

# Panel Discussion: Supporting parents and carers in the early Years: effective models of intervention

**Houses of the Child and Family coaches: integrated support for families in vulnerable situations (?)**

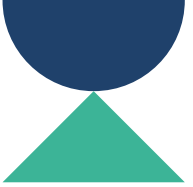


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**Berlin**



## 1. The Local Situation

- ▶ *Families in vulnerable situations in Belgium*
- ▶ *Current policies*

## 2. Support for Families ... in vulnerable situations

- ▶ *Houses of the Child and Family Coaches*

## 3. Conditions for Effective Support

- *Requirements of family support workers*
- *Requirements of organizations?*
- *Requirements of policymakers?*

# 1.

## The Local Situation

- ✓ Families in vulnerable situations in Belgium
- ✓ Current policies

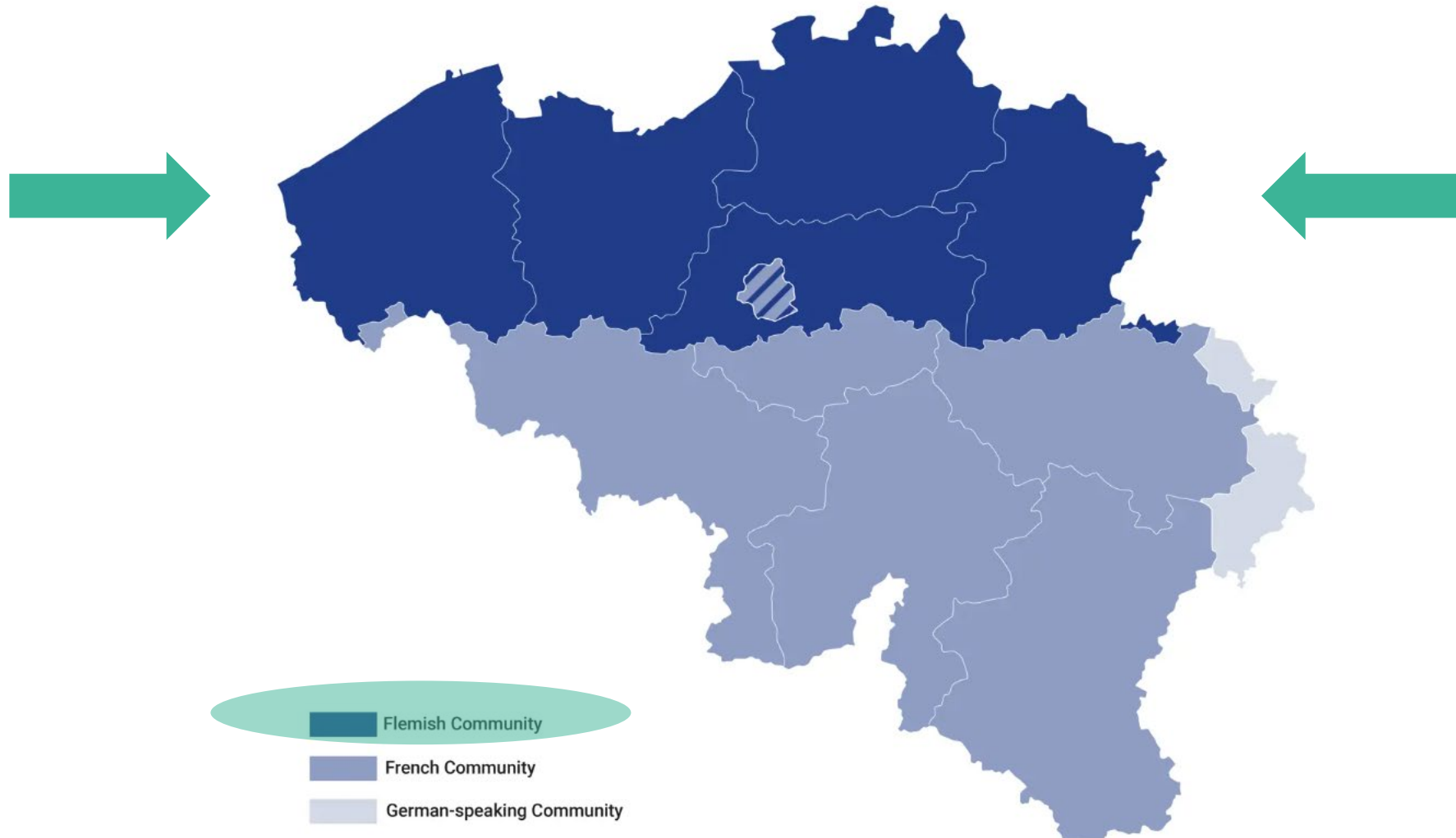
# Families in vulnerable situations in Belgium



