

## Regional Early Childhood Intervention Networks (Frühe Hilfen) - A guide for group services in the context of early childhood intervention networks

Groups with families are not defined as a core element of a Regional Early Childhood Intervention network. However, the concept and the quality standard do mention that additional services, such as group events, can be provided as part of the programme. The guidelines for setting up and expanding Regional Early Childhood Interventions networks provide some specific examples and tips.

Groups have proved very successful in practice and are experienced as very helpful and effective - in the Early Childhood Intervention Networks, but also in other areas. In this context, 'groups' refers to regular activities that are designed to bring together the target groups of the Early Childhood Intervention Networks (pregnant women / mothers / fathers / important caregivers of young children) as a group to exchange ideas, share experiences and/or get to know each other. These groups are usually organised and facilitated by a professional, in contrast to self-help groups.

The National Centre for Early Childhood Interventions (NZFH.at) recommends the provision of groups, but these can only ever be a supplement and not a substitute for the core intervention of early help, i.e. family support. However, they can pursue various goals that provide families with additional support. For example they can offer

- exchange with families in similar situations (peers),
- contribute to the building of a social network,
- promote mutual support through these networks,
- contribute to empowerment,
- enable people to familiarise themselves with the programme (and contribute to a better understanding) and thereby increase its acceptance,
- be a bridging measure before or after participation in the programme,
- provide low-threshold counselling and support independently of or in addition to the family support offered in the programme,
- to teach parenting/education/health skills
- or be used for therapeutic interventions (e.g. in connection with psychological stress).

The associated benefits are just as diverse. Groups can

- support families in sharing their experiences with other families,
- enable the experience of mothers as experts and strengthen their self-confidence and skills,
- allow the observation of mothers' interaction with their children and other mothers to get a more complete picture,
- reach families in a low-threshold way,
- establish or maintain longer-term contact with the families or a connection between the families (e.g. in the event of short-term capacity bottlenecks or if they tend to end the family support, but there is still a need for some further assistance),
- reduce home visits, thus relieving the burden on family supporters,
- in some cases compensate gaps in the regional system.

However, rural areas in particular often report a lack of support and networking opportunities for families. This can be countered by providing dedicated groups. Another reason for setting up separate groups may be that existing groups are not used by families with burdens for economic (cost contributions) or group dynamic reasons. Even in special groups provided by the Regional Early Childhood Intervention Networks, very different population groups come together that otherwise have few points of contact (e.g. mothers with and without migration experience), which is generally seen as positive. What is common, however, is that things do not run smoothly in the families and not everything is positive.

So, a variety of aspects need to be considered and decided when setting up a group, like the composition of the group, the language, if it is a closed or open group, how many participants are reasonable, how to deal with childcare, timing and place of group meetings, duration and management, but also how to invite families. In addition, resources are necessary for staff but also other costs. The guide aims to support the planning phase for groups to be set up in Regional Early Childhood Intervention Networks.