



Laste ja perede
arengukava
2012 – 2020

**STRATEGY OF CHILDREN
AND FAMILIES
2012-2020**

Great Children, Smart Parents, Strong Society

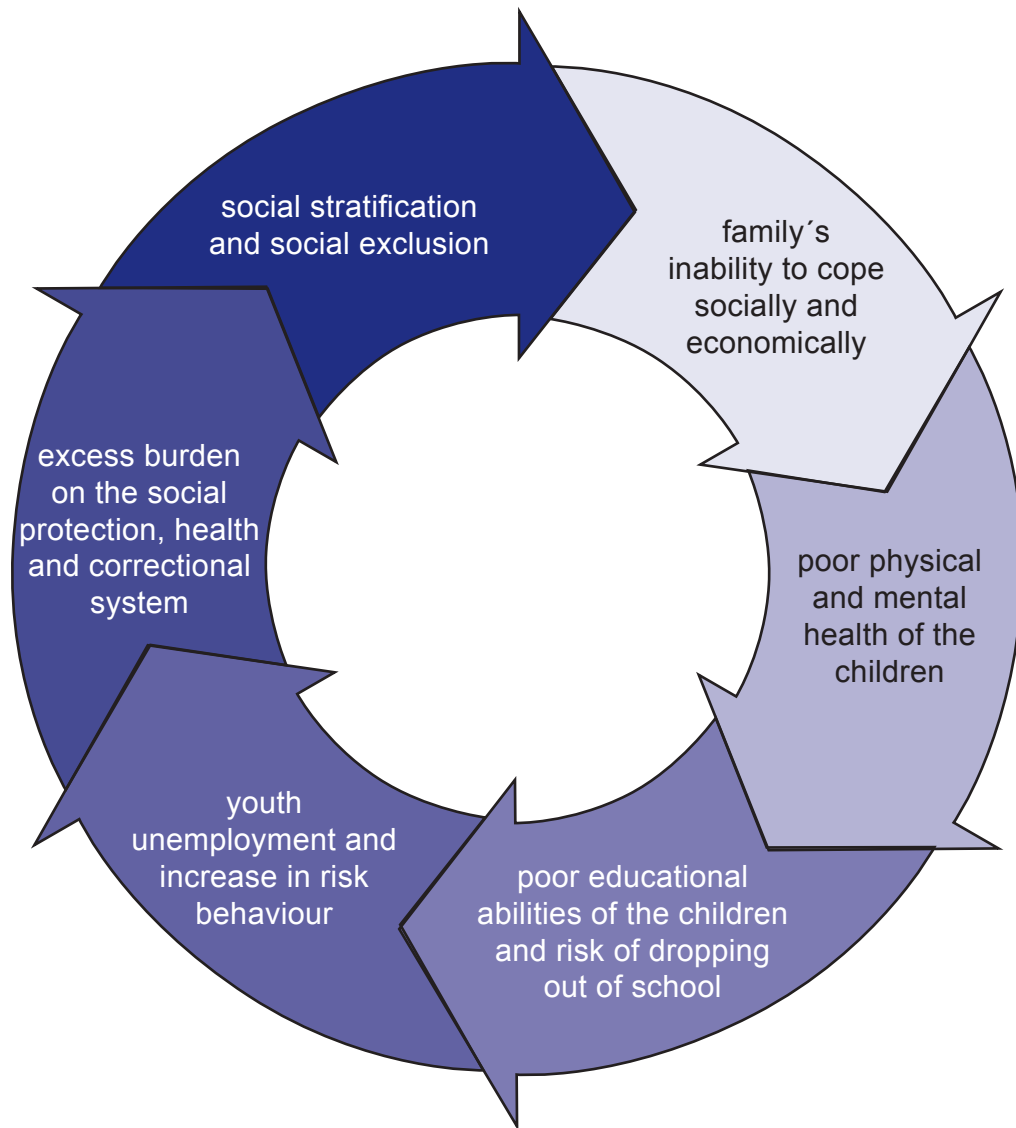


Figure 1. Possible (i.e. not always causal) risks associated with the coping abilities of children and families and connections between them

INTRODUCTION

Objective of the Strategy

The Strategy of Children and Families 2012-2020 was prepared for the purpose of guaranteeing clear development trends in the state for supporting the well-being and coping of children and families. The Strategy is aimed at all children and families living in the territory of Estonia in order to ensure that they can all grow and live in a safe and human-friendly environment.

