# Early Childhood Interventions Psychosocial Care

Sagerschnig, Sophie; Ofner, Tonja; Scolik, Fiona (2024): Psychosoziale Angebote und Frühe Hilfen. Evaluation spezifischer Angebote bei psychischen Belastungen im Rahmen der Frühen Hilfen. Gesundheit Österreich, Wien

## Summary

Background and objective

Early childhood interventions support families and help them to create good conditions for their children to grow up. The core of early childhood interventions is supporting families over a longer period of time (if necessary, from pregnancy to the child**’**s third birthday). As part of this family support, the specific need for support services is identified, these are organi**s**ed and coordinated, and referrals to specific offers are carried out. The need for further support offers is great among the families being supported, and various psychosocial offers play an important role in this. Most of the time, referrals are made to external offers, but offers have also been implemented as part of early childhood interventions.

Two specific offers for mothers with psychological stress, which are offered as part of early childhood interventions, were evaluated in the course of this project: on the one hand, a short**‐**term psychotherapeutic intervention from the “Gesund ins Leben” network in Tyrol, and on the other hand, a therapeutic group called “Mutterseelen...gemeinsam” from the early childhood interventions network Vienna**‐**West. The aim of this evaluation was, to gain general knowledge about the needs and benefits of psychosocial offers for the early childhood interventions target group and, as well as to generate in**‐**depth information on the benefits of the two selected offers in Tyrol and Vienna. The results of the project should also enable broader conclusions or recommendations for a corresponding offer.

Methods

A mixed methods approach was chosen as part of this evaluation. Different qualitative instruments for data collection – focus groups, individual interviews, online surveys, participant observation – as well as screening questionnaires were included as a quantitative survey instrument in order to obtain as complex and differentiated a picture as possible of the offers to be evaluated and to sufficiently meet the needs of the different target groups. In addition, the multi‐perspectivity of this topic was taken into account by surveying various relevant actors (participating families, family caregivers, intervention implementers). The qualitative surveys were evaluated using a content‐structuring qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz; the screening forms were evaluated descriptively.

Results

The use of different survey instruments and different implementation settings led to a large number of people taking part in the evaluation: 43 family support workers, nine treaters, 38 intervention participants and 88 mothers who (formerly) were supported by early childhood interventions.

The persons involved often see psychological stress as a reason for seeking early childhood interventions, and different psychosocial offers are required depending on the problem. Psychotherapy, mother‐child offers of all kinds and a wide range of group offers are very often mentioned as specifically necessary offers for this target group. In general, the families surveyed are very satisfied with the psychosocial services they have used and would use them again. However, all of the respondents emphasised barriers to the use of psychosocial services, some of which prevent the services from being used at all.

The evaluation results indicate that the two evaluated offers make an important contribution to improving the psychosocial well‐being of young mothers with psychological problems. Both offers reach their target group largely well, and due to their orientation, framework conditions (including being free of charge, no diagnosis of a mental illness required for participation) and close networking with family support workers, they help to reduce the barriers that generally exist when using psychosocial services.

There is a high level of satisfaction with the offers among all those involved; they are viewed as important and helpful. The practitioners are viewed as qualified and competent, and the process and content of the offer are also rated positively by the majority of those surveyed. Some participants in Vienna expressed a need for more content‐related inputs, therapeutic interventions and strategies.

The effectiveness of the service is supported by the fact that families, as well as those carrying out the intervention and family support workers who work with the mothers at the same time, subjectively perceive a reduction in psychological stress and also objectively show a reduction in stress during the period of participation in the service in the screenings. The effects achieved by the services were seen in the families in several areas at the same time: awareness of illness and stabilisation, relief through exchange (with like‐minded people), development of a network (in Vienna), improvement of self‐efficacy, parent‐child relationship, partnership and family, security in dealing with the baby/toddler, dealing with life changes caused by the child, self‐acceptance, social integration/less loneliness, evaluation of one’s own motherhood and destigmatisation.

One limitation with regard to reaching the target group is that, in its current form, the service can only reach women with sufficient knowledge of German, but certain target groups of early childhood intervention services cannot benefit from it. In addition, the limited scope of the service in Tyrol and the limited capacity of the service in Vienna mean that both services are not sufficient for mothers with extensive or more complex problems and not all mothers who would like to and need this service can take part in a timely manner.

Recommendations

Based on the evaluation results, it is generally recommended to establish or expand (the number of) low‐threshold, free and needs‐oriented offers. There is also a need for more education and public relations work regarding psychosocial stress/illnesses, as well as more information about support offers. Good networking and cooperation between the support structures is seen as essential.

With regard to the specific offer in Tyrol, it is recommended that this be expanded – at least to up to ten units (depending on demand). It is also recommended that the format, language and organisation be designed specifically for the target group and that there be more intensive exchange between psychotherapists and family support workers. In addition to more information about the service and its framework conditions, it would also be advisable to increase the motivation of fathers to participate.

A regional (target group‐specific) expansion is also recommended for the group offer in Vienna. There is a need for detailed information about the offer as well as clear communication regarding rules and expectations in connection with the offer. Interventions, strategies and prepared content should be used in a needs‐oriented manner.

Keywords

early childhood intervention, psychosocial care, evaluation, mixed methods approach