

Early Childhood Networks – from evidence to practice in Austria

Marion Weigl, Gesundheit Österreich GmbH
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GÖG–project on Early Childhood Networks

- » **Central objective:** Improving basis for the implementation of Early Childhood Networks in Austria
- » **Commissioned by:** Ministry of Health
- » **Implementation:** GÖG in cooperation with regional partners; steering committee and advisory board
- » **Timeframe:** December 2011 – December 2014
- » **Starting point:** new Child–Health–Strategy (Objective 4: To build the basis for a healthy life within the early childhood)

Definition of Early Childhood Networks (Frühe Hilfen)

Early Childhood Networks aim to improve early childhood development especially amongst children (0–3 years) from socio-economic disadvantaged families and families with specific strains/burdens.

Specific Objectives:

- » To strengthen resources and reduce strains of families
- » To promote and ensure well-being and development of children at an early stage
- » To contribute to a healthy growing up including the right on protection, promotion and participation
- » To promote health and social equity

Definition II

Multiprofessional support systems with coordinated services/interventions for parents and children in the early childhood, which are established on regional level.

Core elements:

- » **Systematic identification and referral** of families in burdened life circumstances
- » **Close integration and cooperation** of institutions and services from various areas (like pregnancy counseling, parenting education, health services, therapeutic or pedagogic early interventions for handicapped children („Frühförderung“), child- and youth welfare, social services etc.)
- » **Low-threshold access** (esp. home visits) and **continuous support** (accompanying families)

Basic principles: **voluntariness, transparency, no stigmatisation**

Collecting evidence

Theoretical background:

- » Life course approach
- » Neurobiological research
- » Epigenetic research and Resilience
- » Research on health inequality and equal opportunities
- » cost–benefit–analysis

Experiences from model projects:

- » Several different model projects implemented in Germany
- » Netzwerk Familie in Austria (since 5 years)

Literature reviews (plus questionnaires):

- » on integration of services from different areas within early childhood networks and accessibility of target groups
- » on significant times for contacts during pregnancy and after birth and relevant contents (in the context of universal approaches)

Assessment – Results for 2012

Using activating methods (114 interviews, focus groups with SWOT-analysis, online-survey – 623 questionnaires completed)

Growing interest in early childhood networks

- » but no coherent understanding

Various services/interventions exist, which are relevant for early childhood networks, but:

- » Only a small part of these services aims specifically to support families in burdened life circumstances,
- » outreach approaches are rarely available,
- » deductibles are a prerequisite for many services and
- » socially disadvantaged groups are reached to a limited extent only.

Cooperation and networking isn't widely spread

One programme consistent with definition: Netzwerk Familie

Agenda setting

- » **Stakeholder–WS** with decision makers and key experts on federal level (5 WS with 43 participants)
- » **National conference** on Early Childhood Networks (~ 200 participants)
- » **Conferences and workshops** in all 9 provinces organised by the regional partners
- » **Targeted presentations** at those conferences (ca. 35) and **articles** in those Austrian journals (ca. 25), which are relevant for the different professions concerned

Very important to **generate intersectoral support:**

e.g. National conference financed by 2 ministries, intersectoral letter signed and submitted to their corresponding provincial representatives by 4 ministers

Model for Early Childhood Networks in Austria

Basic service for all „families“ („universal prevention“)

- » In the sense of health promotion as limited support for all „families“
- » First contact with pregnant women and several home visits after the birth within the first months of the child

in combination with

Regional Early Childhood Networks („indicated prevention“) according to the model project „Netzwerk Familie“

- » Regional network, including multifaceted services/interventions
- » Network–management
- » Core Intervention: family support, which is adjusted to the needs of „families“ in burdened life circumstances, consisting of case management and accompanying families as long as needed (max. through the whole length of the programme)

Netzwerk Familie

In 2013 300 families (with 568 children) supported by Netzwerk Familie (4–5 % of all families in Vorarlberg):

- » low burden (41 %) – some support, mainly monitoring
- » high burden (4 %) – referral to child and youth welfare

Families were referred to Netzwerk Familie by:

- » Hospitals (32 %)
- » Self referrals (33 %)

Age of newly supported families' children:

- » <1 month (30 %)
- » 63 % of all supported families were reached not later than the 3rd month of children's life

Effects on families (observations from staff and network partners):

Improved parent–child–interactions and socioeconomic situation, relaxed situation and family relations, etc.

Impact of GÖG–project

- » Concerted Austrian definition of early childhood networks
- » Model for Early Childhood Networks as well as further products
- » Increasing implementation (Pilotproject started in 5 regions in 2014)
- » Intersectoral interest and involvement of decision makers
- » Interest and involvement of relevant professional groups and experts/researchers
- » High political relevance (health policy)
- » Various funding possibilities identified/ensured

Political relevance

- » **Child-Health-Strategy** – one of several main objectives
- » **Health targets for Austria** – one of 10 targets (To ensure conditions under which children and young people can grow up as healthy as possible)
- » **Child-Health-Strategy of the social insurance**
- » **Government programme 2013 – 2018** – Early Childhood Networks are mentioned in the chapter on family and the chapter on social affairs
- » **Health-Promotion-Strategy** – Early Childhood Networks defined as top priority
- » **Prevention funds 2015/16** – Early Childhood Networks defined as core area

Outlook

Implementation of model regions in all 9 Austrian provinces during 2015/2016:

- » Reference model: Netzwerk Familie
- » Pilotproject will be extended and improved
- » Cooperation of provincial government and social insurance

Follow-up project 2015/2016 to establish a national competence centre (NZFH):

- » Provide additional information/research results
- » Develop manual for setting up regional structures (networks)
- » Continuous transfer of knowledge and awareness raising activities
- » Quality assurance and support for the regional implementation:
Templates for documentation, (joint) public relation, evaluation, ...
- » Support a sustainable establishment of early childhood networks

Contact

Marion Weigl

Stubenring 6

1010 Vienna, Austria

T: +43 1 515 61-182

F: +43 1 513 84 72

E: marion.weigl@goeg.at

www.goeg.at

www.fruehehilfen.at

