

Dagmar Müller, Mira Beck, Susanne Gerleigner, Angelika Guglhör-Rudan, Kerstin Hein,  
Mariann Schwaß, Mark Stemmler, Sabine Walper

## **Evaluation of the Federal Programme „Opportunities for parents are opportunities for children – parental support for the educational paths of children“**

---

### **Summary**

#### **Supporting the family as a place of learning – the federal programme „Opportunities for parents are opportunities for children“**

The aim of the federal programme „Opportunities for parents are opportunities for children – parental support for the educational paths of children“ ([www.elternchance.de](http://www.elternchance.de)), which was initiated in 2011 by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, BMFSFJ) is to strengthen family education in its preventative function by removing unequal educational opportunities and promoting the positive educational and development processes of children. With the help of relevant and qualified offers in the area of family education, parents should be involved in early educational processes and supported in their efforts to promote their children’s skills development. By these means, in addition to the initiative for the improved encouragement of early skills development in the context of institutional education, care and development, families should be strengthened as the first biographical place of learning.

With this objective, by the end of 2014 more than 5,500 specialists throughout Germany working in the vicinity of a „focus day care centre for language and integration“, with a working focus on family education, attained further qualifications as parental advisors. This qualification enables them, in the context of their activities in family education, to support and advise parents in a targeted manner in matters of the education and development of the children, in creating an atmosphere within the family to encourage learning, and in decisions relating to educational paths and transitions. Families with low socioeconomic resources and families with a migrant background were identified as priorities. According to numerous findings, both groups are confronted with unfavourable starting positions and framework conditions for the promotion of their children.

Thus the spectrum of topics and activities within family education was expanded considerably, especially in those areas in which there is a large need for orientation, both on the part of parents and of specialists. The cooperation with parents in wide-ranging educational matters formed the primary focus, which, against the background of a broadened understanding of education, also encompassed numerous aspects of family life and the

stimulation provided here for children's skills development. Developing this cooperation with parents for the benefit of the children was also a key concern of many education specialists, who to that point, however, had had no suitable contact persons or concepts. In that respect this programme closed an important gap in the spectrum of qualification offers. The intention was not to create a new profession, and it did not serve to finance family education specialists, but it contributed very clearly to the professionalisation of those specialists working full-time or part-time in family education. Therefore the federal programme represented an innovative programme that had not been done before.

The federal programme „Opportunities for parents are opportunities for children“ (2011 to the end of 2014) comprises two programme elements: (1) the qualification of specialists with a working focus on family education as parental advisors, which was provided by two responsible institutions (AGEF and a consortium of charitable bodies), involving teaching units of three weeks in total, spread over three to six months, and serving to convey specialist competence for the work as a parental advisor, and (2) the project-related funding of 100 family education bodies within the programmatic area „Parental Assistance Plus“, with whose help low-threshold access to families was expanded and needs-related offers for the target groups of the programme further developed and tested, and also networking with other social institutions was expedited.

In all, the federal programme „Opportunities for parents are opportunities for children“ is characterised by the following special features:

- *Needs orientation:* The qualification to become a parental advisor reacted to the growing need for further training in working with parents, especially with regard to the promotion of (early) education processes, and strengthened the family as a place of learning.
- *Specialised direction:* At its core was the teaching of skills that enabled the parental advisors to find diverse access to parents, even those in socially disadvantaged living conditions, and to parents with a migrant background, to create an inviting, respectful communicative atmosphere „among equals“, and to convey knowledge about the education system and stimulation to promote children's skills development.
- *High degree of practical relevance:* The qualification combined theory and practice, as it included practical modules as well as the learning units, during which the specialists could gain experience that was then taken up and reflected upon in the further training. Accordingly, the qualification programme was comprehensive, comprising up to 15 days of lessons plus practical phases.
- *Freedom from costs:* The qualification to become a parental advisor was free of charge to the participants, except for travel costs, which they had to bear themselves. This was important, as the costs of further professional training can often be one of the largest obstacles to participation. Specialists in family education in particular are rarely integrated into professional contexts that encourage further training.
- *Professionalisation:* The further training was aimed solely at full-time and part-time specialists, and not at volunteers. Therefore these specialists must already be work in childcare establishments and in family education institutions.
- *Scientific evaluation:* In contrast to most further training programmes, the qualification to become a parental advisor was subject to extensive scientific evaluation. This parallel research meant that previous experience in implementing the programme could be used directly for adjustments to the qualification. In addition, a lot of information was gleaned about the conditions under which cooperation with parents succeeds.

