

# Mission Statement Early Childhood Intervention

Contribution by the NZFH  
Advisory Committee



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## Foreword by the National Centre for Early Prevention (NZFH)

The Mission Statement Early Childhood Intervention presented herewith supplements the Position Paper on Early Childhood Intervention (Begriffsbestimmung Frühe Hilfen) published in 2009 by the National Centre for Early Prevention (Nationales Zentrum Frühe Hilfen, NZFH) in conjunction with its scientific advisory committee. The Mission Statement was created by the working group Mission Statement (Leitbild), set up by the advisory committee, and unanimously approved by the advisory committee at its meeting on 2 April 2014.

The scientific advisory committee was appointed jointly by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, BMFSFJ) and the NZFH. It advises the NZFH with expert opinion and guidance on scientific matters. A joint panel consisting of members with research and practice background was set up in 2011 in order to shape the transfer between these areas. It consists of 40 members from different academic disciplines as well as of representatives of relevant institutions and agencies. (The current composition is detailed at <http://www.fruehehilfen.de/wir-ueber-uns/beirat>).

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## Introduction

In 2009 the scientific advisory committee of the National Centre for Early Prevention (Nationales Zentrum Frühe Hilfen, NZFH) published a Position Paper on Early Childhood Intervention (Begriffsbestimmung Frühe Hilfen) (NZFH 2009). This work described the breadth and complexity of this new area of action, which was just becoming established, and it offered those working in the field a foundation for the development of concepts that at times resulted in very heterogeneous services and co-operative structures of interagency collaboration. Since then early childhood intervention<sup>1</sup> has developed dynamically and as a result of the Federal Child Protection Act (Bundeskinderschutzgesetz, BKiSchG) coming into effect has now found its way into social legislation. The Mission Statement Early Childhood Intervention seeks to accommodate these developments and in doing so state more precisely the definition of early childhood intervention, while at the same time clarifying the position of early childhood intervention in the spectrum of state services for children and families<sup>2</sup>. The Mission Statement is there to provide orientation for all experts working in early childhood intervention; in particular, the hope and intention is to prompt reflection on their work among the partners in early childhood intervention networks and support them in developing a shared understanding of early childhood intervention.

- 1 Note about the translation of the term 'Frühe Hilfen': The term 'early childhood intervention' was chosen for the translation of 'Frühe Hilfen' as it is more common in the international context and therefore easier to understand. For the name of the NZFH we decided to translate 'Frühe Hilfen' with 'Early Prevention' in order to clarify its positioning in Germany within the area of prevention.
- 2 The Mission Statement is based on a broad understanding of 'family' that corresponds to the pluralization of our society and takes into account the diversity of modern living and family arrangements. We understand 'family' as a private living arrangement where people of different generations care for each other in binding relationships.

## Foundation of Early Childhood Intervention

### **Early childhood intervention is embedded in fundamental rights and enshrined in law.**

The early childhood intervention goals are derived from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), according to which all children have the right to protection, support and participation, ‘irrespective of the child’s or his or her parents’ or legal guardians’ race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status’ (Art. 2, Section 1, CRC). Within this framework, early childhood intervention has the concrete goal of creating and strengthening advantageous developmental conditions to give infants and young children in their families right from the beginning the healthiest, most violence-free passage into adulthood possible.

Early childhood intervention also bases itself on the German Constitution (Grundgesetz, GG) (Art. 6 Section 2 GG), in which the rights and duties of parents to look after and raise their children is guaranteed, but the watchfulness of the state community safeguarding these activities is also provided for by law (the state’s duty of oversight). The preference is always for a child to be raised within a family. According to the law on co-operation and information with regard to child protection (Gesetz zur Kooperation und Information im Kinderschutz, KKG), the state community is mandated to provide parents with adequate support in the exercise of their parental responsibilities (Section 1, Subsection 3 KKG). In relation to early childhood intervention this means from the start of a pregnancy mothers and fathers should receive support by being offered guidance and assistance in looking after a newborn and in building a relationship with the child in a manner appropriate to its needs. The idea of early childhood intervention is to make a preventative contribution, allowing risks for the development of a child to be detected and avoided, and supporting the safety, support and education of the child and its parents.

