

## **Helping relationships and empowerment of families:**

### **Changing Challenges in Child-Rearing and related support for families**

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Across Europe, families have changed considerably during the past decades, not only in terms of household structure but also regarding parental roles and demands in parenting. These trends clearly contribute to changing demands for public and private support that has to meet families' needs. This paper aims to outline major trends and challenges for families and provide examples how these are met by support programs for families, mostly drawing from experiences in Germany.

#### **Intensification of parenting and the role of early prevention**

The first trend relates to changes that have been identified as "intensification of parenting" (Hays, 1998). As pointed out particularly by research from Anglo-Saxon countries, parenting has become more demanding for parents, asking for skills and investments that have not played a major role in the past. Relevant changes that contribute to the intensification of parenting are the higher sensitivity to children's needs and children's rights that emphasize child-centered parenting and the abandonment of power-assertion in disciplining children. Furthermore, there is an increasing concern about early opportunities for children's intellectual stimulation (German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina, National Academy of Science and Engineering - acatech, & Union of the German Academies of Sciences and Humanities, 2014) as well as increasing demands for parents's involvement in children's educational careers, a cultural practice that is advised by research evidence emphasizing its importance for children's academic success (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Miedel & Reynolds, 2000). Finally, there seems to be an increasing lack of clear boundaries for parental responsibilities versus young peoples's self reliance as these turn into young adulthood. At least in some countries, issues of "helicopter parenting" have been raised as indicating an increased risk of parental overinvolvement in the late adolescent and early adult years (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012; Schiffrin et al., 2014).

In response to these trends as well as part of preventive strategies, parenting programs have been developed and rolled out in many countries to increase parents' knowledge about children's development, their needs, and parenting competencies (e.g. Cunningham, Bremner, & Boyle, 1995; Jackson & Dickinson, 2009; Scott & Gardner, 2015). Many of these programs have received high acceptance at least among middle class families who seem to be particularly concerned about "good" parenting. However, outreach to groups at risk is often a special challenge (Axford, Lehtonen, Kaoukji, Tobin, & Berry, 2012). The early phase of parenting has been identified as a particularly salient stage in the family life cycle that offers good opportunities to address parents successfully, not the least because they are

novices in this role, even more so since everyday opportunities to observe and participate in child rearing have become rare in an increasingly age-segregated society. This phase is addressed by a number of programs seeking to foster competent parenting and provide solid grounds for positive family development. Given the salient developmental task in infancy, many programs aim to promote secure attachment relationships as a crucial base for children's social and emotional well-being.

In Germany, Early Prevention has been rolled out in a collaborative effort of health services and social services (Sann, 2012, see also [www.fruehehilfen.de](http://www.fruehehilfen.de) ). Although this program mainly aims to minimize risk factors for child maltreatment and neglect, it also addresses the larger group of parents and thus contributes to an easier start into parenthood more generally. Given the federal structure, different services and offerings for parents have been established in the various states with a particular focus on effective outreach to disadvantaged families. Evaluation studies evidence differences in success, pointing to the importance of program content as well as its suitability to the professional profile of those who deliver the program. In particular, it has been shown to be important for reaching the aims of the program to target the quality of parent-child interaction instead of providing other kinds of support (e.g. related to maternal health and well-being). For midwives who provide the cornerstone of family services (with so-called family midwives visiting families at risk for up to one year) this is no easy task since they typically focus maternal well-being and physical child care. Interventions aiming to promote parental sensitivity as key factor in children's attachment have been shown to be successful – but less so if the professionals themselves had insecure attachment representations (Suess, Bohlen, Mali, & Frumentia Maier, 2010). Interestingly, this was the case for a substantial share of professionals. Finally, experiences from the Early Prevention initiative show that successful networking among the diverse professions involved – from pediatricians and midwives to social workers - has to be actively promoted, preferably by local coordinators.

### **Increasing chances for educational success to reduce social disparities**

The second trend to be discussed relates to increasing economic disparities. Children grow up under very diverse conditions, and the economic resources of their families differ increasingly. Over the past decades, poverty has been pointed out as major risk factor for family life and children's well-being (Adamson, Bradshaw, Hoelscher, & Richardson, 2007; Bradshaw, 2002). The economic crisis of the past years has hit many families, calling for stressful financial adaptations that often undermine family cohesion as well as the quality of parenting. The negative outcomes of economic deprivation for family life are documented by many studies (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010; Walper, 2009). Last not least, families' lack of socio-economic resources limits children's educational success. Due to the lower educational chances of children from disadvantaged background, poverty tends to be transmitted across generations. As documented by the PISA study, this problem is particularly pronounced in Germany where the families' socio-economic resources contribute to the largest differences in adolescents' competencies found across countries

(Deutsches PISA-Konsortium, 2001, 2007).

