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# THE REFLECTIVE POWER OF PROTOTYPES

**Interreg**   
2 Seas Mers Zeeën  
**PACE**  
European Regional Development Fund

 **artevelde**  
university of applied sciences

support for professionals  
guiding parents in  
vulnerable situations  
towards employment



## Colophon

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European Regional Development Fund



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For further information on the PACE project, visit the website at [www.mechelen.be/pacefinalevent](http://www.mechelen.be/pacefinalevent)

Graphic design by [www.gestalte.be](http://www.gestalte.be)

## Introduction

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Providing Access to Childcare and Employment (PACE) was an INTERREG 2seas Social Innovation project that ran from 2016 to 2020. One of the aims of this project was to design systems of support for people in vulnerable situations with young children. This support primarily focused on providing high-quality, flexible child care in combination with support towards the labour market. Based on interviews with professionals and parents on childcare and employment support, prototypes of childcare and activation were developed. Such prototypes make the different approaches visible and allow upscaling of the approaches that have been developed in PACE. This publication focuses solely on the prototypes of activation. Prototypes are models that describe the vision and organisational structures professionals can use to support parents in vulnerable situations towards the labour market. They were all brought into practice by the partners of the PACE project.

The prototypes related to childcare are described in a separate publication.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Raes, A., Piessens, A., & Willockx, D. (2020). Flexibility in childcare. Mechelen: City of Mechelen. To download visit: <http://www.mechelen.be/pacefinalevent>

# Reading and using the prototypes 'activation towards the labour market'

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There is a wide variety of views on the use of prototypes. The prototypes presented in this publication are practical and research based prototypes. We position them as reflective materials for practice and research and not as an end product, which is sometimes assumed in relation to research prototypes (Koskinen & Frens, 2017).<sup>2</sup>

First of all, the design the prototypes was based on interaction between researchers, different professionals and parents. And, the design is mainly based on an inductive bottom up process. Using data from different research sources (interviews, observations, focus groups) with different target groups (professionals, parents, external stakeholders), propositions were made and interactively discussed with project professionals. This collaborative approach led to adaptations of the original designs. Secondly, in discussing the designs, the idea of seeing them as reflective tools, rather than fixed results of the research process originated. This interactive process can also be seen in the elements included in the prototypes. There is a mix of defining elements and theoretical linkage with existing models (e.g. Case management theory), and there are more fluid elements to activate discussion (eg. The tensions between different positionalities).

## Structure of the prototypes

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There are different elements that we included in the design. We give a short description of the different elements in the prototypes.

- 1. General description of the prototype:** In the general description we capture the main meaning and purpose of the prototype. This is what is felt as the dominant theme in relation to this prototype. We looked for a common description of the prototype in order to make it discernible of others.
- 2. Characteristics of the prototype:** the main elements of the prototype are described. Some key positive connotations were put forward in relation to the prototype. This is related to the 'what works for parents' in relation to this prototype.
- 3. Continuums or fields of tension.** We introduced these to give an indication on four different tensions within the practice of support towards these families. Of course, small differentiations between different projects and practices is possible. Especially these fields of tensions are meant to give a general impression of the possible pro's and con's of a certain prototype. Practitioners saw this part of the prototype as very meaningful to think about their own practice, their professional view and the viewpoints of their own organisation. Moreover, discussing these tensions also opened up reflection on contextual issues on a policy level.
  - a. Strong or weak life world emersion**  
On this continuum a qualitative estimate is made concerning the degree of connection that is made with the life contexts of parents in vulnerable situations. For example, is there an imbedded support provision near the place parents live (e.g. A social centre or a child care centre where parents can easily access support) and is this support really connected to the neighbourhood concerned.

