

9th Annual ESPAnet Conference
**Sustainability and transformation
in European Social Policy**

Valencia, 8-10 September 2011

**Stream 19: Children as a “new social risk” – discourses
and policies**

Stream convenors: Carina Marten and Ilona Ostner (Institute of Sociology
Goettingen)

The Right to Parent(s)? Children's Rights, Non – Resident Parenting and Welfare State Provision in Ireland.

Liam Coen and Noreen Kearns

**Child and Family Research Centre,
School of Political Science and Sociology,
National University of Ireland, Galway.**

**Paper presented at stream 19 [Children as New Social Risk – Discourses and Policies]
of the 9th Annual European Social Policy Analysis Network International Conference,
Valencia, Spain, 8th – 10th September 2011.**

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Universitat de València - ERI POLIBIENESTAR.
Edificio Institutos-Campus de Tarongers. Calle Serpis, 29. 46022. Valencia.
Phone: (+34) 96.162.54.12– C.I.F. Q4618001-D
Email: espanet2011@uv.es

ABSTRACT

In line with much of the welfare state literature on the emergence of new social risks, Irish society has witnessed a significant shift in the role and formation of families in recent years. Increases in single parent families, the introduction of divorce, a rise in cohabitation and non-marital births have all contributed to new welfare needs, particularly for children. While many of these needs are perceived to be addressed by the adoption of activation approaches and changes to welfare entitlements and levels of payment, other needs are placed in even greater relief when the lens of children's rights is deployed. One such right – Article Nine of the UNCRC – identifies the right of a child to have contact with each of its parents where appropriate. However, welfare state provision in Ireland has not kept pace with the need to address this gap, with a paucity of services for non-resident parents to meet with and parent their children outside of the adversarial court system or the child protection system.

This paper charts the development and implementation of a dedicated service for non-resident parents to meet with, play and essentially parent their children. Beginning with a brief account of Irish Family and Children's policy development in recent years, the paper presents findings from a formative evaluation study. In particular, the paper details the role a unique service in the West of Ireland plays in permitting a parenting role to be undertaken by non-resident parents in fulfilment of their responsibilities; the challenges some Irish non-resident parents face in attempting to access their children; and the wider implications of an attempt to address a service gap identified through the emanation this particular new social risk.

1.1. Introduction

As elsewhere in recent years, Irish society has witnessed significant change in family formations and family life. Recent statistics have indicated a continuation in the rise of children being raised in one-parent or cohabiting households, and a corresponding decrease in the numbers of children being raised in married households. Dunne et al (2007) accounts for such increases – often termed one of many ‘new social risks’ – through more marriage breakdowns and increases in childbirth outside marriage, as opposed to the traditional route to lone parenthood in the past being widowhood. Despite these changes however, there remains a dearth of relevant research and evidence on non-resident parents (who for the most part are fathers) (Jenkins and Lyons 2006; Kiely 2006). Similarly, there is an absence of services for non-resident parents who wish to meet with, and contribute to the parenting process of, their children. Although social work services do provide supervised access or contact visits to those families engaged with the child protection system, there is a distinct lack of suitable services for families whose situations do not warrant the intervention of child protection services, yet for whatever reason are unable to negotiate access amicably between themselves.

This paper discusses the challenges the emergence of this new social risk presents to both parents and children. In particular, it sets this risk within a rights and sociology of childhood perspective and attempts to chart the impact such a risk can have on the role and function of parenting in modern Irish society, and the Irish welfare state response to such a challenge. Beginning with a brief examination of welfare state literature on new social risks and Irish welfare state change particularly in relation to non marriage-based families, this paper outlines the relevance of the new sociology of childhood and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to parenting in these new families. It then proceeds to examine the development of a welfare state response to the needs of these new families, one in particular which assists them in maintaining contact between non-resident parents and their children and which allows them to parent their children outside of the family home in a structured and consistent way. The paper concludes by examining the implications of these new social risks and this particular service innovation for wider Irish welfare state provision.