## Conception of the evaluation

This evaluation was conducted based on surveys between November 2012 and November 2014. Using different methodological approaches, voluntary information was gathered from the relevant parental advisors and also from the parents they support. This study examined the implementation and impact of the federal programme at three levels:

*Module 1:* At the level of the *specialists* who qualified as parental advisors, the *formative evaluation* provided information about the composition of the participants in the qualification, their work context and their satisfaction with the qualification on offer. The voluntary information provided by  $N = 1095$  participants served as a data basis for analysing the participant structure and their motivation. The respondents were questioned about this just before the start of the qualification. Information on the implementation and evaluation of the programme comes from 56 percent of this sample, who once again took part in a post-test after completing the qualification and who reported on their experiences in the qualification ( $n = 609$ ). In addition, the *summative evaluation* was aimed at an impact analysis, in which changes in the knowledge, skills and professional practices of the specialists was compared over the course of the qualification with the comparative data of those specialists who had not qualified as parental advisors (pre-and post-test:  $n = 609$  qualification participants and  $n = 164$  specialists in the comparison group). The sustainability of the changes was examined by means of a follow-up survey for the intervention group ( $n = 514$ ). In addition, qualitative expert interviews were conducted with participants in the programme ( $N = 9$ ) as well as qualitative interviews with parental advisors ( $N = 25$ ), which were used here primarily to validate and expand the findings. All of the statements at this level were derived from the voluntary information provided by the qualification participants, but were supplemented in Module 3 by statements from the parents.

*Module 2:* At the level of the *institution*, the success of the „Parental Assistance Plus“ programme was determined based on information on the structure of offers of the 100 funded institutions and on the networking and cooperation within the social sphere of the institutions. This information comes from standardised online surveys of the management of each of the funded institutions, as well as from eleven focus groups that included the network partners of the eleven institutions. Thus questions relating to the work of the networks could also be illuminated from the perspective of other participants.

*Module 3:* At the level of the *parents and children*, it was examined how the cooperation with the parental advisors was rated by the parents, and which successes were detectable on the part of parents and children over time ( $N = 490$  parents in the pre-test, of which 69 % or  $n = 337$  were once again surveyed in the post-test). In addition, one parent from 41 of these families was questioned qualitatively in the context of a structured interview. Similar to the research approach in Module 1, a comparison group of parents who were supported by specialists without the qualification as parental advisors was surveyed. However, these data could not be considered fully in this report, as the analyses were not yet complete at the time of the presentation of the report.

On all three levels, data from standardised questionnaires and qualitative interviews and focus groups were included, whereby the focus of the assessments varied, depending on the priority question in each of the three modules. The following detailed summary of the results is structured along the module structure and the central questions of the evaluation. It includes information drawn from different methodological approaches.

## **Findings from Module 1: The qualification as a parental advisor**

### *Take-up of the qualification, characteristics, work context and participation motives of the participants*

The demand for the qualification to become a parental advisor was very large. The original goal of 4,000 parental advisors, targeted for the period from 2011 until 2014, was even far exceeded: by the end of 2014 around 5,500 specialists throughout Germany had successfully completed the qualification and almost 2,000 other specialists had expressed an interest in commencing the qualification.

Mainly women took part in the qualification; only just fewer than four percent of the respondents were male. This is not surprising in view of the gender distribution in the relevant occupations in family education and (early) education. The offer of qualification as a parental advisor received a very positive response across all age groups. The age span of the participants was between 22 and 65 years, whereby most of the specialists who participated were aged between 35 and 50. Although the vast majority of the participants were born in Germany (93 %), almost 40 percent of the qualified specialists spoke at least one other language besides German in their everyday working life, especially English, followed by Turkish and Russian.