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<sup>2</sup> Koskinen, I., & Frens, J. (2017). Research Prototypes. Archives of Design Research, 30(3), 5-14.  
doi:10.15187/adr.2017.08.30.3.5

- b. Systematic or organic approach**

This continuum refers to more or less rules and regulations that apply in the working context or organisation. For example, is there a strict policy on entrance of the service, clear regulations on how to apply for support, strict target group selection etc. The opposite is a very open system where the working principles are sometimes less clear and more adaptable to new contexts (e.g. changes in support needs).
  - c. Priority on guidance towards labour market or broader support scope**

This tension refers to the broadness or narrowness of the support possibilities. What range of support is given within the service and is it strictly seen as guidance towards the labour market or is there a broader scope where other goals of parents can be addressed.
  - d. Team approach or solo key person**

This continuum refers to the way personal support is organised. Are parents dependent on one supervisor in their journey to work, or is there a whole team ready for them? In the team approach there is a certain redundancy among team members in order to support parents. In other project parents have a single contact of support, normally the same person.
- 4. Conditions for implementation.** This part concerns the different conditions to implement or upscale the prototype. Some models and choices are only possible if different conditions are in place (e.g. In PACE, there were resources in terms of staff and funding to create specific professional input such as case management).

## The different prototypes

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In the PACE project, four different prototypes of activation were piloted. The prototypes thus serve as a generalised description of concrete activation practices in existing organisations. In the course of the PACE project, we have found that they can be very useful in instigating reflection on activation practices on different levels. On a policy level, for instance to think about possibilities of implementing this kind of support. On an organisational and team level, this could be to reflect about the way support is organised and to detect possible pitfalls and options for change.

- 1. Community-based case management**
- 2. Employment brokerage**
- 2. Integrated network support**
- 4. Intensive employment training**

These prototypes are presented in the following overviews.



# Community-based case management

Intensive community involvement is a starting point for contact with a team of specialized case managers working together as a team. The team provides adapted support according to the needs of parents. There is expertise on labor market guidance, child care and welfare provision and professionals have a profound knowledge of the target group.



*“It feels like family,  
you are always  
welcome here ...  
the people here  
know who you are.”*

context and lifeworld  
immersion = strong



context and lifeworld  
immersion = weak

systematic approach



organic approach

priority on link towards  
labour market



work if possible,  
but no obligation

team approach



solo key person

## KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- situated in the context of parents (territorial)
- quality of life approach: interventions are organised around families' needs and goals
- comprehensive demand oriented approach
- parents have strong ownership of their own care trajectory
- broad view on soft and labour market skills
- team approach: specialisation but redundancy
- close links to vocational possibilities (drama, artwork, writing etc.) that encompass broad interests of parents
- long term perspective
- strong organisational openness to involve parents in the own structures

## General description

As the title of this prototype highlights, community connection is central to this prototype. Support to families is linked to and integrated into a broader organization of imbedded social work interventions and building a relation with the people in the suburban neighborhood is central. The support towards the labour market is taken up by a team of professionals, rather than a single person. Each team member has specific expertise, but knows the families well enough to provide general support. Informal connections between professionals and parents, as well as between parents themselves are key. Furthermore, there is a clear aim to involve people within the organizational structures e.g. a lot of the parents also take up volunteer work within the organization. Parents are not forced to work. By participation in the training sessions, the openness to explore their competences creates new motivation and parents become stronger in making new choices and seeing new opportunities for themselves in relation to the job market.

## Advantages of this prototype

### Excellent accessibility

Thanks to the embedding in the local context, there is a very low threshold to connect to the professionals. Professionals in turn are aware of the overall situation and needs of the families.

### Broad view on needs

Although guidance towards the labour market is a central issue in the PACE approach, this prototype emphasises the broad and holistic approach of people and their support needs. Everyone is welcome and will receive adapted support on their rhythm. Professionals and parents describe PACE as a 'projet de vie' ('life project').

### Redundancy of support

Families are supported by a team of professionals. People are always welcome. Even when their personal key worker is absent, parents will meet other professionals or parents they know.

### Conditions for implementation

This prototype requires a basic organisational structure within the community that is visible and well-known by the people in the neighbourhood. If not, an investment is needed to provide such a structure. Enough attention should be given to good general service provision in the community and the development of a good network, preferably with the same low thresholds for the service users. The possibilities to these easy and informal contacts, create new opportunities for parents (e.g. sports, drama, social connections).

A reflective organisational climate is essential to cope with the complex nature of this kind of community based work. This calls for a clear vision within the organisation which is

element of constant renewal and critical reflection with all professionals and volunteers. For example, some caution should be given to the organic nature of this kind of work and to the adaptability to the needs of every single person. Some experienced professionals warn against an approach that is too loose, where people aren't challenged enough to take action towards the labour market. Special attention is needed to provide enough support for the team to keep an open and low-threshold way of working and to handle the complex nature of support needs.