While several programs seek to buffer children against negative consequences of social disadvantage by raising their inclusion in public child care, full-day schooling, or after school activities, some programs directly address families and they way parents promote children's competencies. For example, a large national program ("A chance for parents is a chance for children – parental support for the educational paths of children"; see [www.elternchance.de](http://www.elternchance.de)) has been established in Germany to empower parents in promoting children's education early on (cf. Walper & Stemmler, 2013). As major tool of this program, family educators are trained to work with socially disadvantaged families and immigrant families who are not yet familiar with the German education system and do not master the German language well. As "parents' companions" these professionals seek to raise parents' awareness of children's need for intellectual stimulation and support in the educational domain. Particular attention is paid to addressing parents adequately, leaving them in the expert role in parenting their children but at the same time providing information about the educational system in Germany, suggesting stimulating activities with children, helping out with paper work when applying e.g. for kindergarten, supporting parents in communication with teachers etc. Findings from the evaluation point to success of the program but also indicate some limitations (Müller et al., 2015). The program was well-received particularly among professionals involved in early child care, and participating in the training contributed to professional competencies. The parents involved valued the support they received and reported less school-related worries. At the same time, data from qualitative interviews with the professionals evidenced the need for a local infrastructure that provides supervision or intervision. Given the many family problems these parent companions were confronted with, they needed professional exchange to continuously shape their work and develop adequate strategies in deciding how the problems could best be tackled. The program is currently being adjusted to working with refugee families who face even more strains.

### **Post-separation parenting and co-parenting**

Finally, the third part emphasizes the implications of changes in family structure. With increasing divorce rates, many children experience parental breakup and live in multi-local family arrangements that span several households (Amato, 2010, 2014). Furthermore, marriage rates are declining and an increasing rate of children is born out of wedlock, mostly with initially cohabiting parents who, however, are at high risk of separation (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Kiernan, 2004). Both trends contribute to an increase of single parent families as well as to a higher share of multi-parent families when separated parents form new partnerships and stepparents become involved in child-rearing (Sweeney, 2010).

While many separated families manage to find a suitable solution for post-separation (co) parenting, a smaller share of families has to rely on continued professional support in coping with post-separation conflict. Families with high legal conflict are a particularly

challenging case for professionals in law and counseling, even more so since children are often negatively involved in their parents dispute (Coates, Deutsch, Starnes, Sullivan, & Sydlík, 2004; Johnston, 1994). Several approaches such as mediation, high-conflict counseling, or the use of parenting coordinators have been developed to work with separated parents who are involved in ongoing conflict. Quite importantly, countries vary as to the legal strategies employed. While some countries rely on shared parenting time as a means to settle disputes over child visitation, research cautions that frequent contact to the non-resident parent may be rather harmful in the context of high interparental conflict (Fehlberg, Smyth, Maclean, & Roberts, 2011; Kalmijn, 2016).

Instead of dividing the child between parents as a “fair” solution, parenting programs may be a better tool to raise parents’ awareness of their children’s needs and promote strategies of interaction that limit strain for children. In the meanwhile, several such programs have been developed (see Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, & Braver, 2004; e.g. Wolchik et al., 1993). Given a solid research base that documents the detrimental role of interparental conflict, much attention is being paid to its role in designing parenting programs for separated families (Grych, 2005). “Looking out for our children” (LOOK) is a program for separated parents that addresses parents’ and children’s strains and needs, focuses special challenges in post-separation parenting, and offers ways how to limit conflict between parents will be illustrated (Walper & Krey, 2011). It is a small-group intensive program (8-10 participants per group with 2 trainers) comprising 6 sessions, each of 3 hours duration. Both former partners do not participate in the same group but are allocated to parallel or sequential groups. The program is highly structured and offers a very accepting atmosphere with many practical exercises that are guided by high support by the trainers. As evident from the evaluation, the program is similarly well accepted by high and low conflict separated families and voluntary as well as involuntary participants whose participation was mandated by the family court (Retz & Walper, 2015). As shown in pre-post comparisons with two control groups, participants profit regarding parents’ well-being, their conflict, and regarding children’s coping with parental separation. In retrospective accounts, parents also profit regarding their parenting competencies, particularly their way of handling children’s difficult emotions. However, hostile attributions regarding the former partner’s behavior have been rather robust and hard to change. Further improvements of the program shall try to overcome these limitations which are particularly relevant for high conflict families.

## **Resume**

The issues addressed here cover only limited parts of the larger field of family empowerment and family support. Clearly, the major aim must be to offer sustainable help that allows families to overcome critical situations and work out their own best way of coping with the challenges of child rearing. Strengthening parental self-efficacy may be the most important step to this goal.

Overall, the experiences from various programs and initiatives clearly show that specific expertise is necessary to promote families' coping in a given situation and enhance parenting competencies in a certain domain. Evidence-based programs are increasingly available, but not yet similarly accepted by all professions involved in family support. While lay and semi-professional support may be helpful, particularly in accessing families in need, specialized expertise of family counselors and family life educators and a multi-professional support structure are necessary tools for successfully supporting families in changing societies. In many domains, this requires further professional development. Despite the many differences between countries, their family culture, and their professional infrastructure, learning from each other's experiences helps to improve our tools to promote family well-being.

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