



A mentalization-based primary prevention program for stress prevention during the transition from family care to day care



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ABSTRACT

A mentalization-based early prevention program for daycares will be presented. The program aims at supporting families during the transition to day care. Transitional phases are significant threshold situations in which vulnerabilities can become activated. Therefore, prevention at this point, especially for children from psychosocially burdened families is of great importance.

Theoretical background of the program is the concept of mentalization. In the context of stress and intensive emotional arousal mentalization is likely to fail.

The goal of the program is to prevent stress, to strengthen the mentalization ability to support the parent–child relationship and to promote the child's development.

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1. Introduction

Since the introduction of new child-promotive legislation in 2013¹ in Germany, every child from the age of one to three years has the right to external childcare. The introduction of this law included and led to an increasing construction of day care facilities, and it will most likely be leading to an increased enrollment of children in external childcare.

Although day care at this young age is discussed controversially and always contains a social, political, economic and ideological dimension, several study results point towards positive effects of external childcare in regard of children from socially disadvantaged families (Borge, Rutter, Côté, & Tremblay, 2004; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2008; Côté, Borge, Geoffroy, Rutter, & Tremblay, 2008; Loeb, Bridges, Bassok, Fuller, & Rumberger, 2007; Love et al., 2003). This is mainly explained by compensatory effects that day care can provide in respect to children from psycho-socially burdened families.

In a qualitative survey which was conducted with the heads of 21 daycare facilities in the federal state of Saarland it was reported that all of the facilities were working with children at risk or have done so in the past. However the grand majority of the daycare

teachers are not trained in the handling of psycho-socially burdened children and report difficulties in doing so (e.g. displays of behavioral problems on the part of the children, lack of reliability on the part of the parents). Yet the interviewed institutions stated a high willingness in receiving a qualification in this area (Baukhage, Bark, Sidor, & Cierpka, 2014).

The quality of early day care generally plays a prominent role concerning the impact on the development of the child (e.g. Bäuerlein, Linkert, Stumpf, & Schneider, 2013; Anders, 2013) and has increasingly become a subject of interest in research. Particularly, high process quality, i.e. developmentally appropriate and needs-oriented interaction processes between child and caregiver, seems to have a positive impact on the key areas of development (Bäuerlein et al., 2013). However the process quality in Germany has been classified only as average and worthy to improve (Tietze et al., 2012).

Thus, in this article an early prevention program for daycares to reduce stress during the transition process will be introduced. The overall goal of the program is on the one hand to improve the quality of daycares by training the daycare teachers. On the other hand the program aims at strengthening the parent–child relationship and at promoting the socio-emotional development of the child. The program especially offers opportunities for children from psycho-socially burdened families.

1.1. Importance of early prevention programs

Prevention programs in early childhood have shown great effects on the socio-emotional, cognitive and verbal development of

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¹ Since August 1st, 2013; The "Kinderförderungsgesetz" (law of child promotion) came into effect on December 16th, 2008. It entails the appropriation of funds towards the extension of the available childcare facilities (phase 1) and enacts a legal claim to external childcare for children from one to three years of age (phase 2).

children (Egeland, Weinfield, Bosquet, & Cheng, 2000). They are posited to have a long-term effect on the child's conditions of maturation of neuronal structures because of the brain's neuroplasticity in this vulnerable time frame (Strüber & Roth, 2012). Following Hertzman and Wiens (1996) the effectiveness of prevention programs is based on two principles: i.e. “the earlier the better”, which refers to the period from birth to pre-school age, and “again and again”, which means to stimulate development continuously, even in later stages of life. Cierpka, Franz, and Egle (2011) also recommend an early investment as it pays off in the long-term because interventions at a later date are more complex in many respects. According to the “latency model”, periods of understimulation, of traumatization and of resulting developmental delay lead to a neurobiological embedded latent vulnerability, which can become activated in significant life events, especially during transitional phases (Hertzman and Wiens, 1996) such as changing from parental to external care.

Because children from psychosocial burdened families are often affected by multiple risk factors, this is why the program particularly focuses on these children.

