

Austrian National Centre for Early Childhood Intervention Evaluation 2018 to 2021 of the Implementation of Frühe Hilfen in Austria

Final report of evaluation

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Executive Summary

Aims and questions of the evaluation

The accompanying evaluation of the quality standard of Early Childhood Intervention in Austria was conducted from March 2018 to March 2021. The primary objective of the evaluation was to evaluate the process of defining and agreeing on the quality standard as well as the implementation of the quality standard in the regional networks. The evaluation focused on the following overarching questions:

- » Does the quality standard contribute to a successful regional implementation of *Frühe Hilfen*?
- » What factors support the implementation of the quality standard at regional level? What are the obstacles and barriers to the regional establishment of the quality standard?
- » Which quality criteria and implementation strategies have proven successful? In which areas is there still a need for further development/improvement?
- » Can the NZFH.at support the regional level satisfactorily/ sufficiently in the current implementation phase?

Methodology

A mixed methods approach was used to evaluate the first draft of the quality standard: Early Childhood Intervention coordinators had their say in qualitative telephone interviews and two focus groups to reflect on the process of defining the standard, to describe the benefits of the standard from their perspective and to obtain direct feedback on the formulated structural quality in the quality standard. All regional networks quantifiably assessed the degree of implementation, challenge and relevance at two points in time and their experiences with the quality standard as well as feedback on its contents were discussed in workshops. In addition, the coordinators and the networks were asked for feedback on their satisfaction and requests for improvement regarding the cooperation with the NZFH.at. The families' perspective on quality in the process of family support was also obtained by means of seven qualitative interviews and supplemented by the analysis of 22 interviews with families from the outcome evaluation 2015–2017.

Results

All respondents from the regional networks and the early childhood intervention coordinators were very positive about the cooperation with National Centre for Early Childhood Interventions (NZFH.at). It works in a very participatory way and is perceived as supportive. According to the interviewees, *Frühe Hilfen* is also characterised by the fact that there is a central office with a view to the whole country. Research, uniform documentation throughout Austria and a common quality standard are considered useful.

The early childhood intervention coordinators and the interviewees from the teams of the regional networks agreed that a common quality standard is an important basis for the further development of early childhood interventions in Austria and enables a necessary differentiation from similar services.

All respondents found the procedure for setting the standard to be successful and would also like to see such a procedure for the further revision on the basis of the evaluation. The early childhood intervention coordinators are in favour of involving all stakeholders from the beginning to the definition. They do not see development and implementation as a top-down directive, but as a participatory process, which in their view has been successful so far. In order for implementation to continue to be successful, it is important that all people in the early childhood intervention teams can identify with the standard so that they can also support it. The majority of the early childhood intervention coordinators interviewed already use the quality standard as an orientation framework or as a guideline and requirement for the work with and in the regional networks.

Almost all respondents pointed out the problem that not all criteria can be implemented in every federal state due to regional circumstances, different settings and financial possibilities. For this reason, it is important that alternatives to the requirements remain formulated in the quality standard. The NZFH.at could support the implementation in the provinces by ensuring clarity and bindingness and by providing information on an ongoing basis.

The feedback on the individual requirements for the respective criteria in the quality standard is comprehensive and partly makes divergent perspectives of the networks clear. Overall, it became apparent that the structural quality criteria are considered sensible and comprehensible. Thus, in no network and federal state was the wish for a change or deletion of the criteria mentioned. It was also shown that the networks generally attribute high relevance to the structural quality criteria.

Based on the findings of the evaluation, the criteria for process quality also include all important aspects and, from the evaluation's point of view, can remain in place, although some suggestions for additions to certain requirements could be worked out from the data. Overall, however, it was clear that there was much more agreement in the networks on process quality than on structural quality and that the formulated quality requirements are already being implemented for the most part.

Based on the results, it can be concluded that the first draft of the quality standard is a very good document, which is evaluated very positively by all persons involved. From the evaluation's point of view, there is only a need for adaptation and supplementation of individual requirements. In the view of the interviewees, the structure is successful and the 17 criteria named include the most important areas and fields of action for quality work of the networks.