Estonia will have to meet challenges in many different areas in the coming years, all of which are associated with people – their health, coping, education, ability to work and well-being. The children who are born now are the human assets of the future Estonia: they are the ones that shape the future of our country. Today, however, these children depend on the decisions and development opportunities we offer them now. Both child and family policy are discussed in the Strategy, as a child's family is an important factor that influences the life and well-being of the child.

The state must have a broad and forward-looking goal if it wants to achieve significant developments in the area of children and families. A common vision and a long-term and consistent policy are the only tools that help guarantee a quality childhood and good development opportunities for every child, break the vicious circle of poverty, inequality, lack of education and skills, and ensure that future generations will also cope successfully. As a small country with limited financial and human resources, we have to be smart and open when planning our activities, learn from the mistakes and good practices of other countries, implement the interventions that have been deemed effective, increase our focus on prevention and make our systems in guaranteeing the well-being of children and families even more efficient.

Necessity of the Strategy

All European countries, including Estonia, are facing a number of demographic challenges – the population is aging, the number of working-age population is decreasing and the number of new births is small. One of the ways to cope with these challenges is to make Estonia a family-friendly country, where people want to have and raise children, thereby ensuring that the population of Estonia becomes a growing population.

In addition to the children who have not been born yet it is equally important to appreciate and look after the children and families who already exist, because every person and their potential contribution to society are extremely important in a small country. The activities in the Strategy have therefore been planned in consideration of their impact on the existing children and families whilst highlighting the connection with the fertility rate.

The preparation of a national child and family policy strategy is necessary not only for the performance of goals in the area, but for the development of the entire country. The adequacy of the contribution made into the welfare of children and families is sooner or later reflected in people's health and education, crime, employment and economy.

Process of preparation

The preparation of the Strategy of Children and Families started at the time when the Strategy for Guarantee of the Rights of Children 2004-2008 expired. The understanding reached in the strategy execution report was that children should be valued consistently, across all policies, and it must be supported by the work done in order to improve the quality of living of families. The preparation of a national development document, which touches on child and family policy issues, was also recommended.

The preparation of the Strategy of Children and Families 2012-2020 started with a big opening event in September 2010. The activities of four workgroups (parenting support, rights of the child and child protection, child day care, ability of families to cope economically and reconciliation of work, family and private life), which last until February, were launched at the same time. More than one hundred experts in the area of children and families as well as decision-makers of different levels took part in the workgroups and additional interviews with experts were carried out in order to resolve specific issues. A nationwide youth discussion circle was called in cooperation with the Estonian Union for Child Welfare to obtain an overview of the requests and problems of young persons. A steering group consisting of decision-makers was involved after the completion of the first version of the Strategy, which was then sent to a larger group of stakeholders for their comments, and people were also asked to give their opinions via the participation web.

Research institutions, representatives of the third sector, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Education and Research, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Finance participated in carrying out the activities of the first operational programme of the Strategy.

The inclusion of the Strategy of Children and Families was recognised as the best inclusion practice of 2010 by the State Chancellery, the Network of Estonian Non-profit Organisations NENO and the Praxis Centre for Political Studies. The extensive inclusion process made it possible to consider many different stakeholders in the preparation of the Strategy, to obtain information from specialists who work with children and families every day and to include the representations of the state, local authorities and the third sector in the preparation of the strategy as early as possible.