The participants in the qualification were predominantly in salaried employment, but some self-employed (8 %) and freelance (9 %) educational specialists also took part in the qualification. Most of the participants worked full-time or part-time (55, respectively 42 %), only very few had a marginal employment relationship. The qualification was attended by trained educators (62 %) in particular, but university graduates were also represented, most of whom had studied social pedagogy/social work (19 %) or general educational sciences (8 %). Another eleven percent of participants had other different professional backgrounds.

The parental advisors surveyed worked in institutions that are spread across all federal states and community sizes. Demand was particularly high among education specialists in day nurseries (51 %). Of these, half came from day nurseries that are currently in the process of developing towards a family centre, parent-child centre, or similar. Thus, in relation to all parental advisors questioned, one quarter worked in conventional day nurseries and another quarter worked in day nurseries that were opening up to become family centres. Specialists from existing family centres (17 %) were represented more frequently than specialists from family education institutions (8 %).

This variety reflects well the actual range of specialists in the relevant areas of family education, and shows that family education has established itself in many different forms and places. The large turnout for the qualification of specialists from day nurseries – both conventional day nurseries and those that are orienting themselves towards family education – can be seen as an initial indicator that the necessity of a specialist qualification to shape educational and development partnerships has been recognised and is being taken seriously.

This is also reflected by the specialists' motives for participating. The main motive for participating in the qualification was to improve access to families and contact with parents. Furthermore, many specialists hoped to gain more knowledge via the qualification about good and effective cooperation with parents for the welfare of the children. It was important to them to create a greater awareness among parents in conversations and counselling situations of the importance of family in the education of children.

### *Implementation of the qualification and satisfaction of the participants*

The content of the three-week attendance phases during the training encompassed a wide range of topics, ranging from forms of cooperation with parents (e.g. appreciation and attentiveness when cooperating with parents, communication models, forms and techniques of counselling, concepts for outreaching, low-threshold offers for parents) to the content of this cooperation (e.g. bonding, development and language in early childhood, learning opportunities in everyday family life, educational paths and educational transitions) and

ultimately to self-oriented skills (e.g. intercultural skills, self-reflection of one's own role as a parental advisor, self-presentation and public relations work). According to statements by the participants, the contents of the curricula were implemented with the help of broadly based didactic methods, whereby the main focus was on small-group and group work in plenary sessions, combined with lectures. In terms of content, appreciation and attentiveness when cooperating with parents had the highest significance, according to the statements of the respondents, followed by communication models, and forms and techniques of counselling. But knowledge of education paths and transitions, as well as of educational and developmental ideas in different social milieus was also treated in detail. It was stated less frequently, yet still by around half of the respondents, that the possibilities of networking in the social sphere, as well as concepts of outreaching, informal and low-threshold parental work, were addressed intensively to very intensively. Learning opportunities in everyday family life, in contrast, were addressed with little or no intensity, according to statements by 19 percent of respondents. The variation in the depth of the treatment of topics was probably determined by the orientation towards the wishes, interests and prior knowledge of the participants. At the same time, however, it also emerges that topics that have been treated intensively can be better integrated later into working practice than those that received less attention. In that respect, the variations in the intensity with which the topics were addressed are not trivial.

In total, the parental advisors were very satisfied with the qualification. More than 86 percent of participants stated in the questionnaire that they were satisfied to completely satisfied with the qualification. For the most part the parental advisors felt very comfortable in the qualification, and found the learning objectives predominantly clear. Most of the parental advisors were also very satisfied with the course lecturers and with the material handed out. It was rated positively that the lecture team always comprised two persons, who complemented each other well. In addition, the participants appreciated the successful linking of theory and practice, and praised the large number of exercises and possibilities to try out what they had learned in the courses – irrespective of whether or not they had a management function. Almost two-thirds of respondents, in particular specialists in management positions, intended to pass on what they had learned to colleagues.

From the perspective of the specialists, the qualification demonstrated a very high practical relevance for working with parents in day nurseries and developing offers in family education. Four out of five parental advisors surveyed stated that they had received many useful and directly applicable suggestions for their working practice. In particular, the respectful attitude towards parents, the methodical repertoire that was taught, and the knowledge of education paths and transitions were regarded as valuable tools. Nevertheless, one fifth of participants would have preferred the qualification to have had a stronger theoretical foundation, and almost one third would have liked to have seen some content treated in greater depth. This was especially true of knowledge of communication models, forms and techniques of counselling, and low-threshold cooperation with parents.