### Example

The Centre Social Eclaté of Saint-Martin-Boulogne is an example of this prototype. In this community centre, parents are reached by low threshold 'café-parents', moments where they can meet each other and professionals and talk about their experiences in general or experiences in relation to their work situation. In the community centre they have easy access to a variety of training courses and workshops as well as individual meeting opportunities with a keyworker. A variety of training courses and workshops is offered to parents, combined with individual appointments with a keyworker. Parents can participate but also organise activities and there are many opportunities to volunteer within the community centre. Parents especially stress the importance of a personal relation and adaptability of support:

"I got personal support; the staff is available. This is different from the Job Centre, where there is only contact through email and it is more administrative. We are looking together at the possibilities."

(a mother from Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2018)

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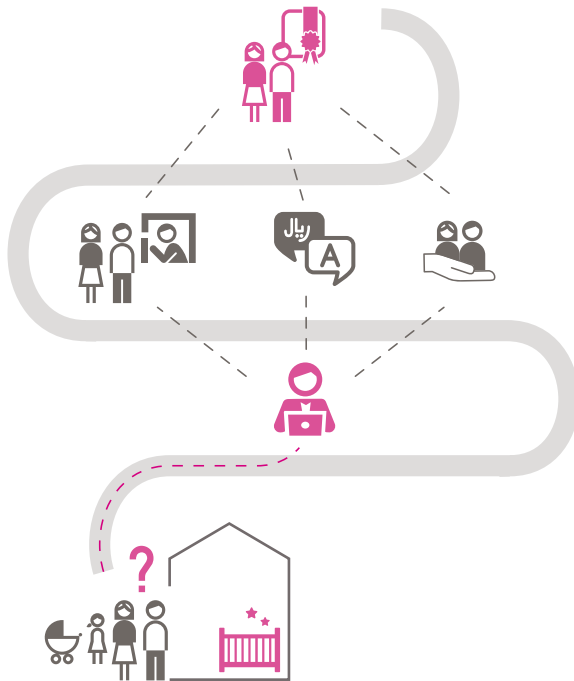
***"They are available, there is always the possibility for an appointment. Also: they give good advice and make sure the information they give is correct. At the Public Employment Service, they did not tell me all these things."***

(a mother from Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2018)

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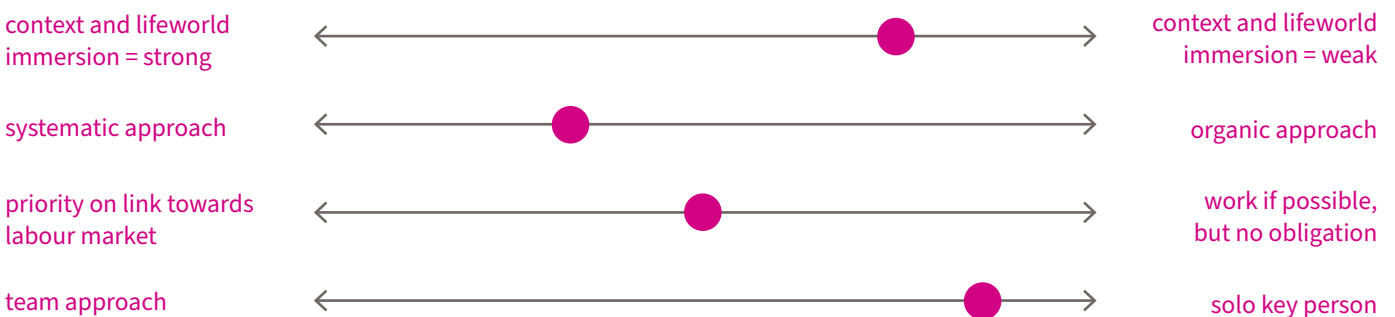
# Employment brokerage

A key person guides parents to work. This person is linked to childcare. Parents are signposted to the key person through childcare or other services. The key person links these parent to possible employment opportunities or helps them with other work related issues (training and education, language support, ...). Other life domains can be covered, depending on the expertise of the key person, the key person's network and the focus of the organisation.