Important principles observed in the preparation of the Strategy

Every child matters

This Strategy is based on the principle that every child matters. This means that in all decisions and undertakings that concern children and families, the state puts the interests, needs and well-being of the child and their family first and guarantees equal rights and opportunities to all children living in Estonia. The goal is to create

conditions where people feel, and children and families are, valued.

The question of the obligations of the child is often raised when the rights of the child are mentioned. It has to be emphasised here that similarly to human rights, the rights of the child mean the rights that arise from sources of international law and are recognised in the entire world. The fundamental rights of people and the associated obligations are described in the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia. One of the main obligations is to avoid infringement of the fundamental rights and freedoms of other persons. According to the above, a right automatically entails the obligation to consider the rights of other persons and this is why the obligations of the child have not been separately emphasised in the Strategy of Children and Families.

Prevention of problems is more effective than dealing with the consequences

The last 20 years have shown that placing the focus on dealing with the consequences is not a sustainable solution, as it tends to lead to an increase in problems and thereby demands increasingly more money. The current child and family policy focuses primarily on alleviating the symptoms of various problems whilst not much attention is paid to dealing with the causes of these problems. Child protection in Estonia also tends to focus on sanctions (e.g. separating the child from the family) and child welfare is aimed at children who have been left without parental care. The lack of early noticing and timely intervention means that more children are separated from their families and placed in substitute care than should be done in a modern society that supports families with children. At the same time, the costs of substitute care are high whilst the resources required for prevention and supporting services are rather marginal.

This is why the Strategy of Children and Families focuses on prevention and early intervention on every level. On one hand, it is practical from the viewpoint of the well-being of individuals, as it helps to prevent further, more serious problems. On the other hand, primary prevention usually requires fewer resources and is easier to perform, and the cash flow required for this is usually smaller than what is required on the secondary or, moreover, the tertiary level of prevention, i.e. in the situation where problems have already appeared.

A knowledge-based approach and consistency help develop the best child and family policy

The services that are aimed at children and families must be based on the best available evidence. Since the middle of the 1990s, a lot of work has been done with evidence-based interventions and services in the area of social affairs, i.e. the interventions and services proven to be effective. However, the reality shows that even on the scale of the entire world, only 2-5% of the programmes carried out are evidence-

based. This means that we have no information about the impact of 97% of services and programmes. This means that we are somewhat behind the developments in other areas (e.g. medicine) when it comes to improving the well-being of children and families. This means that we don't often have any information about whether the programmes and services we implement could help resolve problems or could they be unsuitable and thereby cause irreversible damage to the health and well-being of people.

Investing in activities that are the most efficient for the achievement of goals is even more important in a situation where resources are limited. This is why cost-efficiency is one of the key words of the strategic implementation of interventions. Cost-efficiency is the need to understand that every intervention should also be financially justified in addition to its positive impact. In other words, the implementation of interventions must also produce a positive return on investments. It may be possible to save money on account of the investments made in the child and family policy also in many other sectors, both by reducing future investments (e.g. building prisons) and reducing costs (e.g. subsistence benefit, rehabilitation, therapeutic interventions), as the work done under the child and family policy has an impact on many different problems, incl. those that reach into the areas of administration of other ministries.

The state and local authorities must therefore make wise decisions in the development and implementation of services, which are based on analysing the various effects of interventions.

OBJECTIVES SET IN THE STRATEGY

The main objective of the Strategy is to **improve the well-being and quality of living of children and families, thereby promoting the birth of children.**

Five strategic objectives (SO) have been set for the achievement of the main objective:

1. the **Estonian child and family policy is knowledge-based and uniform** in order to support the sustainability of society;
2. **Estonia is a country that supports positive parenting** and offers the necessary support to raising children and being a parent in order to improve the quality of living and future of children;
3. the **rights of children are guaranteed and a functional child protection system is created** in order to value each child and the kind of safe environment that supports the development and well-being of children;

4. **Estonia has an combined system of benefits and services that support the adequate economic coping of families** in order to offer constant security to families; and
5. **men and women have equal opportunities for reconciliation of work, family and private life** in order to promote a quality everyday life that meets the needs of each family member.