Insufficient Support  
Fragmented Support  
Not customized to meet the specific requirements of families, of parents & children

Level	Measurement	Flanders	Brussels	Wallonia
Family	Poverty Risk Index Kind & Gezin 2022	12,6%	24,5%	N/A
Children	EU-SILC 2021	8,5%	21%	17,3%
Citizens	EU-SILC 2023	12%	38%	24%

**Current Policies** ➤ <https://belgian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/presidency/communities-and-regions/>



Map of the communities in Belgium | © Belgian presidency



# Current Policies in Belgium and Flanders: a brief selected overview

## Interfederal

- Interfederal plan for integrated care (Protocol agreement of November 9, 2023)
- ...

3 Programmes

- Vulnerable pregnant women
- Vulnerable individuals
- Obesity > children and adolescents

## Flanders

- Decree: The organization of activities for parenting support (Jan. 19, 2001)
- Decree: The organization of preventive parenting support (July 13, 2007)
- Decree: The organization of preventive family support (Nov. 29, 2013): A House of the Child in every municipality
- Flemish Action Plan for Poverty Reduction 2020-2024
- Decree: Early and Nearby (May 9, 2024): towards a strong and integrated youth and family policy > *not yet implemented*



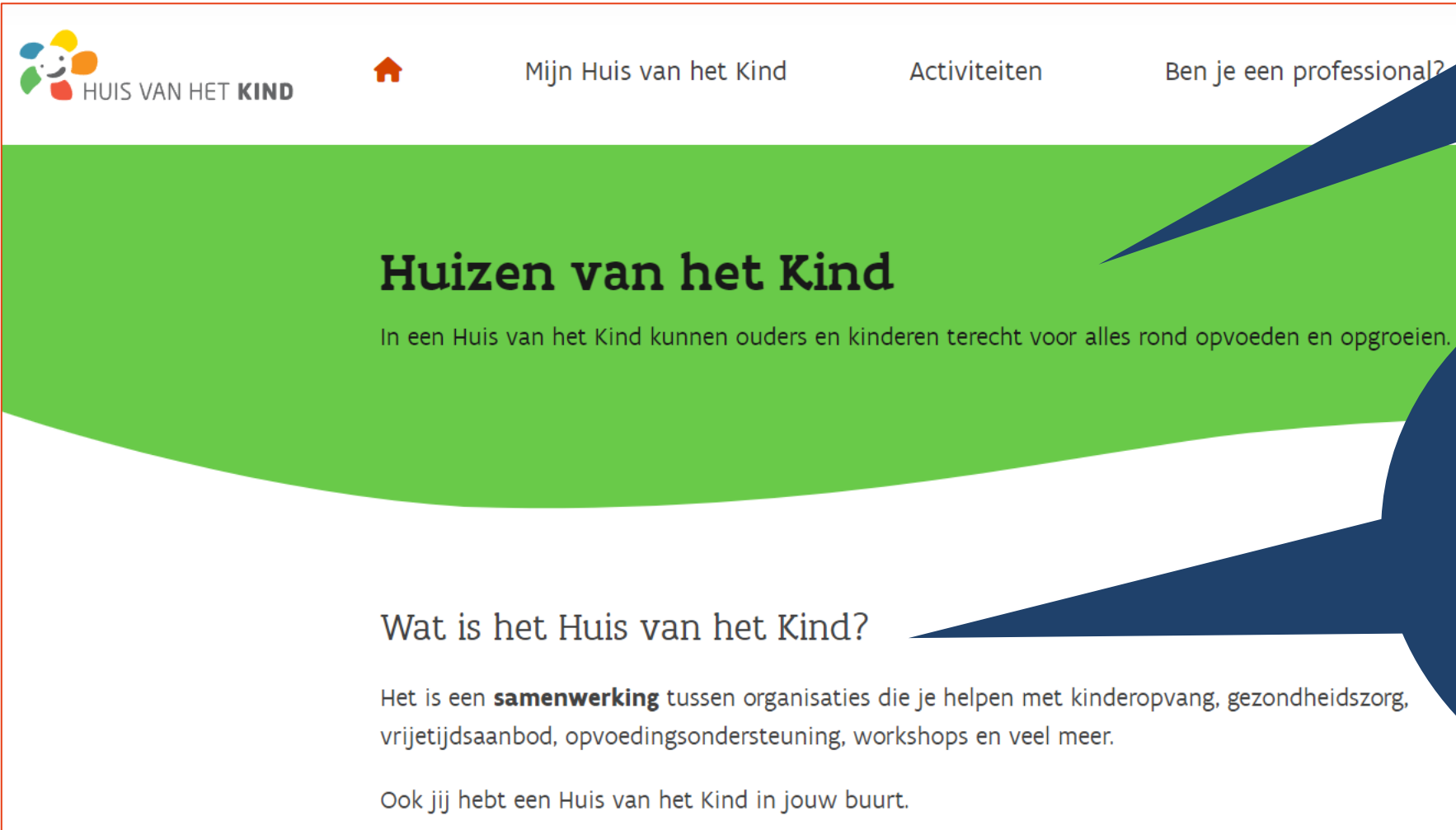
# 2.