*“I wouldn’t have made it without support of Tina.\* I didn’t know what to do at that moment. It was a life saving opportunity. But also ... if I hadn’t taken the first step ... outside, this service is not well known.”*

\* All names and identifying details have been changed to protect the anonymity of individuals



## KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Depends on referral by others (childcare workers, schools for adult education, welfare services)
- Referral is aimed at the labour market, but other domains are taken in-to account
- The distance to childcare varies (location: in, in close connection or further away)
- Specific support concerning areas related to work (language, public employment service, regularisation issues)
- No real connection to the context (eg. no house visits, mainly no territorial embeddedness)
- Mostly quite intensive and adherent support once parents are reached (variations possible)
- Mostly intensive caseload (potential bottleneck and can reduce accessibility for parents)
- No real volunteerwork for parents (less opportunities)



## General description

In this prototype a key person guides parents to work. Linking parents to the matching service and providing good information is key in this prototype. There are different ways of reaching the parents in need. The most important referral in PACE is by the childcare services. The way this is organized can be different, depending on the way the keyworkers are linked to the childcare services and the accessibility of the key workers. Preferably, there needs to be a good connection of the key person to the child care services to reach the parents and build a trustful work relation. Although the focus is strongly related to labour market support, assistance can also incorporate other life domains (e.g. language support, financial guidance).

## Advantages of this prototype

### Focus on employment

The main focus of this key worker is on linking with employment services. Therefore, this intervention is usually quite lean and directed towards this aim.

### Expertise of key worker

Linked to the focus on employment, the key worker is able to develop expertise on the domain of work and employment. Moreover, the keyworker can link with existing networks or build own contacts with important labour market actors.

### Single point of contact

Parents appreciate the clearness of a single person who is responsible for linking them to the labour market.

## Conditions for implementation

It is important that the keyworkers in this prototype have expertise related to the labour market. Also, they have to be able to build connections with parents easily. Sufficient expertise and experience of keyworkers and providing good support for the key workers is advisable. The accessibility for parents is an important point of attention in this model. The key workers should have enough contextual and life world experience and be imbedded in the areas where parents live. Also they should invest in informing parents and signposting organisations about their offer.

Access to job offers and employment related actors in the neighbourhood is an important focus point for keyworkers. This also depends on network availability as possibilities for parents depend on the strength of the network of welfare and employment services. You need a strong network on the level of organisations as well as on the level of the key person. Once the intervention is known a risk might be the caseload of the keyworker. Sometimes guiding parents in vulnerable situations on different life areas besides work takes a lot of time and effort, which can clog up the supply side.

## Example

In Gravesham, Kent, parents are supported by a designated keyworker. They are offered training in house but can also access education and training in other organisations. One of the keyworkers is physically present in the local Job Centre once every two weeks. This lowers the threshold for parents visiting the Job Centre to get information on childcare and vice versa, the Job Centre staff's awareness about parents' personal situation and childcare needs increases.

Parents highly appreciate the different course options giving them the opportunity to get a view on their competences and finding out what they want to do. They mention the importance of choice and the openness of keyworkers to fit courses to their needs. Also the tailored way of working and the adaptability to their needs is stressed by parents:

“The support is different from other services. Especially there is a difference in the way they treat you. There is no judgement.” Moreover, the personal relation is something that parents need to trust the broader support system. “Our keyworker does believe in us. She is supportive through it all. It's not just a job for her, it's personal. Our growth is her growth.” (a mother from Gravesham, 2018)