Book VIII of the Social Code – Child und Youth Welfare Services (Sozialgesetzbuch (SGB) VIII) – defines the duties and services that public and unaffiliated providers of help for children and young people make available in order to implement the abovementioned fundamental rights. Using suitable measures, they are to support young people in their individual and social development, and they are to contribute towards avoiding and dismantling disadvantages; they are to advise and support parents and other legal guardians in the upbringing of their children; they are to protect children and young people from harm and risk to their welfare and to contribute towards preserving or creating positive living conditions for young people and their families along with a child and family-friendly

environment. Early childhood intervention has been incorporated here in Section 16 Subsection 3 SGB VIII: mothers and fathers as well as pregnant women and fathers-to-be are to be offered advice and help with regard to relationship questions and the creation of parental child-rearing and relationship competencies.

In order to do justice to this task, youth welfare services (Jugendhilfe) need co-operative partners from the field of healthcare and from further social service systems (such as establishments for the psychosocial support of women, pregnancy counselling and social welfare institutions catering for basic living allowance). Inter-professional networking and co-operation across sectors is equally necessary for the creation of adequate child and youth-friendly environments and individual, tailored services that support the physical, emotional and social wellbeing of children, parents and families. Legally this has been enshrined in the Federal Child Protection Act (Bundeskinderschutzgesetz, BKiSchG). The Law on Co-operation in Child Protection (KKG) has outlined the collaboration of many independent actors in healthcare, education and other sectors in particular and thereby made it a cornerstone of the provision of youth services.

So far, binding regulations with respect to co-operation and mutual information have been standardized in SGB VIII and the Pregnancy Conflict Law (Schwangerschaftskonfliktgesetz). Federal laws of the individual states (Länder) provide avenues to assimilate and adapt similar regulations (laws relating to the public health service, state child protection laws (Landeskinderschutzgesetze)).

Currently the healthcare sector's primary involvement in early childhood intervention provides standard care through midwifery, generic and paediatric healthcare and through community paediatricians, gynaecologists and family doctors but also in maternity and paediatric clinics, as well as in social paediatric centres and early intervention centres (Frühförderung). Together with other initiatives, specific services in early childhood intervention have found their starting points in the services providing preventive measures in healthcare and self help laid down in Section 20 Subsection 1 SGB V. This states that services delivering primary prevention are specifically mandated to contribute towards reducing inequalities in access to healthcare caused by social circumstances. Difficult living conditions are often at the root of family stress situations; at the very least they restrict the ability of families to cope, thereby causing negative consequences for the health of the children. Early childhood intervention is strengthened further by interdisciplinary circles of quality assurance with representatives from the fields of healthcare and youth services. This overlap between different service providers offers valuable opportunities for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary co-operation.

## Sphere of Action for Early Childhood Intervention

### **Early childhood intervention is geared to the needs of families.**

Early childhood intervention is geared to the needs of children, parents and families. The needs and circumstances of the local families form the foundation for municipal youth services and social planning. If gaps in care are identified in the existing municipal-service spectrums with regard to specific needs, they are recognized by the early childhood intervention network, and the network then works towards closing those gaps. In this way early childhood intervention provides a service structure that is tailored and adapted to different circumstances and needs.

### **Early childhood intervention stands for services to families (to be) and their children from pregnancy to the children's third year.**

Early childhood intervention is intended to run from pregnancy onwards so that any necessary intervention can be timely and preventive. It provides relief and support to parents raising and looking after infants and young children. The aim is to strengthen their capacity to uphold their parental duty of rearing and caring for their children. In the context of early childhood intervention, prevention also includes the timely avoidance and mitigation of developmental disadvantages for children.

### **In early childhood intervention, all work with families is shaped by a fundamental attitude of appreciation and trust.**

Early childhood intervention is a service for families which they can avail of voluntarily and by their own choosing. It will be either in the co-ordinating centre or by the potentially referring expert that parents will receive in-depth information about the purpose and goals of the services; parents are enabled to make a fully informed decision about their participation. This requires a high degree of transparency, confidentiality (non-disclosure, anonymity) and participation, both in the communication and in the shaping of the specific services and the structures through which these services are provided. Early childhood intervention is only effective when it is part of a dialogue and takes place in trustful collaboration.