## Support for families ... in vulnerable situations

- ✓ **Houses of the Child**
- ✓ **Family Coaches**

Support for families ... in vulnerable situations

**Houses of the Child** ➤ [www.huizenvanhetkind.be](http://www.huizenvanhetkind.be)



The screenshot shows the homepage of 'Huis van het Kind'. At the top left is the logo, a stylized figure with colorful dots, followed by the text 'HUIS VAN HET KIND'. To the right are navigation links: a home icon, 'Mijn Huis van het Kind', 'Activiteiten', and 'Ben je een professional?'. Below the navigation is a large green banner with the title 'Huizen van het Kind' and the subtitle 'In een Huis van het Kind kunnen ouders en kinderen terecht voor alles rond opvoeden en opgroeien.' Below the banner is a section titled 'Wat is het Huis van het Kind?' with a paragraph explaining it as a collaboration between organizations for childcare, healthcare, leisure, parenting support, and workshops. It also mentions that every neighborhood has one.

**Houses of the Child**  
In a House of the Child, parents and children can find support for all matters related to parenting and growing up.

**What is the House of the Child?**  
It is a **collaboration** between organizations that can help you with childcare, healthcare, leisure activities, parenting support, workshops, and much more.  
There is also a House of the Child in your area

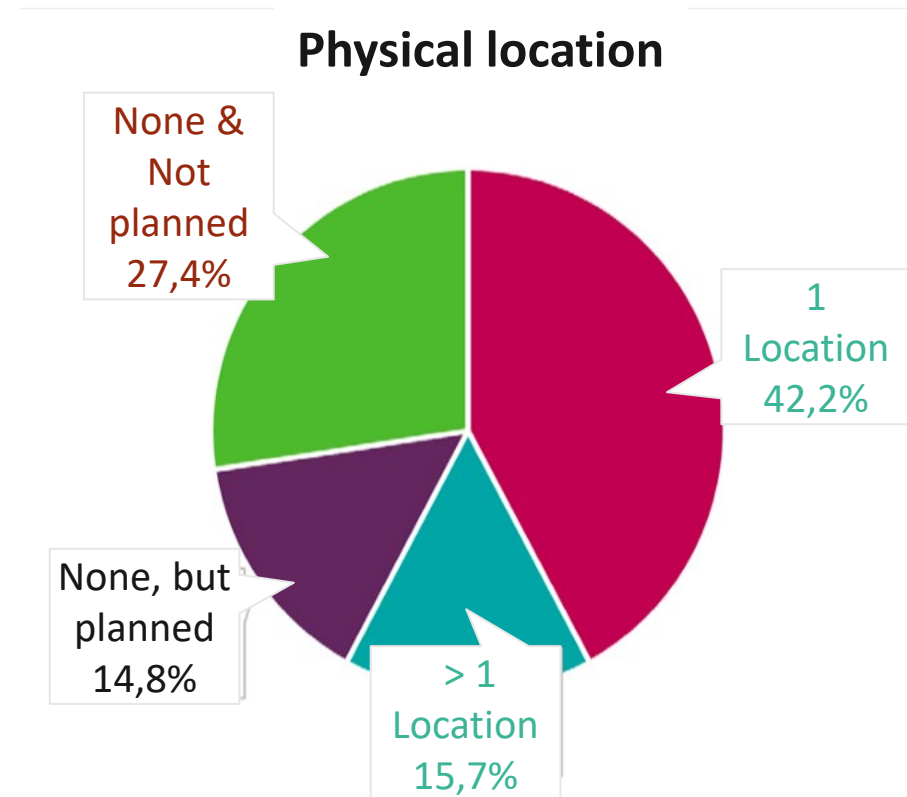


- House of the Child as a local basic facility
- Connecting life domains in a House of the Child
- Appropriate support for every child, every family
- 227 Houses of the Child spread across Flanders and Brussels

29 inter-municipal Houses of the Child

300 Municipalities in Flanders and 19 in Brussels

- ▣ Stable ratio 'Houses with' and 'Houses without' a physical location
- ▣ Inter-municipal Houses
  - Higher rate of 1 or > 1 physical location
  - Higher rate of > 1 physical location
  - Note: a larger operational area