Strategic Objective 1



1. The Estonian child and family policy is knowledge-based and uniform

Current situation

Family life in Estonia has been changing constantly in the last twenty-odd years. The fertility rate has decreased considerably in comparison to the time right after Estonia regained its independence (the 2.05 fertility rate of 1990 had dropped to 1.64 by 2010) and people postpone having children for longer. The number of marriages has also decreased as more couples prefer cohabitation. Partnership relations are also characterised by a high divorce rate, which means that an increasing number of children live in so-called recreated families.

Population growth and positive natural increase are one of the priorities of Estonia. The role of family policy in increasing the birth rate is an important one, as it has to create a suitable environment or an environment that supports raising children, and by doing this helps achieve the desired increase in the number of births. Several surveys confirm that the indicators that motivate people to have children are mainly subjective: age, the number of children they already have and previous experience in raising children, the quality of their partnership relations, etc., and also their overall security and the norms and attitudes prevailing in society. However, people still expect the state to help and support them in raising children.

On the international level, the family policy of Estonia has been described as birth-oriented. This means that family policy measures are primarily aimed at the moment of birth and the first years in a child's life. The other most significant characteristics are the domination of monetary benefits and the firm focus on the mother and the child. In Estonia, fathers have equal rights with mothers in respect of most family policy measures. However, established attitudes and stereotypes, especially regarding the use of family allowances and benefits, act as a barrier to the active participation of both parents in raising children.

Additional surveys are necessary to consider the changed needs and different interests in the area of children and families. The current child and family support system also has to be analysed to develop a systematic and cross-area approach and to create a uniform basis in the state for supporting families and children. Extra attention is paid to the development of measures and assessment practices that have been proven to be effective.

Main lines of action

- Development of a knowledge-based child and family policy, incl. an analysis of the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the measures and expansion of evidence-based interventions.
- Promotion of coordinated research and development activities in the social sphere and the area of child protection.
- Harmonisation of cooperation and development trends in areas of direct impact on children and families.
- Considering the perspective of children, both boys and girls, and families with children in legislative drafting.
- Supporting the civil initiative that promotes the well-being of children and families by financing the project applications that are submitted to the Gambling Tax Council and comply with the objectives of the Strategy of Children and Families 2012–2020.

Strategic Objective 2



2. Estonia is a state that supports positive parenting

Current situation

Supporting parents and a positive parenting is one of the best ways of preventing children's problems and thereby influencing their future prospects. It has been found that the quality of parenting is connected to the child's risk behaviour, mental and physical health, educational abilities and social skills. Children who grow up in dysfunctional families are more likely to form similar families themselves, which means that child-raising practice has a very important role in determining the patterns carried from one generation to the next.

Supporting positive parenting, i.e. a child raising practice that proceeds from the child's well-being and needs, on the state level is a relatively new area in Estonia. However, the need for developing parenting skills is considerable, which is also demonstrated by the statistics of the risk behaviour and health indicators of children as well as the requests, skills and attitudes of parents themselves. Although the attitudes of people in Estonia support coping with any parenting problems and concerns oneself, almost one-half of parents in Estonia admit that they would need advice and help as parents. However, they do not know where they could ask for help, or they lack the courage to ask for it.

The weakest link in parenting education is management of the tensions and emotions associated with parenting. The fact that 40% of parents agree that corporal punishment of children is a necessary and justified educational measure in certain situations can also be associated with stress and insufficient parenting skills. However, maltreating a child for any reason whatsoever, even as an educational measure, is classified as a crime according to the Penal Code of Estonia.

The problems relating to child maintenance or the payment of child support, the disputes between parents about the procedure of communicating with the child and deciding where the child will live, and supervision of children (e.g. accidents with small children and parents moving abroad for a long time) also need to be solved.

