with Families where there is Domestic Violence, Parent Substance Misuse and/or Parent Mental Health Problems. A Rapid Research Review*, December 2015 <[https://ipc.brookes.ac.uk/publications/pdf/Rapid\\_Research\\_Review\\_relating\\_to\\_Toxic\\_Trio\\_Families\\_December\\_2015-1.pdf](https://ipc.brookes.ac.uk/publications/pdf/Rapid_Research_Review_relating_to_Toxic_Trio_Families_December_2015-1.pdf)> (last access 02.07.2017).

<sup>13</sup> ACTION FOR CHILDREN, *Skills framework for developing effective relationships with vulnerable parents to improve outcomes for children and young people*, Action for Children, Watford 2011.

the professionals have to be able to set new aims in order to achieve a better life quality. When wide-ranging problems need to be solved, cooperation has to involve not only the family, but representatives of associated fields as well, while setting a priority among the issues to be solved. Thus a complex set of knowledge is needed, its most important component being the understanding of the context and needs of the family, and the way how these determine participation and need for support. Professionals have to acknowledge by all means that a series of factors influence the quality of the relationship with the family, like the character, culture, past experiences (also with support systems), social and economic background of the parents.

### *Complex needs – complex provider responses*

Nowadays it became clear that families being at the edge of child protection struggle with a series of issues simultaneously, therefore the national governments become increasingly aware of the fact that the multiple and complex needs of these families cannot be tackled by a single support ensured by a service provider and bound to a single financing process. As service needs become more complex, a much more client centred approach is required, implying that service providers are able to adapt to the changing social and economic environment; this, of course, also requires the continuous monitoring and development of the knowledge and skills of the workforce. In this changed environment, in many cases the forms of financing broaden as well, and service providing is better delimited from evaluation processes, all this guaranteeing a better quality. In my opinion these changes inevitably lead to a more extensive exploration of community resources and ultimately to the acknowledgement of the values they encompass. Through this, the governments may be able to advocate for a more intense orientation regarding the exchange of good practices, thus the local volunteer and community services could gain a larger role in order to assume certain roles and show how they can respond to the needs of the families. Local governments or the state itself have to establish partnerships, which would also transmit the message that the care and services they provide and/or finance comply with public policies and demands<sup>14</sup>. In order

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<sup>14</sup>ADFAM, *A partnership approach*, 2011 <[www.adfam.org.uk](http://www.adfam.org.uk)> (last access 26.07.2017).



to respond to the complex needs of the service users, the governments have to provide cost-efficient and integrated services; they need to elaborate those practices based on evidence, which can have a long-term impact on the development of the children and families, then these good practices have to be promoted in a large context. At the same time targeted programs need to be made accessible<sup>15</sup>. The complex problems of the families, their being overburden, exclusion and the fear of losing their children often lead to resistance, to insufficient cooperation, which many international researches find almost natural, and consider that can be solved upon the change of the mentality of service providers and professionals. Robb<sup>16</sup> draws attention to the fact that resistance is a complex, challenging phenomenon, which is integral part of the work with the children and their families. Often this resistance is rooted in negative experiences of the families with the system in general, specifically with a social worker or with the low quality service they had been provided, or in the fact that they didn't acknowledge their need, and they didn't receive support. Therefore the social workers who directly come in contact with the clients have to map the possible roots of this resistance, the cases when it is manifested, and the way how the professional induces or maintains this situation with their behaviour. In case of an imposed cooperation it is even harder for the professional to view the case from the perspective of the parents. At the same time the communication skills and relational abilities of the professional may play a role in establishing a proper cooperation, usually by implementing interventions which involve the clients, and build on strengths.

### *Partnership with families on the edge of child protection*

Efficient cooperation also means the sharing of responsibility and knowledge. Complex responses need to be given to the complex problems of the service users, which in many cases imply several service providers. All this largely depends on whether well trained professionals

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<sup>15</sup> C. EASTON, G. FEATHERSTONE, H. POET, H. ASTON, G. GEE, B. DURBIN, *Supporting families with complex needs: Findings from LARCA - Report for the Local Authority Research Consortium (LARC)*, National Foundation for Educational Research, Berkshire 2012.