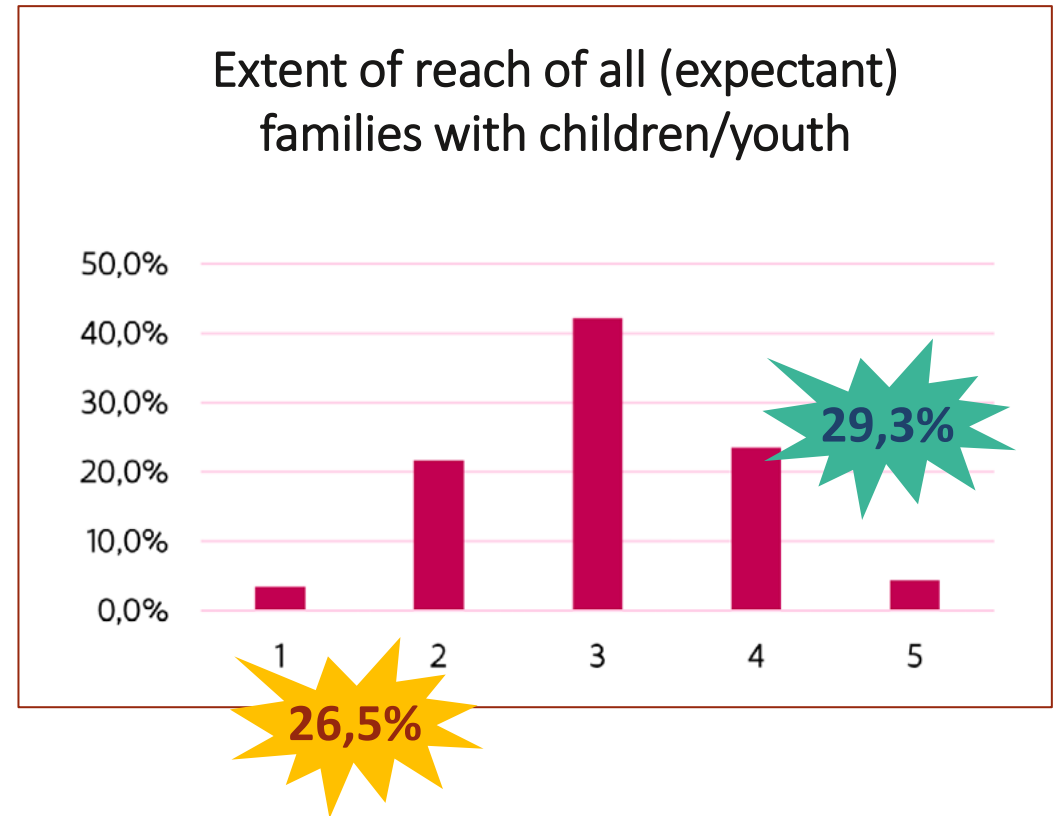


## ▣ Specific target group(s) mostly reached?

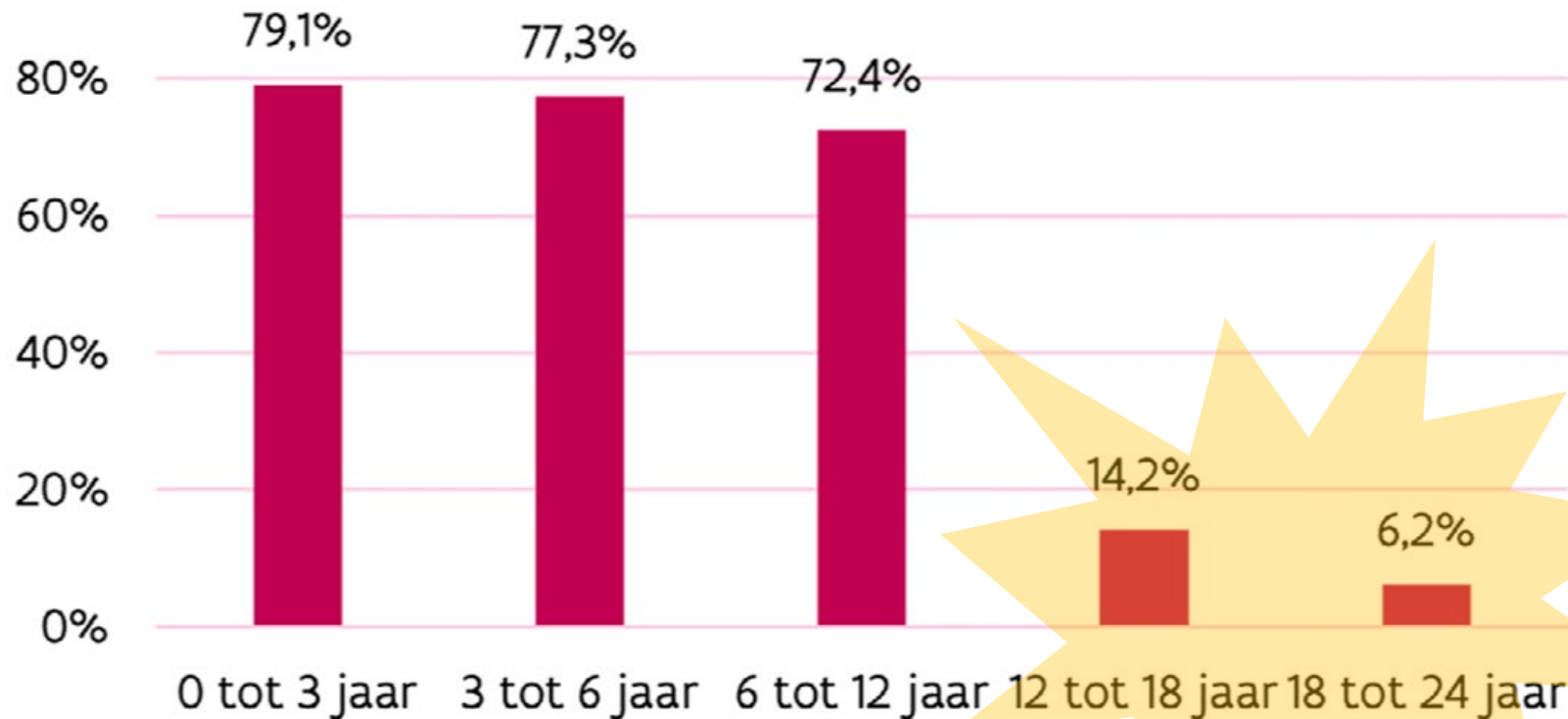
- A great variety:
  - 'mainly average Dutch-speaking families'
  - 'mainly socially vulnerable families'
  - Occasionally mentioned: 'A mix of cultures'
  - Occasionally mentioned: 'Mainly moms' ➤ 'Fathers are more difficult to reach'

## ▣ Having a **physical location** positively influences reaching the target group:

- Houses of the Child with one or more physical locations ➤ scores 4 & 5 are up to 10% higher



## Reached group according to the age of the children



Support for families ... in vulnerable situations

**Houses of the Child** ➤ [https://www.opgroeien.be/sites/default/files/tool-documents/rapport2023\\_huis\\_vh\\_kind\\_0.pdf](https://www.opgroeien.be/sites/default/files/tool-documents/rapport2023_huis_vh_kind_0.pdf) (2023 p. 28-29, n=226)

Top 3 life domains ➤ active engagement	n	%
Parenting support	150	67
Childcare	129	57
Education (cf. school)	88	39
<b>Social cohesion</b> (e.g. play day, picnic, birth tree event)	84	<b>37</b>
Culture/Sports/Youth	57	25
Mental Health	54	24
Practical support	37	16
Healthcare	35	16
Socio-economic determinants	36	16
Youth assistance/help	4	2
Play(groups) & informal exchanges/support	5	2
Other	6	3

Top 3 life domains ➤ non-take-up	n	%
Youth assistance/help	100	44
Healthcare	51	23
Socio-economic determinants	46	20
Social cohesion (e.g. play day, picnic, birth tree event)	39	17
Culture/Sports/Youth	36	16
Mental Health	36	16
Education (cf. school)	27	12
Parenting support	25	11
Practical support	17	8
Childcare	7	3