1.2. New Social Risks and Irish Welfare State Change

Welfare state literature over the past twenty years has charted the emergence and evolution of new challenges to old forms of risk addressed in the golden age of welfare capitalism. Old risks, such as unemployment, retirement, illness or disability, have been overtaken by new challenges which provide policy makers with new problems to be addressed. These problems or challenges have broadly been characterised as globalisation, demographic change, and new social risks (NSRs) (Pierson 2006, p. 221), Taylor-Gooby (2004, p.2-3) has defined NSRs as “the

risks that people now face in the course of their lives as a result of the economic and social changes associated with the transition to a post-industrial society” and result from the gaps in service provision and income which arise from a shift to post-industrial labour markets and societies (Bonoli 2005). Taylor-Gooby has identified (along with others, c.f. Bonoli 2005, 2007; Esping-Anderson 1999) four specific NSRs. These are: increased labour force participation of women and the impact on traditional divisions of labour within the home; increased instability of family life and its potential impact on family income (e.g. lone parenthood); labour market changes, including the decline of the permanent job for life, and the increased coupling of employment and education resulting from the decrease in manual labour employment; an ageing society and the care and service provision implications thereof; and the potential poor options for citizens who (have to) choose private sector provision with little regulation and poor standards.

Responses to these NSRs have tended to take a multitude of forms, the main being labour market activation of ‘old risk’ welfare recipients to varying degrees, bound up in a restructuring of welfare states more generally. Ireland has been no less a convert than other countries. Most significant of the NSRs for this paper perhaps, Ireland has experienced significant demographic changes in the past twenty years, with some new causes of such changes also being notable. The rise in non-marital births over the past twenty years is striking, with rates standing at 33% in 2008, up from 3% in 1980 (Fahey and Field 2008). This is on top of increases in separation and divorce, which have risen steeply over the years since divorce was introduced in 1996. These demographic shifts have not gone unnoticed by policy makers, with the emergence of activation as an element of social policy since the mid-1980s and a core element of the social inclusion agenda (Considine and Dukelow 2009; Millar 2008; Murphy and Millar 2007) within a proposed broader restructuring of the architecture of the Irish welfare state. This restructuring, embodied most clearly in the document *The Developmental Welfare State* (NESC 2005), sets out the desire to adopt a ‘life-cycle approach’ to welfare, and specifically targeting four groups: children, older people, people with disabilities and people of working age. While children are mentioned numerous times in the document, the predominant focus is that of ensuring children are productive (economic) citizens of the future though addressing the economic needs of parents and households of which they are a part of.

However, international developments in children’s policy and academic debate over the same two decades can require us to shift perspective on welfare state change from what might be termed an adult-centred view to one which is more child-centred. What is the potential range of impacts of NSRs on children, not simply the economic concerns as epitomised by a social investment approach (Lister 2003; Jenson 2004; Jenson 2006; Jenson and Saint-Martin 2006)? Are children’s current needs being met by welfare state restructuring or are they a secondary concern to those of adults? What is the role of the state in providing for children’s needs in the face of these NSRs and how can welfare provision evolve to meet these needs? Two

developments in relation to children and policy can help frame such questions, namely the emergence of the new sociology of childhood, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

1.3. The New Sociology of Childhood, the UNCRC and Irish Children’s Policy.

The sociology of childhood seeks to shift the perception of children from that of passive dependent to (within realistic bounds of age-related development) active participants, in family and society. Key features of the sociology of childhood are (Prout and James 1997):

- Understanding that childhood is something which is ‘socially constructed, and as such, allows us to contextualise the early years of human life. It “is neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies;”
- Childhood is a variable of social analysis and as such cannot be completely divorced from other variables such as class, gender or ethnicity;
- The social relationships and cultures of children are worthy of inquiry and research in their own right;
- Children have agency – they are active players in their own lives, of those around them and of societies in which they live. They are not merely passive recipients.

The UNCRC, ratified by the Irish state in 1992, contains a number of references to the importance of parent-child contact, of particular and obvious relevance where children do not reside with one of their parental. Article nine, clause one, states that a child “shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will except when competent authorities subject to judicial review determine [...] that such separation be in the best interests of the child”, while clause three of the same article states that the State shall “respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis”. Furthermore, article 18 of the Convention states that, in undertaking their parental responsibilities, “state parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their children-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children”.

