



COFACE Funding Brief

Investing in Families:

Using EU Funding to
strengthen prevention, family
wellbeing and child protection

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1.Introduction

Across Member States, EU funding is already supporting practical approaches that strengthen families during different life stages: perinatal mental health support, parenting programmes, home visiting, childcare, family therapy, community-based networks and targeted support for families experiencing poverty or exclusion.

These initiatives demonstrate an important policy opportunity: EU funding can help shift child and family policy from predominantly crisis-response models towards earlier, preventive and family-centred support. Funds can be used to provide both reactive child protection systems *and* early, family-centred prevention and resilience. The examples in this EU Funding Brief illustrate how the European Social Fund Plus is used to strengthen family wellbeing, with a spotlight on eight countries.

2.Why investing in families is a European priority

The ESF+ is the EU's main instrument for investing in people and implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights action plan. For 2021–2027, the ESF+ provides €142.7 billion in combined EU and national resources, with the majority implemented through EU Member States.

The European Child Guarantee provides an additional framework, requiring Member States to improve children's access to early childhood education and care, education, healthcare, nutrition and adequate housing, with the ESF+ and other EU funding available to support implementation of these measures.

Families are one of the first environments in which children's development, safety, health and wellbeing are shaped. When parents receive timely support with parenting and family relationships, mental health, childcare and work-family reconciliation, housing and material insecurity, adolescent behavioural difficulties, social isolation, migration and inclusion, access to health, education and social services, families may be better able to respond to difficulties before they escalate into more serious challenges.

This is particularly relevant to child protection. A prevention-oriented system does not replace specialist child protection services. Rather, it creates earlier layers of support around children and families, making it possible to identify difficulties and offer help before they become crises. The examples below illustrate how EU funding can contribute to such a continuum.



3. Current investments in families and their policy relevance

Bulgaria: home care for independent living of persons with disabilities

The Challenge: persons requiring health and social support have needs which remain unmet. Health and social services are not always integrated to create tailored support packages, often functioning in silos and ineffective. These services are relevant across the life course, from early childhood to old age.

Thousands of older people and persons with disabilities across Bulgaria have been able to continue to live independently in their own homes while benefiting from professional care – thanks to Home Care, a project financed by the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+).

By offering integrated health and social services directly to people where they live, the project helps some of the country's most vulnerable citizens maintain their independence and dignity. From food deliveries and health consultations to psychological support and assistance with daily tasks, Home Care ensures that help is close at hand wherever it is needed.

Launched with the goal of supporting 31 000 people, Home Care quickly grew beyond expectations. Thanks to the commitment of municipalities and frontline workers, the project reached more than 44 000 elderly people and persons with disabilities across 229 municipalities.

Nearly 16 000 home helpers were recruited and trained to deliver care, making it one of Bulgaria's largest efforts to provide mobile health and social services. The project's budget of nearly €138 million from the ESF+ was put to work effectively, showing how European funding can strengthen community services.

The municipality of Kostinbrod is an example of how Home Care made a real difference. A full professional team was set up - including nurses, social workers, home assistants, rehabilitation therapists, psychologists and drivers. Although the original plan was to support 90 people, Kostinbrod's team succeeded in reaching 131 older people and persons with disabilities. Nineteen employees were hired and received regular training to maintain high standards of care. After the official end of the project in January 2025, services continued without interruption for 27 particularly vulnerable users.

Thanks to the support of the ESF+, Bulgaria has shown how strong local action and European funding can work together to make a real difference. A new operation – Innovative Health and Social Services – has already been launched, with funding available since December 2024. This next phase will focus even more on personalised support. Municipalities will carry out detailed individual assessments to ensure that everyone receives the right combination of services based on their specific needs.

Further information

[Home Care in Bulgaria helps people live independently.](#)



Czechia: supporting families after childbirth

The Challenge: The period around childbirth represents a very demanding stage in a woman's life, which can have a negative impact on both her physical and mental health. Up to 20 per cent of women are then at risk of developing mental illness. Many women experience post-partum distress but do not receive the care they need.

Czechia provides a particularly relevant example of combining health and social policy under the ESF+ through the project entitled "Early support for families at risk," which developed an online screening tool and care coordinators to identify women experiencing psychosocial difficulties after childbirth and connect them with psychological and social services. Early identification of women at such risk enables the necessary support to be provided and prevent the development of more serious health conditions.