Active on all domains	4	2
Other	5	2



## Houses of the Child ➤ Challenges

- ▣ A more integrated service delivery [support] across policy [life] domains could really make a difference for families.
  - [www.opgroeien.be/kennis/themas/huizen-van-het-kind/levensdomeinen-een-huis-van-het-kind-verbinden](http://www.opgroeien.be/kennis/themas/huizen-van-het-kind/levensdomeinen-een-huis-van-het-kind-verbinden)
- ▣ A ... major challenge is connecting different life domains. ... **Truly integrated work across life domains is still not a reality.** ... There are Houses that provide integrated support, for (some of) their services, but this is rather the minority.
  - [https://www.opgroeien.be/sites/default/files/tool-documents/rapport2023\\_huis\\_vh\\_kind\\_0.pdf](https://www.opgroeien.be/sites/default/files/tool-documents/rapport2023_huis_vh_kind_0.pdf) (2023, p. 33, 39)
- ▣ The **mandate** to make decisions with budgetary or staffing implications rarely lies with the coordinator. ... If the coordinator is strong in **dialogue** with **local policymakers** (more political-strategic skills), this has a positive impact on their freedom of action and mandate.
  - [https://www.opgroeien.be/sites/default/files/tool-documents/rapport2023\\_huis\\_vh\\_kind\\_0.pdf](https://www.opgroeien.be/sites/default/files/tool-documents/rapport2023_huis_vh_kind_0.pdf) (2023, p. 38-39)
- ▣ The ownership of the House of the Child too often falls on the shoulders of **one person**. This has a significant **impact** on the **governance capacity and the sustainability of the collaboration**.
  - (Ibid., p. 48)