Several NPOs offer parenting education in Estonia, but there are no evidence-based or systematic parenting programmes. Several existing counselling services aimed at parents also need to be developed and made more accessible.

Main lines of action

- Improving the knowledge of children and young persons of gender equality, responsible sexual behaviour and sexual health, skills in equal partnership relations and positive parenting practice.
- Promotion of attitudes that value parents and parental education, and improvement of the relevant knowledge among the general public, specialists and decision-makers.
- Supporting positive relationships between adults and parental responsibility.
- Development of services that support parenting and guaranteeing their accessibility.
- Development and regulation of the diagnostics used to evaluate parenting skills, training specialists.
- Implementation of the efficient and population-based parenting program in Estonia.

Strategic Objective 3



3. The rights of the child are guaranteed and a functional child protection system is created

Current situation

Estonia joined the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991 and thereby assumed the obligation to guarantee the rights of the child and to implement the measures required for this purpose. An important right of the child is to participate in social life and have a say in issues that concern his or her life. Whilst the participation opportunities of children are guaranteed on the level of schools and society with various youth work methods, the situation in the inclusion of children in the daily lives of families is more complicated. Surveys indicate that only seven out of ten parents in Estonia have enough time to talk and listen to the child whilst approximately one-fourth do it rarely or not at all.

One of the opportunities for children to participate in social life and have a say is to do it in the media. However, there are several hidden damaging influences in the media that children need to be protected from. Estonian children are among the top countries in Europe in terms of their internet use, but they are also among the top countries in terms of experiencing the risks associated with the internet. This means that the media awareness of children and parents has to be raised and the legislation regulating the relationships between children and the media must be evaluated and streamlined.

Guaranteeing the rights of the child requires ensuring extensive prevention on all levels, thereby improving the opportunities of children to live at home and get the fastest and most efficient help whenever necessary.

According to the effective Child Protection Act, child protection is provided through state and local government bodies and non-governmental organisations. The duty of the state is to guarantee legislative, investment and supervision activities financed from the state budget. Local authorities are mainly responsible for protecting and helping children. Local authorities, especially those with a small revenue base, do not have enough resources for the development and implementation of child protection services at present. Many local authorities have no professional child protection workers. A situation like this means that the implementation of effective help measures and timely intervention in order to guarantee the well-being of children is impossible.

Practical child protection work also needs support in addition to the updating of the child protection system and the legislation, as it lacks a uniform evaluation basis and various user-friendly instruction materials. The qualifications of child protec-

tion workers are also an important issue in addition to their number.

The surveys carried out in Estonia indicate that a number of children have experienced physical, sexual and mental maltreatment. Although § 59 of the Child Protection Act stipulates that every citizen must inform about a child in need, even specialists do not always notify about a maltreated child. Obtaining information about maltreated children from medical professionals is seen as particularly problematic.

The representatives of many other target groups, such as children with mental disorders and disabilities and their families, children in substitute care and unaccompanied and trafficked children also need special attention and additional quality services in addition to maltreated children.

Specialists believe that there is an additional need for psychiatric help and rehabilitation for children with mental disorders in Estonia. The most common practice at present is to send children with mental disorders who have committed offences and truancy to specialised schools. In most cases, however, this does not create any opportunities for improving the situation of the child, which is why children with multiple disorders need additional rehabilitation services that meet their needs.

There are approximately 6,800 families in Estonia that are raising at least one disabled child aged 0 to 17. The needs of these children and their families are vastly different both in terms of the type of assistance they need from the state as well as the volume of such help. The majority of disabled children attend either a nursery school or a school, but they need constant personal assistance when learning. This is why the parents of disabled children have voiced their concern about the ability of the area of education to support disabled children, incl. the existence of assistant teachers. The opportunities of disabled children to receive hobby education and the development of the support services required for using these opportunities also need special attention.