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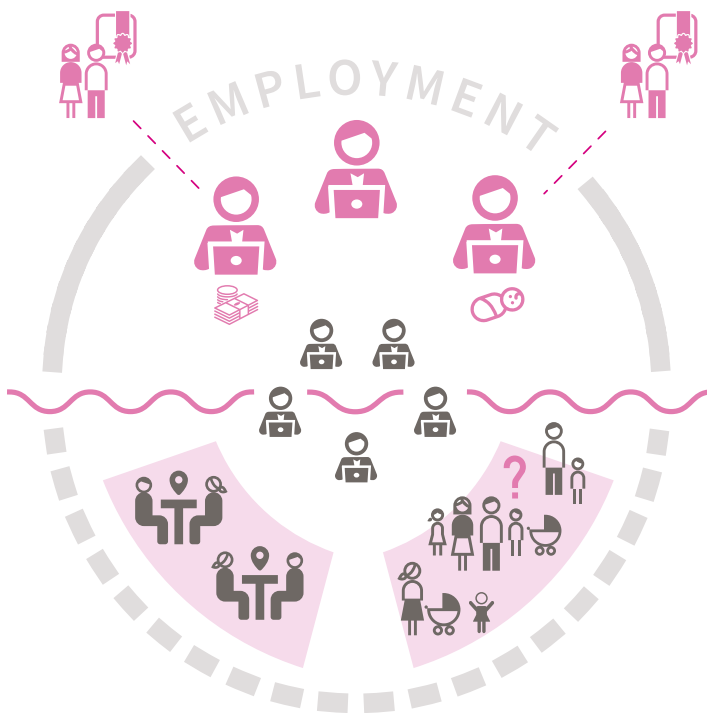
***“I have a learning disability and my keyworker made me see it as something positive and taught to say it to others. I've never been this open. I was surprised that they made an appointment for a job interview. My keyworker gave me confidence, insight on my talents. I can be honest now. In PACE, they were fine with learning a little bit slower.”***

(a mother from Gravesham, 2018)

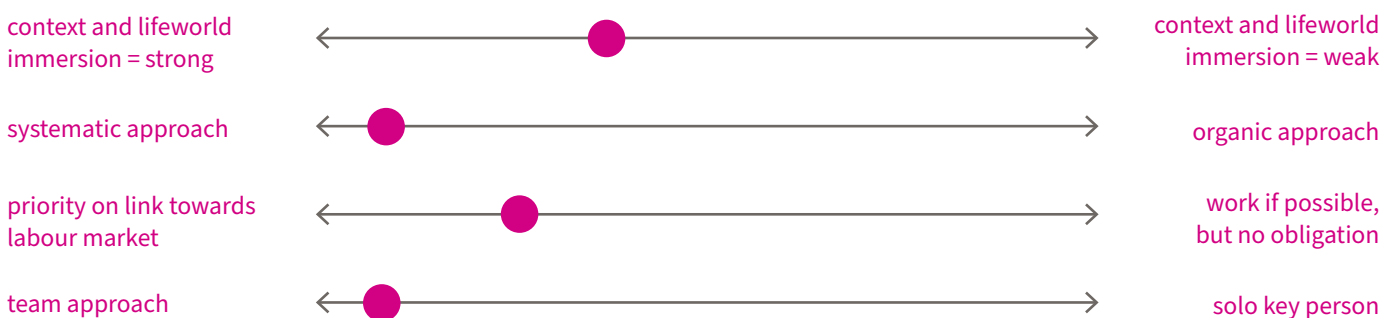
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# Integrated network support

Front line workers embedded in the close context of parents that are linked to a strong back office of experts working in a clear network together.



*“The staff here will push you a little bit. You have to work hard, because they also work hard. At the same time, they understand that sometimes life gets in the way.”*



## KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- The system contains and combines many different kinds of expertise (on childcare, employment, benefits, ...)
- Very strong back-office linking different expertise and locations together in a well organised network
- Clear procedures are set in place to refer parents from one place to another
- Network meetings for sharing information, knowing each other, training
- Parents are accompanied by a low-threshold key person that links to “the systemic network” when needed.
- The employment support is well-structured through forms and meetings. There is a clear logic in terms of back-up, files, registration.

## General description

This prototype is characterized by a strong integration of different forms of expertise in one integrated network of support. The prototype can be described in two layers, one that specifically targets the connection with parents and tries to build relational connection with them, and another that functions as a back-office providing the necessary expertise in the right place and at the right moment. The first layer contains different key workers that are present in child care and build relations with parents. These key workers are closely connected to – even part of – a team that contains different forms of expertise such as a financial expert knowing everything about benefits, a child care broker and coaches for the keyworkers. In this prototype it is important to have an excellent connection between the keyworkers and the team members in the back-office with different expertise.

## Advantages of this prototype

### 'All in one' approach

Different forms of expertise are linked together in one organisational structure. This is highly appreciated by parents because it is clear and the connection with different professionals in the network is facilitated this way.