## Houses of the Child ➤ Challenges

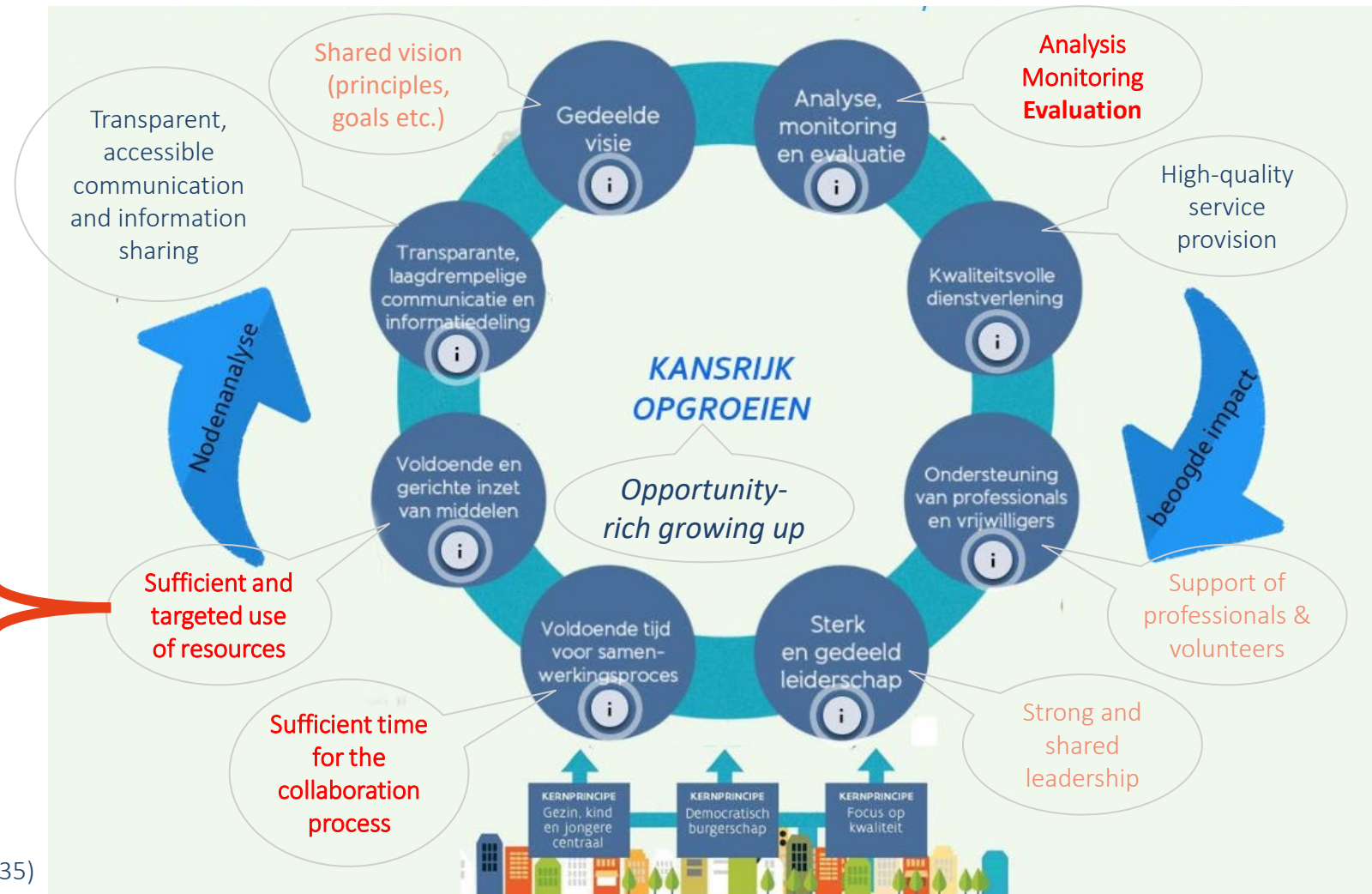
<https://www.opgroeien.be/sites/default/files/tool-documents/kadertekst-geintegreerd-samenwerken-over-verschillende-levensdomeinen.pdf>

### ■ Supra-local, Flemish, funding:

- Varies between €1.200 and €87.500 per House (median = €7.840)
- The funds must be deployed according to the **organization of support**.