In line with the UNCRC, parenting should provide the following to a child: nurture; structure; giving recognition; and enabling empowerment (Pecnik 2006). The responsibilities of parents and associated tasks are presented in the table below (Quinton 2004):

<i>Responsibility</i>	<i>Task</i>
Give physical care	Feeding, shelter, rest, health, protection

Give affection	Overt physical and verbal warmth and comfort
Give positive regard	Give approval, sensitivity to signals, responsiveness
Provide emotional security	Consistent and predictable warmth, sensitivity and comfort
Set boundaries	Clear statements on what is acceptable, good supervision
Allow room to develop	Provide and allow challenges within the child's capability
Teach social behaviour	Model reliability, reasonableness, and assertiveness
Help develop skills	Encourage learning and exploration, be responsive in play
Help cognitive development	Reading, constructive play, monitor schooling
Facilitate social activity	Facilitate peer contact and provide new experiences

Irish children's policy has sought to take account of the two forces of the sociology of childhood and the UNCRC in recent years. Long concerned with children at risk of neglect and abuse, the 1990s witnessed the broadening of children's policy to take account of the need to recognise children as citizens in their own right, and then need to develop and protect their rights as outlined in the UNCRC (Richardson 2005). The development and publication of a National Children's Strategy in 2000, the identification of seven national outcomes for children in the policy document *The Agenda for Children's Services* (2007) and the establishment of local committees to enhance coordination and service integration for children and families are all policy and implementation steps taken to better the lives of children *as children*. Indeed, the National Children's Strategy recognises the need to provide a range of supports to families with children who are experiencing relationship breakdown, so that children have positive experiences of their family environments, including positive interaction and shared interests with their parents and between siblings (Government of Ireland, 2000).

Alongside similar moves in the UK, a report by Hogan *et al.*, 2002 on Irish *Children's Experiences of Parental Separation* recommended that family policy should encourage continuity and stability in family relationships, should promote an ethos of lifelong parental responsibility and facilitate long-term contact or involvement between children and non-resident parents (Cousins, 2006). Moreover, as part of the broad policy shift towards encouraging post-separation co-parenting, core considerations relating to nature, amount, and quality of contact that non-resident parents have with their children (Smyth, 2002) are paramount. This is in line with research findings on divorce generally which indicate that there is a need to move away from a preoccupation with where fathers reside towards wider considerations about the quality of relationships (Featherstone 2003). Moreover, very recent research on the experiences of families involved in court proceedings regarding post-separation contact and parenting highlights the importance of fathers maintaining contact and

enforcing contact rights of children where it has been – and is – safe to do so (McMahon and Moore 2011).

However, Irish Law has not kept pace with the changing nature of family life in Ireland. As Corcoran (2001, p. 136) outlines, while “unmarried fathers are not debarred from parental responsibility or the legal status of fatherhood, their parental rights in law fall way short of those held by married fathers and they are not acquired automatically”. More importantly perhaps, as Corcoran outlines, the ex-married father tends to be more involved with his children and have more contact than the former co-habiting father or father who was always non-resident. Yet, “low levels of contact between non-resident fathers and their children does not necessarily reflect a lack of interest on the part of fathers. Rather, it is equally plausible that personal, social, legal and financial barriers militate against their assumption of a more involved fatherly role” (Corcoran 2001, P. 136).

Equally, there are significant challenges or barriers to realising children’s rights in Ireland (Kilkelly 2007). These include the invisibility of children, gaps in law and policy in relation to children and rights, lack of adequate complaints, advocacy and monitoring mechanisms, an absence of provision of services (particularly to meet the challenges of modern life and the gap in mainstreaming services and supports) and a lack of investment in services used by children (such as play, but also health and education). As Kilkelly outlines (2007, p. 170), the effects of these challenges are felt most acutely by disadvantaged children but are felt by all children in some way.