### Clear and target oriented

The integrated network approach has clear goals and is oriented on good communication among practitioners and sharing of expertise. By working like this, the support network presents itself as target oriented for parents.

### Efficient

The integrated network is efficient. By regulating everything in one organisational structure, the support can be organised within the team itself and is less dependent on other services.

## Conditions for implementation

As professionals state, it takes time to build an integrated network. Learning to 'see' each other's realities can take a while, child care services and the labour market are different worlds to start from. Professionals stress the importance of teamwork. Attitudes of key workers should be directed towards working with others within a network. A clear vision – e.g. on the central position of the parent – is necessary in the network. According to professionals this kind of support is systemic but should also be adaptable and flexible to address the different needs of parents.

The possible dominance of a professional network is recognized by professionals. Related to this, the question on parents' ownership of their own trajectory should be a constant point of attention in this kind of network development. As parents testify the sometimes implicit pressure that can emanate of this kind of networks (e.g. the pressure towards the labour market). Also, an important issue is the accessibility of networks as some thresholds might be too difficult to take for the most disadvantaged parents. Also, more structural

questioning of boundaries can evaporate, leading to an encapsulated interventional system learning parents to use the system as good as possible, without questioning its premises. Testimonies of parents show important structural problems to combine the pressure from being activated towards work and combining this with a family life.

## Example

The PACE model of the city of Brighton & Hove in the UK is an example of this prototype. The city offers tailored childcare brokerage for parents in PACE, guiding parents to nurseries, childminders or the at-home childcare service. Parents are reached by different key workers that are easy to contact in child care services. The key workers as well as the broader network are all integrated in the city administration. The keyworkers help parents access other services and is linked to services within the city council. This allows to work on access to childcare, benefits, employment support etc. Parents are offered a range of training courses and workshops in-house and in collaboration with external partners. There is a broad offer of volunteering opportunities for parents.

Professionals indicate the specific and strengths based view that is present in the network in relation to welfare support. They stress the importance of advocating for the parents. This view is also reflected in the narratives of parents:

"We learn to use the system in a smart way: the PACE officer helps us with this. There are ways to make sure that you get more money in but do not lose too much money, you have to make sure you work the right amount of hours and ask for the right things in terms of benefits."  
*(mothers from Brighton & Hove, 2018).*

Also the deep understanding of the life conditions of parents is a point of attention in Brighton & Hove.

"Pace gave me the motivation to sort out my CV and start looking for work. My keyworker was extremely supportive and helped me to understand how finding work would impact on my eligibility for tax credits and financial help with childcare."  
*(a parent's closedown story from Brighton & Hove)*

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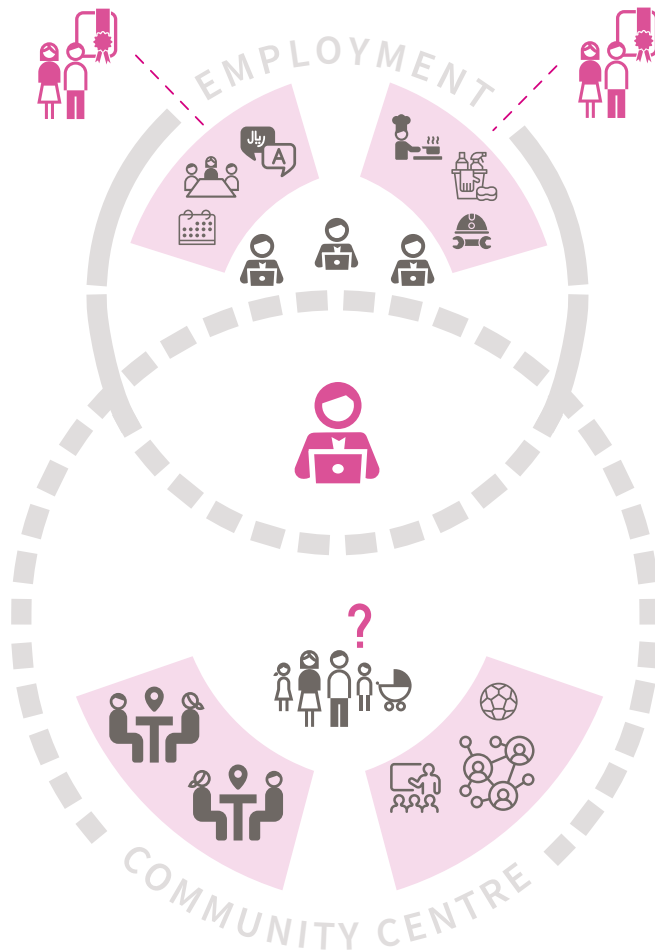
**"They monitor a lot more than work, they look much broader. They also understand, and see that life gets in the way."**