<sup>16</sup> L. ROBB, *Resistance, a complex challenge for practice*, WithScotland, Edinburgh 2014.

work at the state, local, civic or religious organisations, and if they apply suitable methods when providing help. For an efficient cooperation, it is important that the operating conditions are in place, i.e. the channels for sharing skills and knowledge should be accessible among the actors implied in the cooperation, and volunteers and member of the local community should be involved in the decision-making process<sup>17</sup>. In partnering the families, a basic requirement is that professionals have to be engaged towards helping, and this should be shown not only in theory, but in practice as well. All this implies that the professional attempts to get familiar with the family system and to understand family dynamics, structures the received information, identifies the attitudes needed in order to achieve any change, builds on strengths, evaluates developments and the advancement of their cooperation in general together with the family. Efficient cooperation can be achieved at best when families have options and are able to make decisions regarding their own life; for this it is indispensable that we listen to their wishes. Families need support in acknowledging advancement, this also means that the professionals on their turn recognize it in a supportive and confirming manner<sup>18</sup>. The impediments to efficient cooperation can be the following: conflicting relationship with the mother, drug abuse, difficulties in keeping the contact (lack of proper housing or phone), mistrust towards the professional or the service provider. In order to get over these impediments, the strengthening of the relationship with the father and his involving in the cooperation might be necessary; equality among family members is very important regarding their access to services, thus the father should also receive support (i.e. counselling, fathers' support group, counselling regarding housing or employment)<sup>19</sup>.

The establishment of cooperation and efficient functioning demand a family centred approach, where the identification and assessment of problems focus on the entire family, build on the former experiences of the family, respect its culture and ethnical background. The 'family centred assessment' helps the families to identify their

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<sup>17</sup> ADFAM 2011

<sup>18</sup> CHILD WELFARE INFORMATION GATEWAY, *Family Engagement: Partnering With Families to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes*, 2016 <<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-fam-engagement/>> (last access 24.07.2017).

<sup>19</sup> *Ivi.*

strengths, needs and available resources. It contributes to the working out of an action plan, which supports the family in creating and maintaining safety, permanence and welfare. Making a family centred plan guarantees that the need of each involved party would be considered equally important and would be addressed. Family centred case management includes planning, collaboration and cooperation with other service providers and with representatives of associated fields. The social workers address a broader range of tasks, beyond contributing to the satisfaction of basic needs, they help strengthening parental roles, contribute to the development of the child, to the enforcement of life skills in general. In case of a conflict they mediate between family members, facilitate the establishment and enforcement of supportive relationships even with other parents or with the extended family and members of the local community<sup>20</sup>.

### *Professional support to parenting*

International discourse puts a great emphasis on supporting parenting, not only in the process of service providing (family centred case management), but even within the framework of targeted programs or trainings in parenting. As we have mentioned before, it is indispensable to involve both parents; having common and separate discussions with the mother and the father can be very important in the efficient handling of information. The aim of the common discussions is that the professional has the chance to observe the interaction between the parents, which has an influence on their relationship with the child as well. Besides interviewing the parents and the child, it is important to observe the interactions within the family, especially between the child and the parent, since this could enlighten the strengths and the vulnerabilities of the family and its members. Observation can inspect the following aspects: Do family members ignore each other? How much attention do they pay to each other? Is there a contact between them? Do they listen to each other? Does the parent try to control

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<sup>20</sup> CHILD PROTECTION BEST PRACTICES BULLETIN, *Family Engagement: Maximizing Family Resources & Kinship Connections*, no year, p. 2 <<http://childlaw.unm.edu/docs/BEST-PRACTICES/0709-FamilyEngagmentMaximizingFamilyResourcesAndKinshipConnections.pdf>> (last access 26.07.2017).

permanently the child, or lets them play freely and independently? Does the parent have excessive or rational expectations towards the child?<sup>21</sup> According to Olson<sup>22</sup>, the strength of a family can be identified basically along three central dimensions: cohesion, flexibility and communication; nevertheless, according to the research carried out by Trivette, Dunst, Deal, Hamer and Propst<sup>23</sup>, there are 12 qualities which are the most determining (not each strong family can be characterized with all the 12 qualities): 1) commitment; 2) appreciation; 3) good planning of time; 4) a sense of purpose; 5) congruence; 6) communication; 7) clear set of family rules; 8) varied repertoire of coping strategies; 9) adequate problem solving strategies; 10) the ability to be positive; 11) flexibility and adaptability in the roles necessary to procure resources to meet needs; 12) balance between the use of external and internal resources.

