***FAMILY SUPPORT UNIT***

***INTRODUCTION***

Aġenzija Sapport started operating the Family Support Unit in January 2023, emanating from the Maltese National Disability Strategy 2021-2030. Action strategic 6.3 of the strategy calls for the creation of a Family Unit within Aġenzija Sapport, where professionals provide support and training to families with disabled persons.

The main aim of the Family Support Unit is to offer a holistic support service to families who have children or significant others with a disability. Experience and research shows that disability does not only affect the person concerned but also the relatives of the person. Therefore, as the National Agency for persons with disability, Aġenzija Sapport aims not only to support the person with disability, but the whole family and social network of the individual.

This Unit includes various programmes and interventions with the aim to reach relatives of people with disabilities. These include, support groups, workshops and training sessions, both individually and in groups. The unit also serves a point of reference to family members and guardians where they can seek support and guidance from professionals specifically working in the field of disability.

The training programmes offered within the Unit are all research and evidence based. Moreover, professionals working with the agency have gained experience and expertise from their work with service users and their families. Thus professionals ensure to address challenges and needs that families face, through the different programmes, group and individual sessions provided within the Family Support Unit.

**AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE FAMILY SUPPORT UNIT**

* **To support families and their disabled relative in relation to disability issues**
* **To offer a holistic service to families by supporting not only the disabled person but also all the family members**
* **To act as a gateway to other services including but not exclusively, social work services and any other services offered within the Agency**
* **To make sure that no one is left behind**
* **To create innovative programs and work on new concepts in relation to emerging trends related to disability.**
* **To instil the importance of self-care in relatives**

***PROGRAMMES OFFERED WITHIN THE FAMILY SUPPORT UNIT***

* Support Groups for Parents of disabled children
* Workshops for Adult Siblings
* Positive Parenting Programme for Parents of disabled children
* Individualised Positive Parenting Programme for parents who have an intellectual disability and other cases who would benefit from one to one sessions and not in a group setting
* Super Sibs- a fun filled programme for young siblings
* Fathers Workshops
* Acquired Disability Workshops- will be starting this year as a pilot project

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***Positive Parenting Programme***

As the national service provider, we strongly believe that with the right support, parenting can be a journey and a possibility for everyone. Therefore, through the Positive Parenting Services we aim at providing parents the opportunity to stop for a while, have the time to reflect, improve their skills, to use this time to revive their energy so that they can offer a better quality of life to their children and themselves whilst enhancing the parent-child relationship. This is a positive parenting program which is offered through the Client Multi-Disciplinary Support within Agenzija Sapport and thus the overarching idea is that of fostering a culture of independence through parenting of children with disability and that of empowering parents to gain better parenting skills. These key components are embedded into the parenting programs offered to parents of children with disability and to parents with an intellectual disability.

These training courses and parent coaching services adopt a pro-active and preventative approach and do not substitute or act as a means of dealing with child-protection and/ or domestic violence issues.

These training courses shall not be offered to act in a crisis situation or in cases where the basic needs of the family are not being met and where there is no stable household.

The parenting program is aimed for parents who have disabled children under the age of 17. The idea of this program is to educate and train parents in various areas of parenting, teaching them to identify their parenting styles and how they can improve their parenting skills with their children.

The topics that will be covered include the following:

* Promoting independence at an early stage
* Dealing with grief
* Understanding your child’s needs and your own parenting styles.
* Setting up for success and independence
* Values, rules and rewards
* Positive discipline: The road to independent living
* Resources and parenting tips: the 5 languages of love and promoting a secure attachment.

The parents who attend for this parenting training course are given a certificate of attendance including a resource pack at the end of the course.

These parenting sessions are delivered to a group of up to twelve parents over seven sessions of two hours each. Groups are available either in the morning or late afternoon. There are three main categories of this training aimed at different age groups of the children.

1. Early Years 0 – 3 years
2. Primary Years 4 – 11 years
3. Teenage Years 12 – 17 years

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***Supersibs Programme***

Supersibs is aimed for siblings who are under the age of 17 and who have a sibling with a disability.