*(a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2018)*

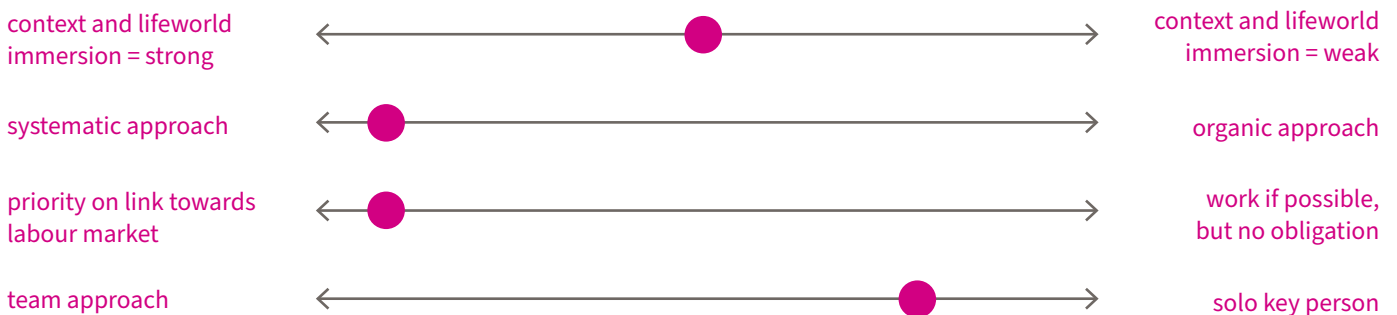
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# Intensive employment training

Intensive model of training towards specific work related skills by organising work and volunteer opportunities 'in house'. Focus is on personal growth towards labour market competences



“Training sessions are excellent and a one-on-one coach is very nice, but it could also be broader, now it is strongly work related, we are on a fast track.”



## KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Very systematic approach on labour market skills
- Selection of target group according to strict screening (language skills, social skills)
- Result driven
- Specific intervention directed towards the labor market, support on other life domains less prominent
- Access by gatekeeper linked to other service providers
- Workrelated activities are installed in the organisation
- Actual funded workplaces are accessible in the organisation (seen as a stepping stone towards regular work)
- Volunteers are connected to people in training

## General description

In this prototype the focus is specifically on parents who want to work. The prototype combines a contextual based approach in vulnerable neighbourhoods with a specific training intervention on work related competences. The focus is on individual tailored work related skills and parents are guided by a mentor during the program. To enter this training segment, parents need to be motivated and ready, there is a selection procedure that looks for this specific target group. Parents with too many problems on different life domains need to work on these issues first. Parents can always enter the other part of this prototype, where low threshold support is given by community workers, other parents are referred to organisations outside the organisation.

## Advantages of this prototype

### Specific job training

Short and specific period of intensive and on target training towards the labour market (limited in time).

### In house facilities

This prototype is linked to a broader organisational structure providing opportunities to 'in house' training of skills and competences. Moreover, parents can take up volunteer work and subsidized labor in specific trajectories within the organisation.

### Personal and tailored

Although this prototype is organised very systematic on an organisational level, the target is to provide individualized and tailored support on the micro level.

## Conditions for implementation

This prototype needs to be imbedded in a broader organisational structure in order to reach the parents. Moreover, the prototype really selects on already existing preconditions (e.g. language) or motivation towards work. This causes less opportunities for the more disadvantaged parents. Great care should be given to this group of parents as they may potentially dropout of necessary support. This is done by additional support in the organisation or by good referral to the suited care.

