

Austria

Country Overview

Generated: 2024-12-01 10:46:19



Country name

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Author of this description

- Erika Kolumbán, Semmelweis University, András Pető Faculty, Budapest

Introduction

The main feature of the German-speaking areas of Europe, including Austria, is that early childhood prevention and intervention relies on the extensive and well-functioning institutional system that has been in place for several decades.

The organisation and structure of early childhood education services is related to the decentralised approach of the already existing governmental system in Austria. In addition to one or two central institutions, early childhood education services are based on a federal/regional and/or local decentralised model.

Austria includes nine provinces (Bundeslander), therefore the structure and the content of early education services can differ from each province, as each of the 9 provinces have separate laws and regulations. The common concepts of care and education are: systems approach, parental participation and full inclusion ideology. However, within the states and regions, there may be differences in the criteria used to identify the children at risk and/or in need of interventions.

Development

The general aspiration in each province is to place early childhood education services as close as possible to the families and to provide the services for the families with equal, free access. Early childhood intervention is considered to be a scientifically based preventive service, provided to children with different, delayed or at-risk developmentally, and socially disadvantaged children. In recent decades, change has taken place in terms of definition and target group. The target group has been expanded to children with an immigration background, children from 0 to 6 years of age, and children from 0 to 6 years of age who are at risk due to the mental condition of their parents (Pretis, 2009a; EASNIE, 2018a).

In 2005, the government set up the Austrian Centre for Personality Development and Social Learning (Österreichisches Zentrum für Persönlichkeitsbildung und soziales Lernen – ÖZEPS). The aim of this centre is to promote and implement personal and social competences in all educational and training institutions. ÖZEPS is the main public institution responsible for raising awareness of, and implementing, Social and Emotional Learning programmes in Austrian schools. Its activities are also focused on teacher education in social learning in the classroom and violence prevention in school (Leibovici-Mühlberger and Greulich, 2013).

Assessment

In Austria, the primary focus of early childhood intervention is to find out within the first few months of a baby's life whether they need some intervention or not. Particularly important in early care is that the family of a child in need of care receives as much help as possible - be it medical, psychological or pedagogical support. Early childhood intervention is therefore based on the cooperation of hospitals (obstetricians), paediatricians, and a well-established network of counsellors, whose task is to provide support for the developmental delays as soon as possible and provide the child and their family the necessary support and assistance (EADSNE, 2005, 2010).

Pregnancy care is the first phase in early childhood intervention and is done according to protocols that comply with health laws. The condition of the childcare fee is that the mother participates in at least five examinations during pregnancy, and then in five additional examinations until the child is 14 months of age (oesterreich.gv.at, 2020).

The above mentioned screening procedure in early care contributes to the inclusion of children in the care system if they are diagnosed with social and emotional disorders. If a problem is found during this screening procedure, the professionals direct the parents or caregivers to early development centres (Pretis, 2009a).

Intervention

The Viennese Developmental Test (Der Wiener Entwicklungstest) is responsible for early childhood assessments and interventions. The Viennese Developmental Test (WET), is an evidence based and generally used method to record the general developmental status of children from 3 to 6 years of age, and is used primarily in the area of support diagnostics.

The WET is a test developed by Kastner-Koller and Deimann (2002).

The WET takes into account the following relevant functional areas of development:

Visual perception/visuomotor skills;

Cognitive development;

Language;

Memory and learning;

Socio-emotional development;

Motor skills.

Each functional area is divided into two to four subscales. In the following, an overview of the structure of the WET will be given and all subscales will be briefly described. The WET consists of a total of 14 subscales, although not all subscales are specified for all age groups.

Functional area of social-emotional development, the "photo album" subtest consists of a total of 11 tasks to assess the ability to understand facial expressions of emotion.

In the various tasks, the child is presented with photos of children and adults and is asked to name their emotional state. The children and adults in the photos show emotions such as joy, sadness, fear and anger, while other photos show neutral faces. The child receives the following instruction: "Now I will show you photos of children and adults. Look carefully at the pictures and tell me how the people in the photos feel". Whereas the questionnaire for parents contains 22 items to record the child's development of independence. The questionnaire provides information about independent behaviour in everyday routines.

In Austria, services are provided in three types of institutions:

- 1) general early childhood intervention centres (for children with movement, cognitive and emotional disorders) that receive children and their families from birth to 3 or 7 years of age;
- 2) in early centres for the visually and hearing impaired, where children can arrive from birth to 7 years of age;
- 3) in clinical centres, four of these are located in the country and receive clients for all ages.

Early childhood intervention centres can be accessed from both the health and social sectors, and are usually run by non-governmental organisations that receive a central budget. The early care centres professional team consists of paediatricians, paediatric neurologists, special educators, psychologists, other pedagogical and health professionals, and social workers.

The follow up and control examinations are individualised and take place usually every 3 months for the first year of life and every six months thereafter until enrolment in a childcare facilities. Interdisciplinary cooperation is also an important aspect in the selection and organisation of the child's developmental or therapeutic treatment programme(s), which is developed with the participation of several professionals and the strong involvement of the parents.

The early intervention and care concept is family-centred and sees the child as an integral part of the family. The aim of the care, measures and forms of support for the family is to enable the child, who may have different developmental or developmental disabilities, to live with as much independence as possible. (Pretis, 2004, 2005, 2009a, 2009b, 2010b, 2010c; EADSNE, 2005, 2010).

The Austrian professionals are committed to SEL and Life Skills education. A good example to mention here is the role of the Salzburg Global Fellows statement and programme. They “believe that global and national education policies, practices and systems should put SEL at the centre of “whole person” development from birth” approach (Salzburg Global Seminar, 2019).

Another good example is the running Erasmus+ project working on “Social and Emotional Education, Building Inclusive Schools and Ownership of Values”, Erasmus+ project on the topic of SEL (PROJECT, 2022).

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- SeeVAL Project web page, <https://seeval-project.eu/>

Citation

This document was generated from the database used to create the Country Overviews Compendium:

Koltcheva, N., V. Coelho, (2022). Social and Emotional Development for Children aged 0 to 7 years old: European Countries Overviews Compendium. EU-SELF Project. ISBN 978-619-233-213-6 (can be downloaded from <https://euself.nbu.bg>)