1.4. Background to the Study

A Play Centre was opened in March 2007 in the west of Ireland on a pilot basis in response to a need identified by a number of key actors and organisations (child and family services in the statutory and voluntary sectors, along with private funders and philanthropists) in the locality. The absence of a place where non-resident parents could meet and play with their children in a safe, secure, conducive environment was the particular need identified by these key actors. The play centre was designed to support continuity and stability in family relationships and promote an ethos of lifelong parenting and involvement between child and parent. Aimed at non-resident parents, it identified itself as a universal, non-stigmatising service providing a play-based environment for non-resident parents and their children to meet, interact and permit the non-resident parent to participate in their child (ren)’s lives. The service also works closely with resident parents to ensure continuity of provision, whole-family involvement and that any particular needs are met as required.

The establishing documentation of the service outlines nine principles upon which the service operates. The most prominent of these for this discussion are:

- i. To provide a non-intrusive, non-expensive facility where non-resident parents can spend time with their children;
- ii. To provide a child friendly facility with activities and equipment that facilitate improved bonding with parents through the medium of play;
- iii. To provide a safe, caring and fun environment that will help sustain and grow child-parent relationships; and
- iv. To carry out ongoing evaluation of the service using evidence-based research so that the service is tailored to meet the needs of service users.

The play centre offers a range of supports to families using its service, from no support (i.e. parents simply using the centre as a facility) to high one-to-one support provided by a qualified practitioner to non-resident parents. In addition, professional staff (anticipated in the establishing documentation as being social work staff) are allowed to use the centre as an alternative to carry out supervised access visits between children and parents involved with the child protection services.

1.5. Methodology

As part of its commitment to evaluation and the generation of an evidence base to underpin service development and/or adaptation, the service funders commissioned the authors to undertake a formative evaluation of the service once opened for twelve months from 2007 through 2008. This evaluation took place over a 12 month period. The initial phase involved clarifying the objectives of the plan and identifying information collected by the centre which could be used in the study. Further to this, the study consisted of two core elements:

1. A theoretical element, underpinned by a literature review so as to locate the centre within its policy and service landscape. In particular, the literature review examined the development and role of contact centres in the UK and elsewhere with a view to identifying comparative and contrasting elements of such provision in the service;
2. An empirical element which in turn required the adoption of a multi-method strategy to collect our data. This involved:
 - The collation and analysis of data recorded by centre staff for the purposes of monitoring service provision and usage levels;
 - The distribution of questionnaires to both resident and non-resident parents using the service;
 - The undertaking of a number of interviews with non-resident parents who use the service;
 - A number of observation periods at the centre; and
 - The undertaking of interviews with project management and staff, and representatives of key referral agencies in Galway City.

All non-resident and resident parents were invited to complete a questionnaire while all non-resident parents were invited to self-select for follow up interview. In total, 16 non-resident

parents completed the questionnaire, representing a response rate of 33%, while nine resident parents completed the survey, representing a response rate of 19%. Seven non-resident parents self-selected for interview. Consent was received from children and both parents in three cases, with these three children being interviewed. Four service staff and four members of the management committee were also interviewed for the purposes of the study.

In completing this study the research team was cognisant of not intruding on the space and time non-resident parents have with their children. To this end, interviews with non-resident parents were arranged at a time and location of their choosing. Similarly, with observations undertaken, the evaluation team desired not to create an unfamiliar environment while a parent and child were using the service. Therefore, observations were only undertaken for part of the visit of each parent who consented.

2. Study Findings

2.1. Service Demographics

In total, 48 non-resident parents used the service over the twelve month period covered by the evaluation study. The majority (n=39) of non-resident parents using the service were male. A total of 28 service users continued to use the service on an on-going basis at the end of the evaluation study. In total, 89 children have used or use the centre with their parents up to the end of the study. The average age of the children using the service is 5.9 years.

2.2. Development and Implementation of the Service

Interviews with key informants and analysis of key documents reveal the stimulation for the development of the centre. As a first step, a local politician held a meeting to raise awareness about issues affecting fathers, and the need to have some service which could meet their needs in relation to meeting their children. Following from this, a number of local health and social care services, in addition to private sector and philanthropic organisations, decided to develop a service in response to this need. Upon undertaking an exploratory visit to a contact centre in the UK, the steering group of the project consciously decided that the new centre would be open to all as opposed to being exclusively for those who have contact arranged through social services or the courts. Once opened, a number of agencies and professionals, including social workers, family support workers, judges and solicitors, from around the city were invited to refer families to the service, in addition to staff advertising the service at various locations in the city and beyond. At this particular stage, both management and staff were a little uncertain about how exactly the service would work in practice, although theoretically they were clear about the nature of the service being a play centre for those parents who do not see their children regularly, or have no conducive environment to bring them to.

