

## Early childhood interventions („Frühe Hilfen“) in Austria

### Progress and successes (June 2019)

There is strong evidence that the (social) determinants during early childhood influence the development of cognitive, social and emotional skills in the early years as well as the long-term health and life perspectives. Consequently, it is necessary to address the (social) determinants during early childhood – most of all by reducing social inequalities during early childhood as well as by strengthening families to be better able to take good care of the children– in order to promote health equity during childhood and later on. Since the determinants are influenced by various sectors, intersectoral cooperation at policy as well as professional level is crucial to improve health equity. There are several ways to support this cooperation, one promising way is to implement early childhood intervention networks.

In the years 2011 to 2014, an Austrian model for early childhood interventions (so called *Frühe Hilfen*) was developed by the Gesundheit Österreich (GÖG). It is based on international evidence as well as systematic analysis of experiences from practice and is combining universal and indicated prevention. The main objective of this model is to reach and support those families during pregnancy or within the first three years of a child, who live under burdened life circumstances. While the possibilities for an implementation of the universal part of this model still need to be clarified, the indicated part of the model is widely implemented in all Austrian provinces in form of **regional early childhood intervention networks**. These networks aim to reach and support families in need (due to burdened life circumstances) during pregnancy or within the first three years of a child.

The main objectives resp. characteristics of the early childhood intervention networks are

- » To reach families actively and systematically = Raising awareness among those who can identify and refer families in need (esp. in the health and social system)
- » To provide continuous and comprehensive support = family support (mostly as home visits) throughout a longer time span; builds up mutual trust; provides model for bonding; refers to specific services within the regional network in the function of a “link worker”
- » To ensure general as well as case-related cooperation and networking = network-management for establishment and continuous maintenance of the regional network, which serves as multi-professional support system, offering well-coordinated manifold services for parents and children

In order to ensure a well-coordinated, high quality Austrian-wide implementation in line with the model in 2015 the Federal Ministry for Health commissioned the Gesundheit Österreich (GÖG) to set up the Austrian National Centre for Early Childhood Interventions. The national centre’s mission is nationwide coordination and harmonization (incl. documentation and monitoring), quality assurance (i.e. training, evaluation, research) and knowledge transfer as well as process guidance and counselling in the establishment of regional networks.

By Spring 2019, 25 networks are covering 64 of the altogether 116 Austrian provinces. The inclusion of additional provinces is in preparation. Already by now, more than half of the population is living within the reach of one of the early childhood intervention networks.

All networks record data about the families supported in a unique data collection system (FRÜDOK) held and analysed by the Austrian National Centre for Early Childhood Interventions. The data show a **fast increase of the number of families supported** by the regional networks from 554 in the year 2015 to 2.200 families in the year 2018. In line with their objectives, the networks manage to **reach the target group at an early stage** (one quarter still during the pregnancy; one third of the children are less than 3 months old). Moreover, the programme **succeeds to address socially disadvantaged families**: amongst the families supported are at least 50 % poor or at risk of poverty (compared to 17 % in the whole population), 34 % of primary caregivers had at most a compulsory school leaving certificate (compared to 24 % in the whole population), 35 % of them were born outside of Austria and 21 % are single parents. An in-depth analysis of the **psychosocial health of the families** supported by the programme in the years 2015 to 2017 shows that at least one third of the primary caregivers have already received treatment or are currently receiving treatment for a mental illness.

In the period 2015 to spring 2017, external partners evaluated the progress as regard to establishing the networks as well as the benefit of the programme for the families supported. The results of the evaluation show despite the short period of implementation a **big progress in the establishment of the networks**. Most important, the evaluation indicates – based on the perception of the families as well as the professionals – a **clear benefit of the programme for the families supported**. According to the results of the evaluation, the early childhood intervention networks succeed to increase the resources (i.e. social inclusion, self-esteem, positive family climate, parental skills, health literacy) and to reduce the burdens (i.e. stress, anxiety, economic hardship, mental strain, social isolation) of the families supported. Mostly due to these improvements in the family situation, the programme has a positive impact on the bonding, interaction and relationship of child and parent(s) as well as the development of the child.