Introduction

Good afternoon Ladies & Gentlemen

As Minister for Children and Youth Affairs it is a sincere privilege to address this conference on vulnerable families. I am delighted to have been in a position to include this conference within Ireland’s EU Presidency calendar. I would like to thank the Confederation of Family Organisations of the European Union (or COFACE) and the Irish Countrywomen’s Association for their kind invitation to attend.

In 2011, I was very honored to be appointed as Ireland’s first-ever senior Minister for Children & Youth Affairs. My responsibilities span a range of issues including child welfare and protection, educational welfare, youth justice, the National Children’s Strategy, early childhood care and education and of course family supports.

By establishing a full government department we are seeking to bring a seamless new approach to policy development and integrated service provision for children; with the ultimate objective of ensuring children are cared for and protected and that they have the best possible start to life.

The theme of this conference is vulnerable families. I believe in the idea of protecting children through supporting the family. Family is so important to our personal life but it is also of immense importance to society in general. Family is where people learn to be good citizens, to take responsibility, to live in harmony with others.

The roots of so many social problems – as well as success stories – are sown in the early years.
Research tells us that successful families are the building blocks of a strong, cohesive society. Research also tells us that parenting is key.

The latest publication to emerge from our flagship research study ‘Growing Up in Ireland’ - the National Longitudinal Study of Children, is ‘How Families Matter for Children’s Social and Emotional Well-Being.’ The most striking finding to emerge from this report is just how instrumental parents and families are for child well-being. This cannot be overstated.

Exposure to conflict in the home, both conflict between parents and a conflicted parent-child relationship was found to be especially damaging for children.

Parenting can have just as great an impact on a child’s life chances as family structure, income or social class. So while coming from a lower socio-economic background or single-parent family may increase a child’s risk for poorer social and emotional outcomes, this risk can be mediated by good parenting and good family processes.

Put simply, good parenting and good family processes will increase the likelihood that children will have better life chances. Bad parenting can do just the reverse.

And so, to reflect the theme of this conference, what can Europe do? In particular, what can we do to help vulnerable families ensure their children get the best start in life?

As Minister I want to do all I can to support children through supporting parents.

Some parents and some families may only require modest, for instance advice from friends and relations or a once-off parenting course. However, all of you here this morning are aware that some families need a greater level of support. We have to acknowledge that on top of the stresses of every day life, some parents have poor role models from their own childhood, or suffer from additional problems associated
with poverty, alcohol, drug abuse or mental health issues. For these families the State must endeavour to provide a level of the support that helps parents to create a safe and caring environment for their children.

In many of these cases early intervention is often critical. There is a delicate balance between provision of ongoing support to a family and the ultimate step of intervening to remove a child from a situation that is detrimental to their safety and welfare. However, early intervention to promote family functioning offers the best chance to support vulnerable families and avoid crisis intervention.

As Minister, I am currently overseeing an ambitious ‘change agenda’ in Ireland’s children and family services, aimed at improving service capacity and consistency. There are a number of critical elements to the reform programme including the creation of a dedicated Child and Family Support Agency later this year. The creation of this Agency is at the heart of the Government’s reform of child and family services.

It is my determined objective to oversee the transformation of our country’s services for children and families, especially vulnerable families. I want to ensure quality services are available for those who need them and to achieve the best outcome for families and children. For too long in this country we have had too many different agencies and services all doing their own things – with little joined-up thinking and insufficient working together.

Leadership expertise, enhanced accountability and more efficient inter-agency working will be important features at the heart of the working of the new Agency. Equally important will be the increased focus on early intervention and family support services, aimed at delivering 'proportionate' responses to child welfare concerns and to protect children in the home.

We have already successfully implemented a number of area-based preventative and early intervention programmes. The Prevention and Early Intervention
Programme for Children (PEIP) has examined methods for improving outcomes for children in an integrated way with a fund totalling €36 million. €18m of this is provided by the Government and €18m is provided by Atlantic Philanthropies. A detailed set of evidenced based interventions have taken place in three of our most deprived communities – West Tallaght, Ballymun and Darndale.

In the recent Budget the Government announced the further extension of this initiative as part of an area based response to poverty. Further communities will be selected and learning from the three existing sites will be used to support families in these areas to provide the best chance in life for young children.

To be effective such programmes must not just be for families and communities they must be of families and communities. I want our new Child and Family Support Agency to emphasise the involvement of local people in tackling local problems and challenges. The Agency will have responsibility for a network of 106 Family Resource Centre’s nationwide. The Family Resource Centre Programme encourages the creation of successful partnerships between voluntary and statutory agencies at community level. People from diverse groups and areas are involved in all levels of Family Resource Centres, including participation on their Voluntary Management Committees. In 2010, a total of 1,109 people served on the voluntary management committees with many other volunteers contributing to activities and programmes.

In Ireland we retain a strong community to voluntary work and community involvement. This is no better exemplified than by the Irish Countrywomen’s Association who have co-organised today’s conference and whose membership is active in every community in Ireland. I am sure the many family organisations from across Europe represented here today are playing an equally essential role in your countries and communities. I commend you for your contribution.

There is a need for evidence and expertise in work which connects with an area as important as children and families. But it will never be sufficient when supporting families and communities for experts operating at a remove to deliver a suite of
services. We must engage families and communities to take ownership of problems and develop their capacity to address these issues. We know that family support services which are community-based and have the involvement of the community are more likely to be accessed by families. We know that individuals calling into community based service for one thing often, through engagement with someone who is from their community and speaks to them at their own level, commit to work on another area of their life which may be crucial to their growth and development.

This is the approach which I would like to see strengthened through cooperation amongst our European partners. We have much to learn from each other and in doing so can implement the very best approaches to support families. This will be a very important social dividend of our European cooperation and the basis of a strong, cohesive and inclusive Europe.

I would again like to thank COFACE for their kind invitation today and I would like to acknowledge the long and committed involvement of the Irish Countrywomen’s Association in COFACE. I hope you enjoy the rest of the conference and embrace the opportunities to listen to and learn from each other.

[ENDS]