Interviews further revealed that staff and management were clear about their service use criteria from the beginning. While described as universal, the management and staff were quite specific about whom the service would not be used by:

“The service works best if both parents are happy for the children and [non-resident] parent to be seeing each other. [...] Where the courts might be requiring court reports or solicitor reports, that was an area we wanted to steer away from because we wanted to maintain our sense of neutrality (staff member 1).

Management interviews also revealed that staff play a key role in feeding into the planning and further development of the service. Although the service opened in 2007 with no service users enrolled, once service use began weekly management meetings provided staff with an opportunity to provide information and suggestions from service users, as well as update management of the progression of particular cases and the evolving model of support. They could also flag issues which may have arisen from service use which have implications for the operation of the service more generally, allowing management to make adjustments accordingly.

2.3. Child Contact/Access with Non-Resident Parent

Non-resident survey data reveal the main reasons for service use. For the most part, data indicate that the main reasons they began to use the service was that it (a) provided a safe place to meet their children, (b) it provided a structure which allowed them to spend more time with their children, (c) or that they were asked to use it by social work and/or the courts service. This was reinforced by the qualitative data. Many of the participants spoke of the importance of having a good relationship with their children and the desire to see them as often as possible. Indeed, many spoke of having a very good relationship with their children in so far as possible given the constraints on seeing them – although the frequency of seeing them varied greatly (see below). They described how this desire has been frustrated by the conflictual nature of the process through which they have gained access to their children. Indeed, of the seven participants interviewed, only two had negotiated access to their children prior to using the service. Despite the desire of staff for the service to be detached from the legal system referred to above, interviewees explained that the legal system and social work departments were the key points of referral to the service.

Clear amongst all participants is the overarching reason for using the service. It offers a possibility of seeing their children in a secure, safe environment where previously that often was not possible:

“It’s a nice place for people – parents – who have difficulty meeting their kids to meet. I think most parents who meet them down there, they feel happy, they feel secure down there, that’s a big, big thing, the main part.” (IV 3)

2.4. Supporting Parents to Parent

The focus of service use for the most part is on play when the non-resident parents are with their children in the centre. It was explained by staff and parents that a variety of things are done in the centre, from playing with the toys provided, to watching DVDs on personal players brought in by service users. It appears from survey and interview data that activities engaged in are very much dependent on the age of the children, with younger children engaging with toys and playing ‘make believe,’ while older children are more focussed on arts and crafts, although not exclusively so. Another activity mentioned by some participants is the role food preparation and eating meals plays in their visits to the centre, as well as reading and school work. All participants mentioned the emphasis on fun and play and, in the words of one participant, children often end up playing with each other, other service users and staff:

“Yeah, draw, play, take photos, go hiding behind seats, hide and go seek stuff, all that sort of stuff, and no one passes any heed. And the staff play along with it too. They go ‘where is he? Or ‘where is [child’s name]? They play along with it and, all the kids, you can see them, they’re all so happy and sometimes just doing their own things [...]. I wouldn’t have got this anywhere [else]. It means a lot like, brings tears to my eyes.” (IV 1)

All participants cited the positive impact the service has had on the relationship between themselves and their children. In particular, the role the centre plays in enabling service users to be parents was cited as a strong factor by participants in their continual use of the service. Significantly, the service has enabled access to occur where previously it would have been denied or severely limited. As one parent remarked:

“For me it’s [access] something I wouldn’t have had, no way would I have had it because as I said I couldn’t afford to go to anywhere.” (IV 1)

Other parents shared this sentiment when speaking of what the service does for their relationship with their children. It was explained that the regularity and frequency of access which the centre permits is an important factor in improving relationships between participants and their children:

“Yes it’s improved you know, greatly improved because I see them [my children] every week now. To spend time with them and they’re happy you know, very happy. It’s actually improved.” (IV 2)

For some interviewees while the bond was strong between them and their children prior to using the service, the regularity of access which the service affords is the primary benefit of using the service:

“The only advantage it has [is] that I see him regularly now, every week, every [day removed], that’s the advantage. (IV 5)

Yet, while some participants simply described the bond they had with their children as better or improved since using the service, for others it is the different parenting roles that the centre enables them to undertake with their children that provide most satisfaction. Specifically, the possibility the centre offers to participants to be a parent is the most cherished aspect of the service. For example:

“Without [this service] I would never have been, got a chance to be a dad and I’d have had to wait till she was sixteen, fourteen, sixteen whatever, till she got old enough to decide because her dad wasn’t doing that, her dad wasn’t that bad. I would never have got that so, what more is it? It means so much, you become a dad, for, for that two hours.” (IV 1)

“It’s given me the opportunity to relate, talk to my children and to really interact with them actually, you know, because this is a one-to-one basis now, so I do have that. Yes, actually it has given me that opportunity.” (IV 2)

For those with older children, the opportunity the centre presents to develop relationships with them, and the importance of engaging in various activities resonated with two participants in particular:

“It’s given me a different perspective. It’s definitely given me – like because of what happened and the way it happened – it’s definitely given me a different perspective and if it wasn’t for the service we probably wouldn’t be at the stage we are at now. As I said, I do help him with his homework, talk to him about things that are happening at school, if you get into trouble and this, that and the other you know. (IV 4)

“I think it’s working, it’s bringing us together. Like, we go up there and play pool. If we don’t want to play pool he can talk to me and I pay heed to him now. And we are getting on, I think, that bit better. We get more friendly and understanding of each other [...] I think we are closer. Going to take a bit more time but it’s getting there.” (IV 3)

In addition to relationship building, some interviewees identified particular ways in which the service has positively impacted on them as parents. One participant spoke of the confidence it gave him as a result of the camaraderie which has developed amongst some service users:

Universitat de València - ERI POLIBIENESTAR.
Edificio Institutos-Campus de Tarongers. Calle Serpis, 29. 46022. Valencia.
Phone: (+34) 96.162.54.12– C.I.F. Q4618001-D
Email: espanet2011@uv.es

“In the last year I suppose it made me go out more believe it or not [...] as in talking to people. I don’t feel as uneasy since I started going there talking to people as I did. [...] You know, you’re not the only person in that boat.” (IV 1)

Another participant spoke of the positive impact it has had on his knowledge base and being able to play with his children. In particular, the role the staff play here was cited as being significant. There appears to be a certain amount of learning that occurs between service user and staff:

“Yes actually I’ve learned a lot from [the service], a lot of things I didn’t know [before]..... I mean they [staff] come here, they put this together and I learn from that you know. Like childcare, the way they talk to the children, the way they handle the children you know. There’s so much to learn from them you know, so I learn some bit of childcare from them.” (IV 7)

The findings from the surveys and the interview data reveal the reported impact the operation of the service has had on the nature of relationships between both parents, and the non-resident parent and children. Regarding the former, both resident and non-resident parents reported a more positive relationship between each other. Whereas 20% believed that relationships were ‘good’ or ‘very good’, almost three-quarters (73%) of non-resident parents reported that, prior to service use, relationships were deemed to be ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’; however, upon using the service for a number of months, those reporting such relationships as ‘good’ or ‘very good’ rose to 63%, with those rating them ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’ dropped to 37%. Amongst resident parents, 11% regarded relationships with the non-resident parent as ‘good’ or ‘very good’ prior to service use, with 78% regarding them as ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’. However, since service use, the positive values have risen to 55% with the negative values reducing to 45%. Additionally, the majority of resident (88%) and non-resident (60%) parents believe that there is less conflict with the other parent since service use began that, according to the resident parent, their children seem happier since interacting with their other parent at the service. Most notable, perhaps, however is the reported increase in non-resident parent – child interaction since service use began. Before service use, 50% indicated they had no or low (once a month or less) access to their child; however, since service use 69% of respondents reported access as being high (more than weekly) or very high (more than weekly including an overnight stay), with all respondents reporting having some access. 8% reported access as low post service use. The majority of both sets of parents reported that their children seem happier since beginning to use the service, particular so with resident parents. For many respondents, both resident and non-resident, the role service staff play in facilitating communication, passing messages between parents and generally advising on issues when requested were all remarked upon as important in facilitating improved relationships between both parents.