1.2. Previous findings and support for psychosocial burdened families

Experiences early in life have a great influence on a child's physical and mental development. Although causal connections are known to be complex, Egle and Hardt (2009) summarized some of the risk factors in early childhood which are associated with a higher probability in developing a physical or mental illness later in life: chronic familial disharmony, alcohol/drug problems of the parents, mental or physical illness of the parents, financial problems, low socio-economic status, maltreatment and neglect—just to be naming a few of them. Families facing the burdens named above have been the target for early intervention programs throughout the last decades. The project “Keiner fällt durchs Netz” (“Nobody slips through the Net”) was one of the pilot projects of early intervention programs implemented in Germany (Cierpka, 2009). In this sensitivity-oriented program trained family midwives are administering home visits in high-risk families, i.e. families facing multiple psychosocial burdens. Children in families that received the intervention showed an improved level of social development. In addition, mothers in the intervention group judged their 1-year-old children to be less “difficult” compared to the comparison group. Due to the intervention, a more functional mother-child interaction was achieved (Sidor, Kunz, Eickhorst, & Cierpka 2013). The results of the 1-year and 2-year follow-up obtained long-term effects in the areas of maternal assessment of the child's “difficulty” and their parenting behavior. Thus, mothers from the previous intervention group used less negative behavioral strategies when dealing with difficult limit-testing behaviors of their children (Sidor, Fischer, & Cierpka, 2015).

Especially high-risk constellations in families are accompanied by limitations on the abilities of mentalization (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002) as well as on parental sensitivity (Ainsworth, 1977). Mentalization inhibiting interactions in families and lacking parental sensitivity are believed to cause behavioral problems in children such as aggressive behavior, emotional problems and interactional problems (Fearon et al., 2006). Fraiberg, Adelson, and Shapiro (1975) describe how unresolved difficult experiences of the parents in their own childhood affect their perception of the relationship with their children. Such interaction problems between parents and children often go along with insecure attachment patterns (overview see Dornes, 1999; Grossmann, 2000). While a secure attachment has been shown to be a protective factor for a healthy mental development in children, in insecure attachment patterns (i.e. anxious-resistant insecure, anxious-avoidant insecure, disorganized attachment) the parents are not or

only partly available for their children as a “safe base” during a felt threat or during explorative behavior (Marvin, Cooper, Hoffmann, & Powell, 2003). Taking this into account experiences of separation like the transition from parental to external care represent a significant struggle for the child. With described irritations, the child cannot make any or only limited use of the opportunities in the daycare facility, showing limitation in his or her explorative behavior.

1.3. Acclimatization processes in daycares

The separation process between parents and child from family care in the home environment to daycare is a transitional phase which puts parents and their child under specific stress, and is a challenge for all participants: the child, the parents and the daycare teacher. Questions such as “Will my child like the teacher more than me?” asked by the mother, “Will my mother leave me alone in this unfamiliar place?” asked by the child, and “Will the parents accept me as an attachment figure for their child?” asked by the daycare teacher, etc. arise and necessitate taking the different perspectives into account. Supporting stressed families in this phase is of great importance for the development of the child and the parents.

An investigation by Laewen (1989) found that children, who had to manage the transition to daycare without the support of their parents, exhibited a higher rate of absence because of illness and showed more anxious and less explorative behavior within the first 7 months after transition. Together with the introduction of Bowlby's attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973) those national and international findings led to a different awareness of the transition phase in Germany in the mid-1980s, underlining the importance of an acclimatization period in the presence of one parent. Acclimatization models were developed, in which the adaptation of the child to the new childcare setting follows a specific procedure with the parents being present.

One of most common and field-tested acclimatization models in Germany is the “Berliner Eingewöhnungsmodell” (Berlin's acclimatization model) which was developed by Laewen, Andres, and Hédervári (2009) and is based on the attachment theory, meaning that the child's basic need for an emotional attachment takes a center stage. The main principle of the model is the development of an attachment of the child to a specific daycare teacher. With the support of the parent as a “safe base” the child can slowly get used to the new surroundings and people. Once the daycare teacher is established as an attachment figure, he or she can serve as a “safe base” for the child during the day. According to the model the acclimatization process may last from one to three weeks, depending on the attachment style of the child with securely attached children needing a longer time. The model consists of an initial phase of 3 days. On the 4th day the first separation between parent and child takes place, after which the time needed for the acclimatization period will be decided, depending on the amount of protest a child shows during the separation. The process is continued by a stabilization phase, where the separation time is slowly expanded and the finalization phase where the parent is not present anymore, but still available if needed. The stabilization phase may vary in duration.

A study by Datler, Ahnert, Fürstaller et al. from 2007 to 2012 investigated the transition process from family care to daycare of 104 children at the age of 1 ½ and 2 ½ years, using different methods, e.g. cortisol measurements, analyzing video recordings and psychoanalytic infant observation. One of the main results of the study was that the transition process of children to daycare was very distinct for each child. Therefore, the authors questioned the notion of a unified model, categorizing the children according to similarities in the acclimatization process. The period of time

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