Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Resolution 2410 (2021)[1]

Best interests of the child and policies to ensure a work-life balance

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The arrival of a baby is a joyous event, but it can also be disconcerting and complex. Parents must strike a balance between work and private life at a time when their child's brain and body are going through the most spectacular growth. Too often they do not have enough time to devote to their children because of the demands of their work and the inadequacies of childcare services. Many inequalities are established from the very youngest age. The social and economic cost if parents do not pay enough attention to their children can be very high. The Parliamentary Assembly is convinced that it is during childhood that the fundamental bases securing the enjoyment of human rights are established. Widespread investment in family policies and early childhood is key to the construction of balanced personalities and to the development of stable and prosperous societies.

2. The States Parties to the United Nations International Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) recognise the right of every child to a standard of living that is adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. Under Article 27 of the convention, the parents or others responsible for the child have the primary responsibility to secure the conditions of living necessary for the child's development. The States Parties undertake to adopt appropriate measures to help these persons carry out this task and provide material assistance and support programmes in case of need. Article 17 of the European Social Charter (ETS No. 35) requires States Parties to provide the necessary protection for the development of children, particularly the most vulnerable, such as girls, migrants, children from ethnic minorities or those born to poor, single-parent or sexual minority families.

3. The Assembly believes that the best interests of the child must be regarded as one of the ultimate goals of the Council of Europe in all circumstances. On many occasions it has fought uncompromisingly for the preservation of this goal. In Resolution 2056 (2015) "The inclusion of children's rights in national constitutions as an essential component of effective national child policies", it called for the provision of "constitutional guarantees for the protection and promotion of children's rights based on a modern approach addressing children as autonomous rights-holders, ensuring that the best interests of the child are a primary consideration (Article 3 of the CRC)".

4. The Assembly notes that the Council of Europe member States must meet the requirements of an economic recovery while bearing in mind the socio-economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Assembly is alarmed that the balance between parents' professional and private lives may be undermined in this context. This balance is all the more important in times of crisis when children need even more support and protection. Depriving them of their parents' attention would be an infringement of their right to development and would impair our societies' future.

1. *Text adopted by the Standing Committee*, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 26 November 2021 (see Doc. 15405, report of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, rapporteur: Ms Françoise Hetto Gaasch).
See also Recommendation 2216 (2021).

5. Bearing in mind these considerations and in order to meet the needs of children and their families properly, the Assembly urges the member States of the Council of Europe to take the following measures:

5.1. ensure that employment policies take account of parental responsibilities for all parents (including fathers); promote flexible working conditions; extend the length of parental leave for all parents (including fathers) and create the necessary conditions for parents taking parental leave not to be disadvantaged or discriminated against at work or in the labour market; provide for the possibility for parents bringing children up on their own to take the parental leave intended for both the mother and the father;

5.2. take into account the difficulties of single-parent families, most of whom are women; and recognise the role of members of the extended family through the creation of special leave for grandparents still at work and for any responsible adult in the family, subject to the prior consent of the parent;

5.3. in times of crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, ensure that working conditions enable persons responsible for children to provide care for children and support remote learning without being penalised; secure a healthy lifestyle for children, such as healthy food and physical exercise; and view such arrangements as means of preventing mental disorders, burnout and domestic violence;

5.4. enhance mental health services for children and parents in order to effectively combat childhood mental disorders and perinatal depression; improve services for protection against domestic violence, services for parents with disabilities or parents of children with disabilities and services for families in situations or under threat of extreme hardship; and ensure that the most vulnerable children are given special support without stigmatising their environment or their living conditions;

5.5. adopt a national strategy for early childhood so as to ensure that childcare services can continue to function while protecting the best interests of the child in consultation with local and regional authorities; uphold the quality of care provided in these facilities through dignified working conditions, measures to prevent high staff turnover and appropriate training; and establish a legal right to childcare;

5.6. extend the use of free training in parenting strategies to help adults welcome their children at birth and support them in their development; set up guidance on parenting issues; and improve diagnosis and supervision of perinatal depression without stigmatisation;

5.7. take account of the risks that can be posed by excessive screen time, not just for children but above all for the sake of harmony within families; launch campaigns not only to combat child screen addiction but also to help adults in the company of children; and provide the necessary help for parents who are victims of screen addiction, acting in the best interests of the child and pursuing a positive education plan;

5.8. continuously assess and monitor family policies, including the national early childhood strategy, to help with the ongoing improvement of these polices and review them at regular intervals; allocate sufficient funds for university research on these subjects; and take into account the views of families and children, including those in vulnerable situations, while ensuring respect for child protection and personal data protection.

6. Bearing in mind its role working alongside member States, the Assembly once again calls on the European Union to open negotiations, as soon as possible, on accession to the revised European Social Charter (ETS No. 163), in order to enhance the consistency of European standards with regard to socio-economic rights.