### ■ Supra-local Project funds

### ■ Local funds



# 2.

## Support for families ... in vulnerable situations

- ✓ Houses of the Child
- ✓ Family Coaches



## Family Coaches ➤ Government Information Leaflet (2021, p. 1)



In the Government Agreement and the Flemish Action Plan for Poverty Reduction 2020-2024, the Flemish Government **recognizes local authorities as coordinators for addressing poverty at the local level.** Currently, a family in poverty is often assisted by various partners, who frequently lack an overview of the total assistance provided. To reduce this fragmentation, **the Flemish government aims to support local authorities in implementing the principle of local family coaches** to offer tailored intensive guidance to vulnerable families with children facing multiple challenges. The **proactive and outreach-oriented support** helps families **progress in all areas of life, enabling more social rights to be realized.**

## Family Coaches ➤ The Flemish Government: 2024-2029

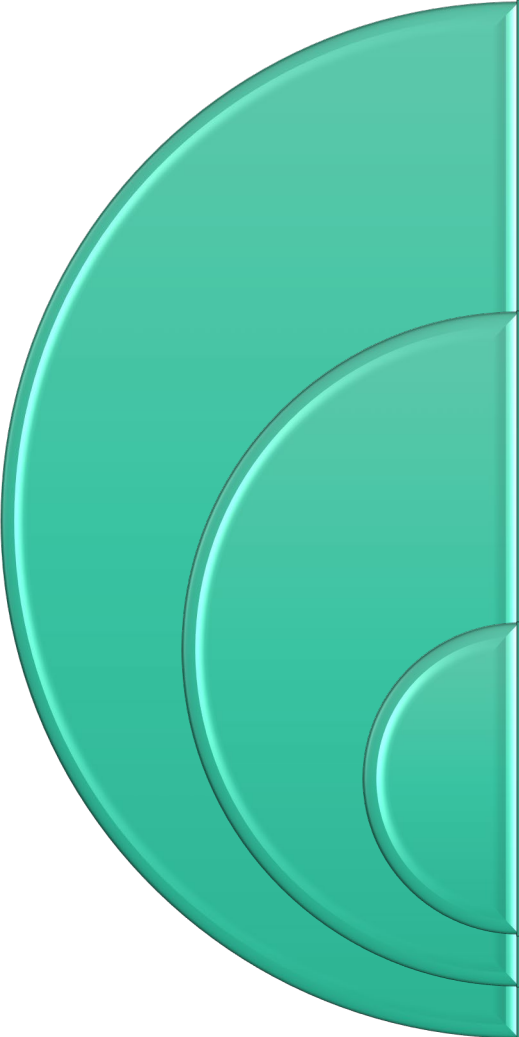
*'Working together towards a warm and prosperous Flanders' (p. 145)*



You help children in poverty by **supporting the whole family**. ... Local authorities can call on local family coaches who intensively *guide* vulnerable families *towards* **social rights, aid organizations** and the **labour market**. In order to proactively and timely tackle child poverty and reach disadvantaged families, more work needs to be done on **data sharing** and **cooperation** between the Flemish government and local authorities, in particular data sharing and cooperation between welfare partners (including Child and Family) and the OCMW [public social work centre]. A **poverty-conscious school policy** can also contribute to improving the situation of children in poverty.



## Family Coaches ➤ Families in the Most Vulnerable Situations



**Facing vulnerabilities and challenges across multiple life domains**

- Poor living conditions
- Precarious financial circumstances
- Poor health
- Limited or non-existent social support network
- Burdened parenting situations
- ....

**Precarious relationship with (social) services**

- Lack of access
- Negative experiences
- Inadequate or poorly tailored support
- Distrust towards service providers
- ...

**A family coach works exclusively with families who have given consent to initiate the support**

Support for families ... in vulnerable situations

**Family Coaches** ➤

[www.huisvanhetkindregiomol.be/organisatie/detail/104/gezinscoachen-huis-van-het-kind](http://www.huisvanhetkindregiomol.be/organisatie/detail/104/gezinscoachen-huis-van-het-kind)

## Family Coaching at the House of the Child



In family coaching at the House of the Child, we focus on (expectant) parents and families without any professional support regarding family functioning.

A key requirement is that the **families** are informed and **agree** to a referral to the House of the Child.

We work on **the themes that the family brings up**: this can involve well-being and psychological vulnerabilities, parenting, behavior or development, organizing the household, pregnancy or birth, individual well-being of family members, single parenthood, finances or exploring rights, school, and so on.