The project was piloted at Thomayer Hospital in Prague and subsequently contributed to the development of an integrated approach to identifying and supporting women and families at risk of psychosocial stress after childbirth.

They tested methods for identifying these at-risk women and, in collaboration with other organisations, established a system to ensure they receive the necessary health and social support in good time.

In a follow-up project now entering the implementation phase, the project organiser aims to roll out the screening method to all 78 maternity units in the Czech Republic and to pilot cooperation with selected social services in several regions. This new approach will make it easier for women at risk of mental illness to gain rapid access to specialist support - maternity ward staff will approach them to offer help, a specialist will provide them with support, and, where necessary, refer them to further specialist health and social services.

This project example demonstrates the value of early identification combined with a pathway to support. Screening by itself is not prevention. The important feature is the connection between identification, professional assessment, coordinated support, and follow-up.

Further information

[More information about the project](#)

[It received a 2025 REGIOSTARS award in the category of a social and inclusive Europe.](#)



Estonia: strengthening the child and family support system

The Challenge: Early childhood is a vulnerable time for families, a key life transition for new parents. It is important to ensure that support systems respond effectively to children's and families' needs, to improve service quality and accessibility, and to ensure that children grow up in a caring, safe and development-supportive environment.

One overarching social policy goal of the ESF+ in Estonia is to make the country a good place to start a family and raise children, and that Estonian children would be happy growing up in a caring, inclusive, safe and developing environment. The activities ensure equal opportunities for target group members of different genders, ages, regions and nationalities to participate in and benefit from the activities. The programme is implemented by the Department of Children and Families of the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Social Insurance Board, the National Institute for Health Development and the Centre for Health and Welfare Information Systems. More specifically the activities supported from 01.01.2023–31.12.2027 are the following:

- Developing parenting skills and supporting parenting and preventing children's risky behaviour
- Supporting children with multiple needs and their families
- Developing a cross-sectoral child protection organisational model
- Improving and diversifying the quality of substitute and follow-up care and family-based care
- Creating IT solutions to support children and families and effective child protection work
- Development and implementation of the Family Friendly Employer label programme
- Creating and developing family services in local authorities

Regarding the last activity on the creation and development of family services in local authorities, the specific operational objective is to create and develop prevention and family work centres and to increase the number and accessibility of family services in local and regional authorities to help families cope better. Family services are defined as programmes supporting parenting and couple relationships, health promotion, support groups, or other services that support families to be resilient. The local authority must be guided in the development of activities by the model of activities developed by the Child Welfare and Development Centre Foundation (LaHe). LaHe has developed and piloted in 2022 an operational model for a prevention and family work centre, referred to as "Family Nest" (or "Perepesa" in Estonian). This model aims to provide a systemic solution to support local authorities in improving the quality and accessibility of services for children and families and in increasing the effectiveness of preventive work with families. They currently operate in the cities of Põltsamaa, Türi, Viljandi, Tartu, Elva and Tallinn, and the network is expanding.

The Estonian example illustrates another possible use of EU funding: not only financing individual services, but strengthening the system around families.

Further information

[ESF+ Estonia website](#)

[ESF+ Programme for supporting children and families in Estonia](#)



Germany: local parent-support networks

The Challenge: services to support families are situated in multiple places, which can be overwhelming for families who can face a fragmented system to navigate. This lack of coordination can result in patchy service delivery at a time when families are vulnerable and need effective answers to their needs, with early intervention before their life situation spirals.

Families should not have to navigate fragmented systems on their own. EU funding can be used to build the local infrastructure that connects families to education, childcare, social services and community support.

Germany's "ElternChanceN – mit Elternbegleitung Familien stärken" programme demonstrates another model: investing in local networks. The programme is co-financed by the ESF+. The first phase supported 64 networks and delivered more than 3,400 family-oriented activities between 2022 and 2025. The programme is currently in its second funding phase, running from June 2025 to May 2028. The second phase supports 67 local parent-support networks. The networks provide low-threshold services primarily for families experiencing challenging circumstances and work with partners such as family education centres, childcare facilities, primary schools, municipal departments, migrant organisations, welfare organisations, and youth welfare services. The objective is to strengthen cooperation between institutions and create local prevention pathways for families.

The family support networks implement individually tailored services for families in special circumstances in their local areas. For each funded location - with the involvement of qualified parent mentors - personnel and material costs of up to €122,000 per fiscal year are made available in the second funding phase, over a three-year project period. The required matching funds amount to at least 10% of the total expenses. The project beneficiaries had to establish a coordination office, and a project consortium, with qualified parent mentors, in order to offer parent support services within the local community.