**Early childhood intervention starts off with the families' own resources, strengthens their potential to help themselves and enhances parental responsibility.**

The goal of early childhood intervention is to reach and activate families in their living environment; the focus is on strengthening their resources and on mobilising the families' potential to help themselves. Securing the families' basic provision is considered a prerequisite for further intervention. On this secure foundation parents are strengthened in addressing their children's needs sensitively, in developing trust in their own actions and in experiencing themselves as effective in caring for and rearing their children. It is a central goal of early childhood intervention to support the parents' educational and relational competencies as the foundation for successfully building secure attachments.

**Early childhood intervention is aimed at all families and is committed to the concept of diversity.**

Early childhood intervention is open to all families. This means that the ways to access early childhood intervention and that early childhood intervention services are designed in a manner sensitive to cultural and social differences. Language barriers, residence status and cultural particularities should not lead to anyone being excluded from early childhood intervention. This also implies that existing services need to be made more accessible and new services and access options need to be created when specific needs have been identified.

**Early childhood intervention has its own profile and is integrated.**

Early childhood intervention has its own profile, and is at the same time an integrated part of the overall spectrum of support services for parents (to be) and children. The target-group profile places it largely in the primary and secondary preventive area on this spectrum, from where it develops its own expertise and quality of work. At the intersection of secondary and tertiary prevention, experts working in early childhood intervention possess the competencies to detect any risks to the children in good time. Where necessary, and whenever possible with the collaboration of the parents, they enact a transition to the youth welfare office (Jugendamt) to secure the children's safety and wellbeing. It is acknowledged that in general, but particularly under these circumstances the generic and support needs of family members and the need for support do not stagnate, but develop dynamically. In order to offer tailored early childhood intervention services, cooperation between the participating institutions and professions

is essential. This holds as much when early childhood intervention services are provided within the youth welfare services (Jugendhilfe, SGB VIII systems) as well as when they are availed of and coordinated with services that come from healthcare institutions (i.e., treatment of illnesses and use of nursing care services), integration services ((Eingliederungshilfe) comprising early intervention services (Frühförderung), mother-father-child prevention measures, rehabilitation) and in generic welfare services. Co-operation across the health and care system is shaped in a systematic, competent and quality assured manner.

### **Early childhood intervention creates low-threshold access for families with psychosocial stress.**

Early childhood intervention is particularly aimed at families that do not possess many resources and are not well positioned to organise their own support. Experts in early childhood interventions take on an advocacy role for families in particular stress situations, actively ensuring that the support services are tailored to their needs. They are attuned to family stress factors that they become aware of during their work and co-operation with families. For that reason it is important for early childhood intervention that access to the support services is opened up and has a low threshold to enable these families to participate. Support services in early childhood intervention have to be shaped in such a manner that families with few resources can easily access them and develop trust in them.

### **Early childhood intervention is provided by everyone who has contact with families and children experiencing psychosocial stress.**

Early childhood intervention cannot be assigned to one specific health or care system. It is built out of structures and services provided by different professions and institutions that have contact with children and parents in problem situations or that take action which can have consequences for the families' situations. This includes their willingness to shape their structures and services in such a manner that the delivery of care above all for families under psychosocial stress improves. This particularly includes professional services, but also services based on civic initiatives. As such, early childhood intervention services are to be understood as a cross-sectional task for all relevant areas of political life and social legislation along with professions and institutions.

This requires embedding early childhood intervention into a comprehensive, integrated long-term municipal care system. The early childhood intervention services are

the starting point in a proactive strategy aimed in the end at covering all childhood and adolescence service provisions with the goal of making available a supportive environment for the development of **all** children.

Beyond that, early childhood intervention can only develop sufficiently if it is embedded in a whole range of supporting measures such as poverty prevention to secure families' basic needs ('Verhältnisprävention' – forestalling problems arising from people's circumstances).

