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Foreword: European perspectives on child abuse and neglect: Key messages from the 13th ISPCAN European Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect

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Foreword

European perspectives on child abuse and neglect: Key messages from the 13th ISPCAN European Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect

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The 13th ISPCAN (International Society for the prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect) European Conference was held in Dublin, 15-18 September, 2013. We were very fortunate in the calibre of the Key-note speakers and the presenters at the Master class which preceded the Conference. This collection of papers is drawn from some of the Key note presentations at the Conference.

They provide expert perspectives on a range of aspects of child abuse and neglect in Europe, including: the multi-country work of UNICEF and the Council of Europe; promising primary child sexual abuse prevention strategies; the effectiveness of early interventions designed to reduce the risk of child maltreatment; international perspectives on the key components of an effective national system of services to safeguard children; and child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Ireland.

Jean-Claude Legrand, UNICEF Senior Regional Advisor for Child Protection, describes child care system reforms that UNICEF is supporting in Eastern and Central Europe and in Central Asia. The priority for UNICEF is to reduce the numbers of children being placed in formal care and to support systems that protect the right of children to live in a family environment. UNICEF is leading calls in Europe to give priority to end the placement of children under three years of age in institutions. This paper identifies a number of countries where the numbers of very young children being placed in formal care is reducing significantly, and describes the approaches that have been effective in bringing this about.

Regína Jensdóttir, Head of the Children's Rights Division at the Council of Europe, describes a key transversal programme of the Council, 'Building a Europe for and with children'. She describes four areas that have been identified for particular action: to promote child-friendly services and systems; eliminate all forms of violence against children; guarantee the rights of children in vulnerable situations, and promote child participation. Regarding the elimination of violence against children, there is a particular focus on combating sexual violence against children and this paper describes the Lanzarote Convention (Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse), and the Council of Europe 'One in Five' campaign to stop sexual violence against children.

Alberto Pellai of Milano State University focuses on the prevention of child sexual abuse. He examines what we know and what we have learned about primary prevention, that is, strategies aimed at the general population. In particular, he looks at preventative strategies aimed directly at children. He reviews the evolution of interventions, from school-based programmes that emerged in the late 1970s to the 'Words not said' programme developed by Pellai in Italy in 1999, and since adapted in five other countries.

Harriet Ward of Loughborough University in the UK examined the effectiveness of early interventions designed to reduce the risk of child maltreatment. This paper describes the findings from a range of studies undertaken as part of the Safeguarding Children Research Initiative, which explored the evidence regarding strategies and interventions that seek to promote positive long-term outcomes for children and young people who suffer or are likely to suffer harm as a consequence of abuse or neglect. The paper also discusses the factors influencing the choice of different types of intervention, including the nature of the evidence from evaluation programmes, and the current economic and practice context.

Jenny Gray, social work consultant and ISPCAN past President, provides an international perspective on the key components of an effective national system of services to safeguard children. Based on her extensive international experience, she describes the necessary components of an effective system, including competent staff with access to on-going training and supervision; effective data collection systems to support planning, resource allocation and evaluation of services; on-going research into the efficacy of services in preventing abuse and neglect and protecting children from further harm. She stresses the need for all parts of the system to work effectively together and to maintain the focus on improving outcomes for children.

The final paper by Marie Keenan of University College Dublin examines child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Ireland. Based on many years of clinical practice with clerical offenders, she outlines a systemic perspective to conceptualise the problem. Whilst not denying individual psychopathological causes, she highlights the role of these men's formation as clerics. In particular, she argues that the seminary experience and the ways in which clerical masculinity is fostered and adopted is significant and is central to a fuller understanding of this problem.

We are delighted the authors have worked with us to ensure their valued contributions at the Conference have been recorded in the form of the papers which follow. We are confident they will prove an important resource for practitioners, policy makers and scholars in Ireland, Europe and beyond.