Project example: Strong Bonds - Network for Strong Families, in [Meissen](#). It supports parents as important players in early childhood education. The focus is on families with children of kindergarten and primary school age who live in Meissen (and the surrounding area) and are disadvantaged in their educational and participation opportunities. Parents are guided out of their feelings of being overwhelmed or helpless and their parenting skills are strengthened. This enables parents to (re)assume responsibility for their children's development and education. The parental support helps families manage transitions from kindergarten to primary school or to secondary school. Together with local partners, the support network is being expanded, and additional, easily accessible services are being created for families facing particular challenges.

Further information

[Phase 1 of Eltern Chancen](#) and [Phase 2 of Eltern Chancen](#)
[Overview of the funded projects of phase 2](#)



Ireland: support for young parents

The Challenge: Young mothers (and fathers) face the risk of discontinuing their education due to pregnancy and the subsequent impact on their career opportunities. Young parents can face several challenges simultaneously, and this can affect the broader family. For instance, parents who have teenage sons or daughters who are expecting a baby might be in distress - if the teenage son or daughter live at home with their baby, that means there are two families living under one roof. This can be very demanding and stressful.

Ireland provides an example of targeted support during the first stages of parenthood. The Young Parent Support Programme (YPSP) supports young parents up to the age of 24, including during pregnancy and the first 1,000 days of their child's life.

Rather than providing a single service, this model provides a gateway into multiple forms of family support. It illustrates the value of investing early in the parent-child relationship rather than waiting until difficulties require intensive intervention. They offer support, information and advocacy in all areas of a young parent's life including health, relationships, parenting, childcare, social welfare entitlements, education, training and anything else about which the mother or father is concerned. This support can be tailored and delivered in a way that best suits the individual needs of each young parent.

The programme is co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Union through the ESF+. Its expansion increased the number of sites from 11 to 15 in the relevant Tusla programme - the broader programme currently reports 19 projects across 16 Irish counties.

Support can include parenting and child-development support, welfare and rights information, accommodation, education and training, childcare, links to local services, support for mothers, fathers and other family members such as grandparents.

The programme is run by an organisation called Treoir, which was founded in 1976. It is a national organisation that consists of a network of services dedicated to supporting unmarried parents and their children. Initially, the organisation's goal was to provide essential support and information to unmarried mothers and the professionals assisting them during a time when unmarried women faced significant discrimination and social stigma, and their children were labelled as "illegitimate" since they were not born to married couples.

Further information

[ESF+ website in Ireland](#)
[Young Parent Support Programme](#)



Italy: childcare and work-family reconciliation

The Challenge: Across Europe, many parents struggle to balance work with caring responsibilities. Long hours, high childcare costs and limited flexibility can make it hard to stay in employment - especially for women. This example shows that investment in families also means reducing structural pressures on parents.

In Trento, Italy, the Service Voucher scheme is a key response to this challenge. Funded by the ESF+ and identified as a strategic priority for the 2021–2027 programming period, the scheme helps families access affordable childcare and education services. First introduced in 2005, it continues to reflect the province's long-term commitment to supporting working parents.

The scheme helps families meet the cost of childcare and educational services for children from three months to 14 years, with extended eligibility in some circumstances for children with disabilities. The programme is intended to help parents remain in employment or enter employment and training, while also reducing inequalities for families in vulnerable situations.

Support is targeted at working mothers and those entering employment or training. In single-parent families, fathers in similar situations can also apply. By helping with childcare costs, the vouchers remove one of the biggest barriers to finding and keeping a job.

From the beginning, the scheme has paid special attention to families with low incomes or those in vulnerable situations. By ensuring dedicated access to childcare, it helps reduce inequalities and lowers the risk of social exclusion.

Under the 2021–2027 funding period alone, around 8,800 people have already benefited from the scheme. With a dedicated budget of €42 million - over a quarter of the province's total ESF+ allocation - Trento is continuing its long-term investment in supporting families and building a more inclusive labour market.

Affordable, accessible childcare is not simply an employment measure. It can also be understood as family infrastructure: when parents can access reliable childcare, families have greater capacity to combine employment, care and family life.

