
Aim: This presentation aims to document and critique the development and evolution of Family Support structures, processes and practices as ‘early help systems’ in Ireland through the later part of the 20th century up to the present day with a particular emphasis on the interaction between informal and more formal statutory structures, processes and practices.

Abstract:

The development of what can be termed child welfare services in Ireland has a chequered history, which has recently been tainted as result of the institutional abuse suffered by many early service users. The modern ‘statutory’ system, as established from 1970 onwards, has moved from an orientation that was a reactive mostly ‘protection oriented’ system to a present construction within a broader Parenting, Prevention and Family support emphasis. One effect of specialisation, re-orientation towards family support and greater formalisation of service structures is the creation of multiple interfaces. This raises many issues in relation to accessibility for families, gate keeping, thresholds, standardisation, allocation of resources and relationships with other elements of the system. A current trend is towards a process of standardisation of the, heretofore, less formal early help provision as exemplified by aspects of Tusla’s Mainstreaming and Development Programme for Prevention, Partnership and Family Support, particularly Child and Family Support Networks and Meitheal. This presentation draws from evidence relating to the most recent developments that have informed this programme including the Identification of Need Project in Sligo/Leitrim/West Cavan and the Limerick Assessment of Needs Project. The discourses underpinning these developments are critically examined, particularly in relation to the distinction between standardisation and functional interface on the one hand and homogenisation on the other. This analysis is considered within the context of the changing nature and orientation of child welfare systems from a global perspective.