2.5. The Views of Children

The participating children were asked about what they liked and disliked about the centre; what they did when they were with their parents in the centre; and anything they would like to see added to the centre. Children were also invited to draw a picture depicting what they do when they are with their parents using the service. One child completed a picture for the research team.

All participating children indicated that they were happy using the service and liked the staff. They used terms like “fun” when asked about the centre. In addition, some of the children identified particular toys – such as the tractor, the ice hockey table, the pool table and the dart board – when asked specifically what they liked about the centre. One child responded that seeing their Dad was the most positive thing about their experience of the service.

Regarding what each child did with their Dad when in the centre, the same answers were forthcoming. Additional activities mentioned by the children included painting and drawing, watching DVDs, playing pool, talking (about sports and school), and general play. Two of the three children indicated also that they had or prepared food and/or drinks with their Dad when in the centre. One child did indicate that it was “fun to play pool with Dad” when they visited the centre together. Additionally, one of the children who participated also sees their Dad outside the service. For instance, on the day of the interview they had just returned to the centre from spending the afternoon away from the service

All children were asked if there was anything they didn’t like about the centre. Two of the children mentioned nothing in response to the question, while the third child identified the disappearance of the dart board from the centre as being a negative. When asked if there was anything they would like to see changed about the centre, one child said no, another responded with “more toys” while the third child mentioned the replacement of the dart board.

Overall, the interviews with the children using the service, although short, indicate a high degree of satisfaction with the centre. Understandably, the centre is very much associated with interaction between the children and their fathers.

2.6. Meeting the Continuing Needs of Non-Resident Parents

The majority of participants felt that due to financial and legal constraints their use of the centre will continue for the foreseeable future. In total, four of the seven interview participants cited their legal situation as requiring them to continue using the service. For some, it was the perceived control exerted by the child (ren)’s other parent that would require them to use the service:

“No, I see myself using it, I’ll be honest with you I’m always going to be kind of using it because there will always be that lack of trust between me and [child’s other parent] so

I'll always need [this service]. [...]All [child's other parent] got to do is phone up, 'could you tell them to be back by two.'" (IV 1).

The cost of pursuing greater access outside the centre is viewed by some as preventing them from moving on from the centre, while maintenance payments was also cited by one participant as being a prohibitive factor:

"I do still see myself using it until I can get back to court and either make some other increase on access or arrangement, yeah. [...] Every time I went to court it was €500 per solicitor, whether a case was adjourned or not they had to be paid." (IV 5).

"Yeah, basically the reason I'm not out of here is financial [...] It's basically because of the maintenance payments which are not, haven't caught up." (IV 6)

Other participants cited the lack of suitable alternative locations for their anticipated use of the centre into the future. In particular, their own place of residence was viewed as being unsuitable:

"I'm not in a position to. I'm in a sort of one bedroom flat thing and there are outstanding matters with that as well so like I don't really have anywhere else to take them if you know what I mean, which a few of the fathers I think are in that position as well you know." (IV 4).

All participants see themselves using the service for the foreseeable future (six months to one year). However, the reasons for this are varied. Some participants had begun using the centre as a pick-up and drop-off location for access visits outside the centre, but still prefer to have the option to use the centre from time to time should the need arise, due to inclement weather for example, and because it's simply a pleasant place to be. Other parents see themselves using it as their children have become familiar with the centre and like it but see it as a stepping stone to greater access outside the centre:

"I think [child's name] has gotten used to it, they enjoy coming here and so do I. I do hope, like, within the next few months that we could start doing stuff (off the premises of the centre) again. [...] Yeah, but I wouldn't mind calling in now and again, you know?" (IV 6)