Further information

[Trento Province website](#)

[European Commission website](#)



Latvia: measures to reduce domestic violence

The Challenge: "Often, behavioural problems in children and young people are closely linked to family relationships, as well as the social environments in which they stay – friends, school, and other factors. Multidimensional family therapy allows one to look at the young person's situation comprehensively and helps the family as a whole change behavioural patterns and strengthen interpersonal relationships," says project manager, Agnese Igaune, Director of Family Strengthening at the Latvian SOS Children's Villages Association.

Latvia provides an example of using the ESF+ to introduce an evidence-based family intervention for families raising adolescents with complex behavioural difficulties and addiction risks. The project "Support Instruments to Reduce Domestic Violence" runs from April 2024 to December 2029. It has total funding of approximately €5.45 million, including €4.64 million from the ESF+.

One of its objectives is to introduce evidence-based early-intervention instruments for violence prevention and strengthen cooperation between institutions involved in prevention and support. Parents of pre-school and school-age children are explicitly included among the target groups for primary prevention. The multidimensional family therapy approach described in the Latvian example works simultaneously with the young person, parents, the family as a whole, peers and school, and the wider social environment.

It treats difficult behaviour not simply as an individual problem of the child or adolescent, but as something that can be addressed through family relationships and the surrounding social environment. It demonstrates how EU funding can support family-based prevention.

Key activities in the project include:

1. Evaluation of the violence prevention system and improvement of the monitoring of the situation;
2. Improving support measures to reduce the risk of violence against children;
3. Introducing new methods for working with children and adults who are victims of violence and perpetrators;
4. Educational and informational activities for professionals and the general public.

The project is run by SOS Children's Villages.

Further information

[Website about the Latvia ESF+ programme to reduce domestic violence](#)



Poland: supporting transitions to adulthood for youth with disabilities

The Challenge: The employment gap begins early in life, as young people with disabilities encounter numerous obstacles in the education system. Consequently, they often leave school prematurely, which impacts both the individuals and their families. Specialists and career counsellors supporting young people with disabilities face several challenges. Interventions often lack the necessary flexibility, are implemented too late, and are not sufficiently integrated into broader policies and initiatives.

The NEVY-EVY project, funded by the ESF+, aims to increase employment chances and job quality among young persons with disabilities. This goal is achieved by developing, testing, evaluating, and popularising Job Crafting, an innovative model of work with unemployed individuals. Job Crafting is an approach that offers extensive support from a job crafter who accompanies unemployed individuals not only during the job search but also during employment. Job crafters enhance the sense of control and agency that allows employees to shape their tasks and relationships in the workplace.

Within this project, the Job Crafting model is being tailored to the specific needs of young persons with disabilities, accounting also for gender differences. European experts from various countries are co-designing the model to increase mutual learning and make the model more universal and possible to replicate in other contexts. They are testing and evaluating the effectiveness of Job Crafting in Poland and Slovenia, with a particular focus on young people in rural areas (as they have fewer job opportunities and worse access to public employment services). To increase the project's long-term impact, they plan to engage European policy-makers in their events (workshop, European parliament hearing, conference) to discuss how to mainstream disability in EU policies and services.

The social impact of the project is to pave the way towards creating a better working environment in employment support offered to young people with disabilities, in particular those from disadvantaged areas. From a broader perspective, the project aims to increase the number of individuals supported by Job Crafting and improve their skills, motivations and aspirations to live an independent life without stigma.

They have developed various tools, including a policy brief on disability inclusion in EU Youth Policies. This policy brief assesses how disability inclusion is addressed within the Reinforced Youth Guarantee and the broader legislative framework in Portugal, Spain, Italy and Poland. The analysis shows that EU-level commitments have strengthened the visibility of young persons with disabilities within youth employment policies, but national implementation remains uneven.

Further information

[NEVY-EVY Project website](#)



4. Conclusions and next steps

COFACE Families Europe advocates for strong European social funds to be invested in services and support for families. This includes work on ensuring the EU funds are in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and not funding more institutions, and that the funds are used to boost implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, and especially the European Child Guarantee, European Care Strategy and European Anti-Poverty Strategy.

The current European Social Fund Plus (2021-2027) funds family support of different types including early childhood education and care, long-term care, parental support and family centres or hubs in the community. Taken together, the projects in this EU Funding brief demonstrate that "investing in families" does not mean funding one particular type of family programme. It can mean investing across the family life course.

As the new generation of EU funds for 2028-2034 are being negotiated at EU level, and the new investment priorities are in discussion at national level, these examples serve as inspiration for continued investments in families post-2027.