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*“Often you get the question  
“Madam, what have you done  
in the past eleven years?” –  
“Yes, but I have been a mother.”*

*(a mother from The Hague, 2020)*

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*“I was then linked to a mentor.  
Together with him I had  
weekly sessions for about six  
months. When I started, my  
self-confidence was low, and I  
couldn't name my qualities and  
talents very well. My mentor  
helped to rediscover them,  
which helped my self-confidence  
grow. I have also had support in  
writing motivation letters and  
writing my CV.”*

*(a mother from The Hague, 2020)*

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The prototype works with volunteer mentors, so good support of this volunteer group is essential for its good functioning. Also the match between mentor and parent should be handled with care as there needs to be a good connection from the start to succeed. Moreover the person guiding the entrance of parents in the training should also be able to link with other support, training or care. A good view on the needs of the different parents is crucial. Also, parents need to be able to fall back on this coordinator if something doesn't work out with their mentor.

## Example

De Mussen is located in a multicultural neighbourhood in the city of the Hague, called 'Schilderswijk'. The neighbourhood centre provides different kind of meeting options for people of the area. In this context vulnerable parents who do not have a job and have children up to the age of 12, can make use of formal or informal and/or occasional child care. If they are what professionals call 'employable', they can enter a six-month coaching programme to work on their labour market skills. They are paired up with a mentor, mostly people from large businesses and employment networks and willing to share their knowledge and expertise with the parent. They coach the parent and help them with the different steps towards employment. Also, in the community centre, parents can make use of different low threshold activities and training courses. Most parents first steps are in subsidised employment. This is temporary and provides no added value for parents, however, for some parents this is a stepping stone to a permanent job.



# Concluding remarks and reflective questions for policy and practice

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When using the prototypes some specific points of attention need to be addressed. First of all, practice never collides with a prototype completely. The prototypes are in that sense reductions of complex realities, where different combinations of prototypes are possible. Secondly, in the research we opted for this way of imaging because of the reflective power these prototypes have. For one, fieldworkers and organisations can reflect on their way of helping this target group, but also policy can be influenced by some important elements in the prototypes. There are strengths and weaknesses depending on the prototype.

However, it is also clear that some important elements are recurrent, whatever prototype is described. By listening carefully to what PACE parents had to tell us about the interventions, it was possible to find out what they really appreciate and what they experience as helpful support. This is what is helpful for most parents:

- The availability of a real and engaged connection with a key worker;
- Flexible support with an eye for ownership of the parents' own trajectory. By doing so, parents find their own intrinsic motivation to progress instead of being pressed by benefit gain or loss;
- Broad scope of support instead 'just' child care and labour market.

These elements seem to be related to how support is organized on a meso level. Organisations need a clear vision on what support for vulnerable people should be and what thresholds they encounter in daily life. So support systems should be adaptive and participatory in nature. Having a choice, feeling appreciated and part of a bigger group of people opens up new opportunities for parents.

On a macro level this calls for policy that is developed with a rights perspective as frame of reference. The right on a decent job, the right on adapted child care, the right to basic provision when not employed etc. In order to give some input for reflection of different levels, we provide some leading questions for practice and policy. Of course, these are not exhaustive and can be flexible adapted according to use.

## Micro level (front line workers)

- How can parents connect to our service? How do parents experience first contact with our service?
- Who takes up the role of key worker for parents? Is this clear for them?
- How do we handle advocating for parents towards the labour market?
- Is there continuous support for parents or do they depend on a single point of contact?
- How do we make sure the link between childcare and employment support does not create additional boundaries to childcare? (e.g. *only people who are in employment support can access childcare or occasional childcare*)

## Meso level

- Do we have a good view on all potential service users?
- What kind of protocol do we have to work with other organizations or services?
- Is this protocol known enough by the different partners in the network and related networks or organizations?

- What is the role/mandate of key workers in the network? Do they have sufficient skills, access to resources, power, ... to support parents and advocate for parents with other services?
- Is it possible for parents to participate on the network level or are they merely represented by their key workers?
- How can parents give their opinions and input in the organization or network?

## Macro level

- How is the specific PACE view and method known in the broader context of society and what can we do to get it known?
- What influence do we aim for with the organizations and network (e.g. in new policy making or in changing existing policy)? How can we work towards this kind of influence?
- How can we strengthen our critical role towards activation policy directed at our target groups?
- Do we invest in partnerships that can empower the voice of parents in vulnerable situations? How can we increase this investment?