In 2010, the number of children in replacement homes was 1,215 whilst 337 children were in foster care. A system of family houses that considers the well-being of children has been created in recent years to replace the large institutions used in the Soviet times. However, it is still better for children to live in a safe family environment, which is why the implementation of family-based substitute care (fostering and guardianship) must be developed.

Main lines of action

- Raising people's awareness of the rights of the child, incl. the preparation and organisation of a relevant training programme for specialists.
- Increasing the participation of children on the level of individuals and society.
- Raising the media awareness of children and development of a safer media environment, incl. the internet.
- Increasing the efficiency of supervision, incl. cooperation with the Office of the Chancellor of Justice, to guarantee the rights of the child.

- Development of a system for evaluation of the developmental needs of a child and early intervention.
- Analysis and development of a system of home visits by family nurses.
- Reduction and prevention of violence against children and helping victims.
- Development of a system for diagnosing maltreatment of children and reacting to such cases.
- Increasing the competency of specialists who work with children and families, incl. the development of child protection instruction materials and children's case studies, and the creation of an opportunity for regular supervision.
- Organisation of child protection work and improving supervision, incl. the updating and implementation of the Child Protection Act.
- Development of the bases for regional counselling centres and launch of the centres in order to increase the accessibility and quality of services.
- Improving the quality and accessibility of counselling and therapy services.
- Development of the services needed by children with mental disorders, incl. the establishment of mental health centres of children.
- Development of the interventions needed by disabled children, incl. health and support services, in the education system.
- Providing children without parental care with a family-like living environment that promotes their development, incl. the development of a support system for families that foster or adopt children or act as their guardians, which covers preliminary and follow-up services for such families.
- Identifying and helping unaccompanied and trafficked children.

Strategic Objective 4



4. Estonia has a combined system of benefits and services that support the adequate economic coping of families

Current situation

Supporting the ability of families to cope economically is a significant opportunity for the state to show that children and families are valued, to promote the birth of children and to reduce the problems caused by poverty. Poverty limits equal partici-

pation in society and has an impact on human dignity. In the case of children poverty is associated with several risks at once – health problems, limited opportunities for learning and development, behavioural problems, limited social contacts, lower self-esteem. Unfortunately, data show that having children is the factor that increases the poverty risk of households. The data for 2010 indicate that 18.6% of children aged 0-17 in Estonia lived below the minimum means of subsistence. The absolute poverty rate of all households at the same time was 9.5% and covered more than 57,000 families.

Estonia uses a universal system of family allowances, where every child has the right to a child allowance. A certain part of the costs of raising a child is divided solidarity between the whole of society with such a universal system. According to the surveys carried out by the European Commission, a universal system is efficient in preventing and mitigating child poverty, especially considering the level of social protection expenditure in Estonia is lower than in other European countries. The survey conducted by Praxis also in Estonia shows that the benefits aimed at large families are the most cost-effective in reducing child poverty, followed by the child-care allowance and the child allowance.

The universal family allowance system of Estonia is also a targeted system, i.e. families at the risk of poverty are also offered additional support on top of universal allowances. In Estonia, the households that are more likely to struggle with coping are those with a single parent, three or more children, or an unemployed parent.

The primary objective of the parental benefit established in 2007 is to support the reconciliation of work and family life. Although changes in the structure of women giving birth started taking place before the implementation of the parental benefit, the survey carried out by Praxis shows that the probability that women who are highly educated and earn a higher income decide to give birth increased after the implementation of the parental benefit, which gives reason to believe that the parental benefit could have given more momentum to a trend that had already started.

