

FINNISH FAMILY CENTER MODEL

Marjatta Kekkonen, *Senior Specialist*, marjatta.kekkonen@thl.fi, *Child, Adolescent and Family Service Unit, National Institute for Health and Welfare.*

All families need help and support for care and up-bringing of children. Some families may be burdened by issues like lack of social networks, long-term unemployment, poverty, substance abuse, mental health problems. Basic services have a central role in ensuring and strengthening resources and protective factors of children and families. Diverse families with different needs are met, identified and provided help in the basic services.

Family center is based on the idea of integrating universal service provision and early support and treatment services. Family center will meet the needs of all children and families at the low-threshold, timely and according to emerging needs, likewise identified risks. Family centers have been developed in Finland since the early 2000s. Despite the relatively long history of family centers there is a variation between municipalities with regard to services, actors and activities of the family centers. Development has proceeded from single, local municipal projects to more comprehensive, nationally steered reform programs.

A key project of the government and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health is “*The programme to address reform in child and family services*” (2015 -2018). The aim of the programme is to change the operating culture of services by strengthening children’s rights and a knowledge-based approach and to develop child- and family-oriented services. One mean is to reorganize all services for children and families by integrating a) low-threshold services, b) specialized services and c) intensive services to larger units. Family centers are multiprofessional service centers, which provide services such as maternity and child health clinics, family work, early childhood education. Strengthening support for parenting and the couple relationship, services for divorcing families and immigrant families is considered important. Family centers provide also digital service possibilities, activities of organisations (NGOs), parishes and peer support services.

As a part of the reform programme *The National Guidelines for Finnish Family Center Model* were launched in 2016. The big vision is to implement Guidelines all over the country. In order to achieve that, totally 17 family center county level projects of 18 counties were granted a two-years government subsidy by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. These 17 counties cover over 95 % of the Finnish municipalities. In the future, all families - including those with special needs or vulnerable life circumstances – will be met in family centers on

equal ground and will be offered both basic and specialist services as well as information, support and aid nearby the child's and adolescents' growth environment.

There is strong evidence that family center model is most likely to succeed when inter-sectoral management is coordinated and there is a coordinator to promote multiprofessional collaboration in teams and networks. Centers with established cooperation practices are more successful in the provision of parental peer support, targeted early support, and information delivery to families. Engagement of NGOs in family centers has a strong linkage to involvement of parents, provision of low-threshold services and peer support activities. The main cornerstones for NGO activities in FC are accessibility to the meeting place, positive social atmosphere, a low-threshold entry and expertise of personnel.

In order to follow-up strengths and potential risks of the family center service model, evaluation research is needed. The evaluation tool of the family center model is under preparation and will be piloted during 2017. Both quantitative and qualitative data is needed in order to evaluate whether integrated low-threshold service model meet the needs of diverse children and families.