**Aim of the Programme**

The main aim of this programme is for siblings to meet other brothers and sisters of children with disability so that they do not feel that they are alone in this situation. They will be doing both fun and therapeutic exercises. They will get to know the pros and cons of having a sibling with a disability. The professionals will support the siblings in seeking assistance when they need it

**Eligibility Criteria**

Super Sibs are for children aged between 7-16-years who have a sibling with a disability. The groups will be divided according to the ages. (Refer to Appendix 1.8- Supersibs Referal)

**Group Facilitators**

SuperSibs are being organised by professionals working within the Family Sapport Unit within Aġenzija Sapport. Super Sibs are run by a team of people who have a professional and, in some cases, a personal understanding of the impact a child’s disability can have on brothers and sisters. Equally important, they all have great kid skills!

**Frequency of Sessions**

Super Sibs Programme consists of 5 sessions once a week between 16:15 and 18:00. Upon completion of the programme a party will be organised whereas all participants will be presented with a certificate of attendance and a small token. An extra session with the sibling and the guardian will be held so that siblings can spend some quality time with their loved ones.

These sessions will also be carried out for a half day during the School Holidays i.e. Christmas, Carnival and Easter Holidays.

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***Fathers Workshops***

Being a father of a child with disability can bring a range of feelings and emotions, and everyone experiences this differently.

Aġenzija Sapport shall be holding a set of 12 workshops aimed at fathers of children with disability. Some common issues that fathers normally face when raising a child with a disability are: feelings of self-blame; denial of the extent of the disability; effects on their marriages; uncertainty over their children’s diagnoses; the constant strains of caring; restrictions on family life; difficulty telling other people about the disability; feeling guilty about having negative feelings about their child; negative experiences of service provision, and negative reactions in the community. All these issues and more will be tackled during these workshops.

The Fathers’ Workshops will be held once a month, and they will be 1.5 hours long, between 18:00 and 19:30, allowing enough time for information provision on the specific topic, discussion, and socialising with other fathers.

**Topics to be discussed**

1. Connecting with other fathers
2. Working in partnership with service providers
3. Juggling the needs of your family, work and your own needs
4. Balancing the needs of other family members
5. Maintaining positive adult relationships
6. My child and me
7. Managing behaviour
8. Encouraging your child’s emotional growth
9. Building relationships through play and friendships
10. Stress Management
11. Finding your own strengths and solutions
12. Focusing on the future

**Eligibility Criteria**

Fathers or Guardians of disabled minors can apply for these workshops.

**Location**

These support groups will be held at the Professional Development Centre, Santa Venera.

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***Adult Siblings Workshops***

**Aim of the Workshops**

The Adult Sibling Workshops aims to offers a caring setting to share, network, gain valuable information, advice and resources. These workshops will provide the possibility for adult siblings to benefit from the experience of the group facilitator as well as other participants, and learn valuable coping and intervention strategies when dealing with issues pertaining their disabled sibling.

**Frequency of Sessions**

The workshops shall take place once a week for a duration of 8 weeks. Each session will take place from 17:30-19:30. The first 5 sessions include discussing particular topics and the last 3 sessions will be dedicated for guest speakers.

Topics to be discussed

* Introduction and Getting to know each other
* The Sibling within the community
* Growing up, Family role and Family Dynamics
* Personal life choices and decision making
* Self- care and self-proclamation

**Location**

The support groups will be held at the Agenzija Sapport Professional Development Centre (PDC), Triq il-Harrub, Santa Venera.

**Eligibility Criteria**

Adult siblings of disabled people aged between 18-35

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***Parents’ Support Groups***

**Aim of the Support Group**

The Parent support group aims to provide a caring setting to share, network, gain valuable information, advice and resources. This support group will provide the possibility for parents to benefit from the experience of the group facilitator as well as other participants, and learn valuable coping and intervention strategies when caring for minors or young adults with disability.

**Frequency of Sessions**

The support group shall take place once a month for a duration of 1.5 hours.

**Location**

The support groups will be held at the Agenzija Sapport Professional Development Centre (PDC), Triq il-Harrub, Santa Venera.

**Eligibility Criteria**

Parents or Guardians of disabled minors can apply for these workshops.

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