**1 professional**  
➤ **integrated support**

MacBook Pro

## Family Coaches ➤ Integrally tailored to the family's needs



It is important that a family can receive **long-term support**, without a predetermined end date, from **one, single, family coach**.

**What is addressed in the support**, what a family coach does with and within the family, and the **intensity** of the support are determined by the family, based on their **questions**, their support **needs**, and the **challenges** and **opportunities** they experience.

Nys, Vandewaerde en Stoové (2024, p. 18)

## Family Coaches ➤ Research findings: improvement in different domains of life

▶ *Delanghe et al. (2024), Storms (2019), Van den Cruyce et al. (2023), Van Lancker et al. (2020)*

▶ *Summary of the research in Flanders (Nys et al., 2024)*

In approximately three-quarters or more  
of the family coaching programs

Improved awareness and access to  
(basic) rights

Financial improvements: increased  
household income, social benefits, debt  
reduction, additional financial support

Enhanced use of services and support:  
increased use of assistance, better  
alignment of support to the family's  
needs

In approximately half of the family coaching  
programs

Housing: stable residence, allocation of social  
housing, improved quality and affordability

Administrative support: better follow-up,  
paperwork in order

Increased employment opportunities

Fulfillment of basic material needs

Increased safety

Improved personal functioning of mothers:  
greater self-confidence, stress reduction,  
higher level of coping

**3.**

## **Conditions for Effective Support**

## Conditions

### Family support worker & the organization

Approachable local  
embedding  
Low caseload  
Flexibility

Standing alongside the  
family

Coordinator: support  
(e.g., supervision,  
training), alignment of  
network and policy, etc.

...

### Local Services

Mandate for the family  
support worker  
Trust, time, and space

Consolidation of  
expertise

Allies in integrated  
work and advocacy  
(e.g., optimizing  
operations based on  
needs)

...

### Local Policy

Mandate for the family  
support worker  
Trust, time, and space

Alignment with needs

Accessible services  
(e.g., measures and  
allocation policies  
tailored to needs,  
minimal or low  
administrative and  
procedural burden)

...

### Supra-local Policy

Structural integration  
into regular service(s)

Structural resources

Structural and  
integrated policy:  
financial (e.g., family  
allowances), housing,  
childcare, etc.

...



***Approachable local embedding: a Family support worker operates in ...***

**A confidential, low-threshold service or organization**

Establishes links to low-threshold local activities  
Strengthens (in)formal networks

The most appropriate location for the family

Where the support can be most effective

E.g., at home, going to the social grocery shop, to the social service, to the market, to a playground, to an outdoor play day, etc.

## *Approachable local embedding* ➤ *Outreach work ...*

- ▣ Begins and ends in the client's living environment.
- ▣ Is more than just approaching people on the street.
- ▣ Primarily involves seeking out individuals who have not yet been reached and those who have disengaged.
- ▣ Involves holding services/organizations accountable for their responsibilities.
  - Encourages them to adjust their tasks to suit their target audience.
  - If necessary, “pries open” the door to organizations/services (e.g., during referrals/access).

➤ Beelen, De Maeyer, Dewaele, Grymonprez, & Mathijssen (2014)

➤ <https://sociaal.net/opinie/niet-iedereen-die-kantoor-verlaat-werkt-outreaching/>

## *Approachable local embedding*



It is not clear from which organization family coaches can operate most optimally at the local level. Best practices are found in a variety of settings, including OCMW (Public Center for Social Welfare), a "Huis van het Kind" (House of the Child), or a combination of various services and organizations (e.g., primary, secondary, and tertiary care).

What is crucial is the **positive (trust-building) image** of family coaches. Above all, family coaches need to be able to establish trust with families and, therefore, should ideally **not be associated with more controlling organizations** within social services. The non-controlling role must be evident not only in name but also in practice.

## ***Approachable local embedding***



**It [the coaching] begins with a conversation from one person to another, rather than from a service provider to a client. For example, families may attend the coffee moment, and during that time, someone might mention that they've received a letter they don't understand. At that point, we can simply say, "Oh, I've experienced that too. Shall we take a look at it together?" And from there, the process begins naturally.**

*A Family Coach (in Van den Cruyce et al., 2023, p. 30)*





**The most important thing was that she always listens. She listens well and, most importantly, she doesn't judge. And she helps wherever she can. [...] The key is to keep listening and to support mothers.**

Mother in the program OPkomst+ (*in Delanghe et al., 2024, p. 103*)

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# More information?

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<https://kcgezinswetenschappen.odisee.be/gezins-en-opvoedingsondersteuning-huizen-van-het-kind>

<https://kcgezinswetenschappen.odisee.be/onderzoeksprojecten/gezinscoaches-intervisie>