

Participatory research in the field of Early Childhood Interventions

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... want to improve the development and health chances of children and parents in family and society at an early stage and in a sustainable way

... in particular with regard to socio-economically disadvantaged families and families with various burdens

The **Austrian Model for early childhood interventions** follows the proportionate universalism approach, combining universal and indicated prevention. The current implementation focuses on the indicated part, though. Key elements:

- Home visitors:** continuous and comprehensive family support - throughout several months/years
- Network-Management:** cooperation and networking across sectors as well as case-related
- Regional multi-professional network:** which functions as a multi-professional support system with well-coordinated, diverse services for parents and children

More information: www.fruehehilfen.at

Participatory research

“Depending on the practical conditions in the project and the living conditions of the target group, participation can be realised in different ways. The task is to find the level of participation that corresponds to the respective conditions.”

Intensity	Description
Usual form of participation	Participants are informed about the study and give their (informed) consent
Controlled / targeted counselling	Participants are specifically asked for advice (e.g. in the form of expert interviews)
Mutual consultation	Longer cooperation between researchers and participants (e.g. steering group)
Strengthening partnership	Equal cooperation between researchers and participants

Degree of participation

Objectives of our participatory research for early childhood interventions

To identify

- Effects of the early childhood interventions from the families' perspective
- Barriers for the use of early childhood interventions

-> **targeted and hypothesis-based further development**

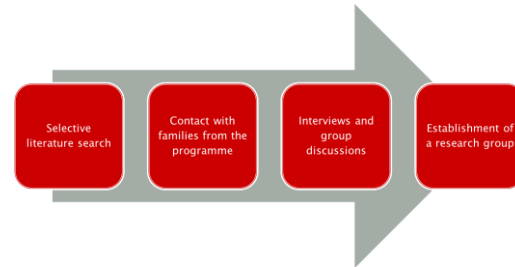
Our activities so far

At the beginning of 2018 there was a **selective literature search** on concrete options for action for the participation of parents/families in research projects.

Based on these initial findings, we began contacting (formerly) accompanied families through various channels in spring 2018 and invited them to initial **interviews** or **group discussions**. The aim of the 21 interviews/ discussions was to get to know the families better, to gain initial insights into their experiences with early childhood interventions and, above all, to motivate them to continue working together in the sense of a research group.

At the beginning of 2019, it was possible to set up a **research group** of 13 mothers. The work was always carried out in a group setting, whereby one method was tested at a time. The results were discussed in a one-on-one format, in order to learn more about the content and also to learn to formulate questions.

The meetings of the research group are arranged in such a way that we start with a breakfast and only begin with the actual work after a considerable time (which the parents also like to call their job). The work then usually lasts 1 to 1,5 hours. Finally, the method is reflected upon and feedback on the research group and suggestions are sought. During the whole period one of the home visitors is present, who on the one hand takes over the child care and on the other hand offers concrete advice and support before and after the group. The families receive an incentive of 20,- per meeting.



Results

The **literature review** showed that parents in particular were seldom used as co-researchers, while there were research methods with which parents were consulted. However, most of the literature is rather vague or refers to intervention projects rather than pure research projects.

Our **experiences with the participation of families** showed, that:

- ✓ The preparation phase needs more time than anticipated
- ✓ Need to consider accessibility of families (who, how, when, where)
 - ✓ Reached families tend to have good social competence but are missing a social network
 - ✓ Using existing contacts from the Early Childhood Interventions Network works well
 - ✓ Must match the time and organizational conditions of the families
 - ✓ Benefits must be clearly visible
- ✓ Constant circle of persons vs. changing group members
- ✓ Seriousness of the implementing institutions important

Conclusions on the participation of families:

- ✓ Allows deep insights into the living conditions of the families
- ✓ Gives valuable feedback on the implementation of the programme -> results as a good basis for further development
- ✓ Improves quality of research: improved survey tools, adapted recruitment process, context/culturally sensitive interpretation
- ✓ Gives clarity about the possibilities and limits of participatory research
- ✓ Shows opportunities to support networking among families

Characteristic of the 27 participating mothers:

- 18 born in Austria, others mainly in Eastern Europe but also African countries
- 10 mothers only completed compulsory school, 6 finished apprenticeship
- 6 mothers are unemployed
- 10 mothers are single parents
- At least 15 families are living in risk of poverty
- 14 mothers started with the programme during pregnancy
- 14 families completed the programme already by the time of their participation in our research
- Main reasons for contact: being overstrained/anxious, lack of social support, psychosocial issues, need for administrative/legal/organisational support, medical/social burden, threatening crisis