**Early childhood intervention is rooted in municipalities. It is equipped with resources for independent action.**

Early childhood intervention and its networks need municipal direction and are part of a comprehensive municipal concept whose goal it is to support all families and their children. As such, early childhood intervention is strategically rooted in a municipality, and the federal government as well as the state governments and various service providers support its development and expansion. Sufficiently resourced, the positive impact of early childhood intervention should become clearly visible and easily evidenced.

**Early childhood intervention is shaped and co-ordinated in networks.**

Early childhood intervention services are co-ordinated in interdisciplinary, multi-professional networks. The networks encompass all institutions and providers of support services that are involved with families, starting at pregnancy and with children under the age of three. The early childhood intervention networks go beyond individual cases to serve communication on fundamental collaboration, the development of a joint action framework, the co-ordination of the local health and care services and – while adhering to data protection regulations – collaboration in specific casework.

Transparency and participation are essential for successful multi-professional collaboration in the early childhood intervention networks. Further prerequisites are awareness of the competencies and limits of other professions, acceptance of outside expertise and willingness to work together as equal partners. Communication is underpinned by the development of a shared language and the interdisciplinary 'learning from each other'.

**Through the networks, early childhood intervention has the general and specific competencies of the participating bodies at its disposal.**

In the networks, early childhood intervention relies on partners with inter-professional core competencies. The core competencies include knowledge about the services and about the strengths of the different network partners as well as information about agreements made in the municipality and any relevant procedures. They also encompass a shared understanding of early childhood intervention, the ability to come to agreements about joint network actions and competent collaboration with the various actors. Opportunities for joint reflection and training to further develop these competencies are available.

**Early childhood intervention is based on scientifically evidenced principles of health promotion and social work with families.**

Early childhood intervention is based on scientific findings from different disciplines, e.g. attachment and child development research, family research, public health research, resilience studies, the social sciences and cultural studies and from social work, the health sciences, nursing and midwifery, and the life sciences.

**Early childhood intervention is quality assured and regularly evaluated.**

Early childhood intervention and the support services provided by the partners in the early childhood intervention network act on the basis of their up-to-date and scientifically evidenced knowledge about the emergence of developmental problems and resources in the parent-child relationship. They apply jointly developed quality standards to develop effective measures and co-operative structures. To develop early childhood intervention further and to monitor its effectiveness in families and on children, early childhood intervention is continuously documented and regularly evaluated. The families actively participate in this process.

## Appendix: Position Paper on Early Childhood Intervention

Early childhood intervention creates local and regional support systems with co-ordinated support services for parents and families, starting with pregnancy into the first years of life with a focus on the 0–3 age group. It aims at lastingly improving the developmental opportunities of children and parents within the family and society from early on. In addition to day-to-day support, early childhood intervention seeks to make a contribution to supporting the relationship and parenting competencies of mothers and fathers (to be). As such, they significantly contribute to the healthy development of children, ensuring their rights to protection, support and participation.

Early childhood intervention encompasses a wide variety of both general and specific services and measures that are interlinked and complementary. Services that address all parents (to be) and their children in the sense of health promotion (universal/primary prevention) are fundamental. In addition, early childhood intervention has a particular interest in families in problem situations (selective/secondary prevention). In its work with families, early childhood intervention contributes towards recognizing and reducing risks for the wellbeing and development of the child. If these support services are not enough to forestall risks to a child's wellbeing, early childhood intervention ensures that further measures to protect the child can be taken.

Early childhood intervention is very much based on multi-professional co-operation, but also includes civic commitment and the strengthening of families' social networks. For this reason close networking and co-operation between institutions and services in the areas of pregnancy advice, healthcare, interdisciplinary early intervention services, child and youth welfare and further social services are central for the practical implementation of early childhood intervention. Early childhood intervention has the goal of pushing forward the comprehensive care for families with need-appropriate support services, as well as the goal of improving the quality of care.

*The above definitions were approved at the 4th session of the scientific advisory committee of the NZFH in Berlin on 26 June 2009. They were developed together with the NZFH and discussed with the NZFH's advisory committee. (Members of the working group 'Position Paper on Early Childhood Intervention' in the scientific advisory committee of the NZFH: Sabine Walper, Peter Franzkowiak, Thomas Meysen, Mechthild Papoušek).*



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