However, in comparison with other countries Estonia stands out with its large number of family allowances, which means that the system is relatively fragmented. Also, families need more support in the stages of a child's life that follow his or her birth and early years, which is why it is necessary to develop a policy for supporting the parents of small children after the payment of the parental benefit ends. Many surveys indicate that families that officially do not live in poverty may be unable to meet the needs of their child and guarantee them future prospects that meet their development potential. We therefore have to analyse the benefits of monetary support and services, and consider increasing the share of the latter, as the share of services in social protection expenses is currently very low in Estonia. The best way of preventing a family ending up in poverty is to give parents the chance to participate in the labour market, which is why services that support participation in the labour market must also be offered in addition to narrow family policy measures.

The different living conditions of households are also connected to their ability to cope economically. Although there is no shortage of housing this day and age, not every family has access to a quality home that meets their needs. Surveys carried out

in Europe also confirm that the absence of a home and the high expense of buying one is a significant reason why families postpone having children, especially in the case of more than one child.

Main lines of action

- Analysis of the system of family allowances, development of potential new measures and increasing the cost-effectiveness of the system.
- Analysis and development of policies aimed at single parent families and families with many children.
- Resuming the payment of paternal leave benefit.
- Development of the system for payment of child support and maintenance allowance.
- Improving the housing conditions of families with children, incl. the implementation of a home support system for families with many children.
- Provision and development of social services that improve economic coping.
- Development and provision of welfare services that support the employment of people with special needs and their family members.
- Increasing the efficiency of employment services and the relevant awareness of people.

Strategic Objective 5



5. Men and women have equal opportunities for reconciliation of work, family and private life

Current situation

The reconciliation of work, family and private life is one of the main principles of EU strategies. The creation of more equal opportunities for men and women for the reconciliation of work, family and private life is closely connected with the rights of both women and men, which is why it is important that the representatives of both genders can fulfil themselves in all three areas of life. International surveys indicate that fertility is higher in the countries that take measures to reduce the care burden of women and increase the participation of fathers in family life. The father's positive participation in raising the child has a good impact on the health of the father as well as the development of the child.

People in Estonia agree that raising children is an obligation of both mothers and

fathers in equal measures. Many rights and benefits aimed at families and parents are meant equally for mothers and fathers. However, various data indicate that in behavioural terms, the participation of fathers in raising children is not particularly widespread. The RISC Value Orientations Survey also shows that more than a half of people in Estonia believe that a father's main responsibility is to offer financial security to his family and children.

As the above shows that raising children and looking after them (especially in the early stages of their lives) is generally the mother's responsibility, it means that the participation of women in employment is restricted. The gap in the employment rate, which characterises the employment of women with children of up to six years of age and women who do not have children up to six years of age is considerably bigger in Estonia (25.7% in 2010) than the European average (17.3% in 2009). The birth of children does generally not restrict the participation of men in employment – it usually increases it. Statistics show that fathers of children up to six years of age are the group in Estonia that participates the most in employment.

In general, there are two options for reducing the conflict between work, family and private life: to reduce the family obligations of people or their work-related obligations. The childcare services provided by the state or local authorities can offer support in family obligations, especially raising children. However, approximately 39% of local authorities are unable to perform the obligation to guarantee all children with a place in day care, which means that Estonia needs approximately 4,000 additional childcare places. Childcare for children up to 3 years of age is the most problematic. The quality, accessibility and flexibility of child day care also need attention in addition to the creation of childcare places.

The family-friendly attitudes of employers, laws that support parents and flexible forms of work also have an important role in the reconciliation of work and family life.

Main lines of action

- Promotion of the participation of fathers in family life and mothers in working life both by changing people's attitudes and updating the relevant policy measures.
- Development of an employee and family-friendly working environment, incl. the organisation of a contest to find the most employee and family-friendly employer and the development of a relevant certificate.
- Supporting all child day care providers (incl. providers of day care for children with special needs and disabilities) in order to improve the accessibility and sustainability of the service.
- Improvement of the quality of child day care, incl. reviewing the quality indicators of the service and updating their evaluation, inspection and procedure if necessary.
- Collection and systematisation of information to obtain an overview of child day care requirements and needs.
- Increasing the efficiency of local authorities to improve child day care.

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