

Background

The **Austrian programme of Early Childhood Interventions „Frühe Hilfen“** aims to support pregnant women and families with babies/toddlers in need. Despite many Roma families live in difficult situations, the programme is currently little used by this community.

A participatory study was carried out to **identify obstacles and necessary adaptations in the design of service specifically for Roma families**. The research project was funded by the European Union (EC, DG Justice) as well as the Austrian “Bundesgesundheitsagentur” (by budget of the NZFH.at dedicated for research activities).

Methods

The study was conducted with co-researchers from the Roma community. **Interviews and focus groups** were used to gather information from **mothers, fathers and grandmothers of the Roma community** on experiences and perspectives on early childhood as well as the health and social care system and, more specifically, the programme “Frühe Hilfen”. **Focus groups, interviews and an online survey** were also conducted to obtain the views of **health and social care professionals** on these topics as well as specific needs and requirements as regard to support for families of the Roma community.

Main messages

- To overcome existing barriers, it is **key to gain the trust** of Roma families.
- **Culturally sensitive work** is essential, not only for Roma but for all families.

Results

The results of the study confirm the findings from literature that many Roma families are confronted with **different kind of burdens**. However, these burdens are not specific to Roma families; they can occur in all families and especially in socioeconomically disadvantaged families.

A special feature of Roma communities seems to be that the **mothers are often very young**. Most of the mothers interviewed, however, feel confident in dealing with the newborn, as they have already gained experience in the family. Another special feature and resource is the great **support and backing from the extended family**, which can reduce the need for external support. However, not everyone, especially those with migration experience, can fall back on the family. And even the family cannot cover everything or often does not have the necessary information. The interviewees themselves expressed a **need for external support**, especially financial support, but also health-related information. It can therefore be assumed that at least part of the Roma families living in Austria belong to the target group of “Frühe Hilfen” and would benefit from it.

I think that's exactly what I needed. Someone who would come to me and calmly give me tips and information. I had so many questions at the time and often I was just alone with my questions. (interviewed mother)

Despite the identified need, Roma families hardly seem to have been reached by the programme so far. One reason for the presumably **low accessibility** so far could be that the need for support is a sensitive topic that is not always addressed directly/openly by those concerned. In the present study, the need for external support was seen or mentioned more by respondents with migration experience than by autochthonous Romnja/Roma. This could be because the families of the former live in another country and are thus not available as support. However, other relevant mechanisms were also revealed that make it **difficult to seek professional support**, such as concern about negative effects on one's own family or the Roma community, fear of authorities or shame.

If you ask someone external for help and then maybe they come to your house and show you how to maybe handle your child, you can be sure that the neighbours will soon say, "Look, the gypsies can't handle their children!" (interviewed father)

Conclusions

Various measures can contribute to improve the accessibility of the programme for Roma families, like **raising the awareness of the professionals** cooperating with “Frühe Hilfen”, focusing on Roma without an extended family and the flexible design of family support.

There is also esp. a need to **raise awareness among Roma families** by working with trusted key persons and providing appropriate information about the Austrian programme of Early Childhood Interventions and its benefits. Complementary offers to promote health and parenting skills (e.g. in the form of group offers) seem necessary but require trust in the recommending or acting persons. **Trust** can be built best upon positive experiences with uncomplicated, quick help at the beginning. If necessary, **alternatives to home visits** should be offered. In addition, it is important to improve access to Roma families by **working with familiar key persons** and providing appropriate information about “Frühe Hilfen” and its benefits.

As I said before, so don't control or be unkind, don't just talk, really help!" (interviewed grandmother)

Initial measures to improve access to “Frühe Hilfen” for Roma families have already been developed and tested within the framework of the project, considering the project results and feedback from Roma families. Specific **awareness-raising activities** (information in the context of events, materials like a new leaflet explaining the programme for the Roma community and available in the relevant languages, a video) are intended to make the offer better known in the Roma community and lower barriers to utilisation. Further **training on intercultural competence** and the deconstruction of existing stereotypes and prejudices in general, as well as discrimination structures and exclusion mechanisms of Roma and Romnja in particular, should provide professionals (especially family supporters working in the programme “Frühe Hilfen”) with knowledge and expertise for working with Roma families. It turned out, that this training is also helpful for dealing with families with different kind of cultural backgrounds.



Ažutimos pe vrjama (Frühe Hilfen) – Sasto Šavoripe

Publications

Weigl, Marion; Winkler, Petra; Haas, Sabine (2020): Sasto Chavoripe - Soziale Inklusion von Roma durch Frühe Hilfe. Ergebnisse der Literaturrecherche. Gesundheit Österreich, Wien

Weigl, Marion; Haas, Sabine; Schipper-Schauer, Michaela; Winkler, Petra (2021): Sasto Chavoripe - Soziale Inklusion von Roma durch Frühe Hilfen. Gesamtbericht. Gesundheit Österreich, Wien (in preparation; will be available by end of 2021)

<https://www.fruehehilfen.at/de/Service/Materialien/Publicationen.htm>