Marcenko and his co-authors<sup>24</sup> highlight that counselling or mentoring for parents can function adequately, if it reflects to individual needs as well, and provides intense help. From the point of view of success, an important role is fulfilled by the mentor, who first of all elaborates an action plan together with the family and with the social worker involved in the case. The task of the mentor is to help the family in finding a job, in organizing housing, in accessing various welfare services, in organizing supports targeting mental health, but also in solving legal issues. It is also the mentor's task to mobilize a healthy supporting network. Kroll and Taylor<sup>25</sup> put the emphasis on the view that a successful intervention is by all means grounded by an intersectoral forum, in which the actors focus jointly on the family; prior to the phase of child protection intervention, it is necessary to

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<sup>21</sup> J. CRAWFORD, *Bringing it together: Assessing parenting capacity in the child protection context*, in «Social Work Now», April 2011, pp. 18-26.

<sup>22</sup> D. OLSON, *Circumplex model of marital and family systems*, in «Family Therapy» 22, 2000, pp. 144-167, quoted by A. WHITE, *Assessment of parenting capacity. Literature review*, Centre for Parenting & Research, Asfield 2005, p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> C.M. TRIVETTE, C.J. DUNST, A.G. DEAL, W. HAMER, W., S. PROPST, *Assessing family strengths and family functioning style*, in «TECSE» 10(1), 1990, pp. 16-35. quoted by White, *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> M. MARCENKO, R. BROWN, R. PEGGY, P.R. DEVOY, D. CONWAY, *Engaging Parents: Innovative Approaches in Child Welfare*, in «Protecting Children» 1, 2010, pp. 23-34.

<sup>25</sup> B. KROLL, A. TAYLOR, *Interventions for children and families where there is parental drug misuse*, 2009 <<http://dmri.lshtm.ac.uk/docs/kroll.pdf>> (last access 26.07.2017).

initiate a much more open communication between all the actors involved in the case, and to ensure the proper flow of information; it is also necessary to have interventions applying supporting solutions, but built on more powerful and direct methods in case of less accessible, hidden families (i.e. parents having addiction-related problems) and children, especially in rural or segregated areas.

### *Summary*

To sum up, we can state that in practice the care and protection of children and young people include the extensive assessment of the needs of the service users, the planning and putting into practice of different programs, the integration of activities targeting development, prevention or therapy, the development of knowledge and applied methods, as well as the administration of care related activities, the provision of supervision, training and research, and ensuring right enforcement. All these complex activities require an ethical professional attitude on the part of the professionals working with the children and their families, or who come in contact with them during case management.

The child centred, family focused intervention has the following features: it builds on strengths, it is based on participation and on sincere and mutual communication, it is free of all forms of discrimination, it takes into account cultural differences, establishes partnerships between the child and their families and the organisations providing supporting services. What does this practice based on strengths mean? The professionals detect in which situations or when the child or the family functions adequately, what are their personal resources, what the family members themselves consider as a strength, which can be used during cooperation. The communication is positive and everybody has the chance to express their opinion. In order to make the strengths visible, the professional attempts to reveal and treat the structural and personal impediments, for this identifies those key persons, who can support the child and the family, thus facilitating the creation of a positive vision of the future built around realistic objectives<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT, *Engaging with Families – Practice Paper*, July 2013, pp. 4-5. <<https://www.communities.qld.gov.au/resources/childsafety/practice-manual/pp-engaging-with-families.pdf>> (last access 27.07.2017).

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