"Like, I mean, it has been very beneficial to myself and even a few of the other parents, I mean it's a stepping-stone as well to a lot more freedom with [child's name]" (IV 4)

3.1. Discussion and Conclusion

Like many other western countries, the Irish welfare state is undergoing significant change, indeed retrenchment, after two decades of growth and expansion. Rising unemployment and

falling incomes have understandably impacted on citizen's ability to source social services themselves privately, while service cutbacks and increases in co-payments for services have all affected both targeted and universal services to varying degrees. While welfare state literature has charted the emergence of new social risks in numerous countries – and Ireland is no exception in this regard – the Irish state has been willing to meet the needs of some of these social risks, such as an ageing society or particular (economic/income) affects of the increased instability of family life. Yet, it has been reluctant to address other needs, such as the social or psychological impact of family breakdown on all members, not simply parents or children. Despite this however, the Irish state is persevering with the move towards enshrining children's rights in its legal framework, most prominently in its constitution¹ through a referendum proposed to take place in 2012. However, much work remains to be done to operationalise such rights in practice, particularly when it comes to the right of each child to meet with, and be parented by, both its parents where it is safe to do so.

The findings presented here offer an insight into the challenges faced by non-resident parents in meeting with and undertaking their parenting responsibilities for their children. For many non-resident parents who participated in the research, the service being evaluated offered the first chance for them to meet with and engage in parenting tasks with their children in a regular, constructive and formative manner, and not simply be Sunday Dads. Evidence presented here highlights that, while play and having fun are important parts of forging a relationship between child and parent, for many parents other parenting tasks are to the fore, such as making dinners, nap times and helping with homework. While these may be seen as everyday tasks in a home, for non-resident parents they take on additional meanings in that they permit them to play a part in the upbringing of their children. For authors like Quinton (2004), such a service permits non-resident parents to undertake tasks with their children which allow for the fulfilment of parental responsibility. Children themselves who took part in this research also highlighted the importance of play and play with their dad, although a limitation of the research was the relative absence of the voice of children compared to adults.

However, for many service users, the role the resident parent plays as gatekeeper to the child and regulator of child contact/access problematises their evolving relationship, as can be seen by the quotes from some parents in anticipated service use in the future. For some the service is a stepping stone to access outside such environs, while for others the service may be the best it gets. Yet, from both resident and non-resident questionnaires, the service appears to have had the impact of reducing conflict between both parents and thus contributed to improved relationships within the (disaggregated) family. This is an important point and one worthy of consideration given the Irish State's orientation towards family support. It may be well worth considering Featherstone's approach to the family support paradigm which emphasises the

¹ It should be noted that Irish governments have been promising a referendum on Children's Rights since 2007.

importance of relationships amongst all family members, for all family members, rather than simply for children (Featherstone 2003; 2004).

Most importantly perhaps is the potential this service offers as a model in realising some of the rights of children outlined in the UNCRC and the agency afforded them in the new sociology of childhood. Both account for children as beings, not 'becomings', as worthy of intervention for the here and now, for their current needs and not solely for future considerations of the economy itself, and as entitled to a voice and a role in decisions which affect them. Contact with and access to children is important to many, many non-resident parents. However, contact with and access to parents for children who do not live with them is equally important developmentally and – as expressed through children's attendance and engagement with the service in this study – important as a choice. Ironically, a service which was established ostensibly as a way to help parents who do not live with their children to meet them and play in fact aids the realisation of children's rights in Ireland prior to any referendum being passed and enacting legislation being finalised. However, this service does come at a cost, and the Irish state will have to make choices regarding the supports families receive and which ones to prioritise in a time of severe retrenchment, which in themselves challenge the realisation of children's rights as outlined by Kilkelly (2007) above. It is clear that this service is meeting the needs of users and countering some new social risks. The question remains as to whether the right to parent(s) outweighs the need to control welfare expenditure in the face of meeting the needs of other new social risks and cut in welfare provision.

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Universitat de València - ERI POLIBIENESTAR.

Edificio Institutos-Campus de Tàrragona. Calle Serpis, 29. 46022. Valencia.

Phone: (+34) 96.162.54.12- C.I.F. Q4618001-D

Email: espanet2011@uv.es