#### *Changes to practical knowledge and skills*

Oriented towards the contents of the curricula, the evaluation team identified eight key areas of knowledge in which changes were examined over time, whereby participants in the qualification were compared with specialists in the control group. The thematic focus was on knowledge of forms of cooperation with parents, networking possibilities in the social sphere, and aspects of formal and informal education. Participants usually started the qualification already with a good knowledge of education-relevant topics, informal, low-threshold and respectful parental work, and possibilities for networking in the social sphere, but they had a starting advantage over the control group in only one area (in their knowledge of concepts of outreaching, informal and low-threshold cooperation with parents). As shown by multiple regressions, knowledge in all eight areas was developed even further during the

qualification, and grew under the control of numerous constraints to a greater extent than in the control group. This could be seen particularly clearly after completion of the qualification. In most areas of knowledge, participation in the qualification had a similarly strong influence on the growth in knowledge as the prior knowledge in each case. Even some months after the qualification there still existed much better knowledge than before the qualification. In that respect, this growth in knowledge is sustainable. A crucial factor for the level of knowledge after the qualification was not only the interest of the participants in each topic, but also the intensity with which individual topics were addressed.

Statements in the open interviews also confirmed that the parental advisors rated the knowledge gained in the qualification about communication models and forms and techniques of counselling as very profitable, meaning that they could now conduct conversations with parents in a less intuitive and more professional manner. The new knowledge about counselling techniques and communication models, and about how to use these effectively, was considered to be very helpful.

Gains were also made in specialist skills. Skills contain not only the required knowledge, but also in particular the ability to apply what was learned to different situations in practice. By summarising many thematically-related statements, five broad indicators were formed, which enabled a comparison between five different areas of competence at all three survey times: (1) *dialogue skills*: use of different conversational strategies and the ability to remain calm, even in emotionally difficult situations; (2) *professional objectivity*: the ability of the specialists to hold back and to leave aside their subjective feelings when working with parents; (3) *empathy specific to the target group*: the ability to empathise with persons with a different cultural background and parents in difficult circumstances; (4) *professional self-efficacy*: feeling confident when working as a parental advisor and (5) *constructive cooperation with parents*: the ability of the specialists to develop solutions together with the parents.

In four of these five areas, the participants considered themselves to be significantly more competent after the qualification than beforehand, and also had a greater growth in skills than the control group. Only with regard to professional objectivity could no change be established. In all, however, the qualification had a weaker effect on the skills of the specialists than on their knowledge. Although the follow-up survey showed a decline in three of the five areas of competence, a growth in competence would still appear to exist, even many months after the qualification. The greatest gains were made in the area of professional self-efficacy, while the constructive cooperation with parents was not increased in the long term by the qualification. However, this is already the area in which the specialists in both the intervention and control groups reported having the greatest skills prior to the survey. In that respect, the possibilities for improvement here were limited.

In particular, the gain in dialogue skills was – alongside knowledge of counselling forms and techniques – of very high value for the direct cooperation with parents. The parental advisors now felt better prepared for conversations with parents, whether in the form of organised parent evenings, individual meetings or chats in passing. One aspect that was especially appreciated was the chance to avail of different „tools“ during the qualification, in order to use different dialogue strategies, depending on the communication situation. Furthermore, after the qualification the specialists found it easier to remain calm, even in emotionally difficult situations.

According to statements by the specialists in the follow-up survey, above all the knowledge gained about appreciation and attentiveness when working with parents could be implemented very well and integrated into their own work, followed by knowledge of communication models and counselling forms and techniques. Implementation was not so easy in the areas of educational and developmental ideas in different social milieus and the possibilities of networking in the social sphere. At the rear were the educational systems in the federal states. In some areas, management staff had advantages in implementation (e.g. cooperation and networking). It would also appear that day nurseries and family centres

provide a more favourable context for implementation. In all it should be noted that the specialists were more optimistic with regard to the transfer into practice immediately after completion of the qualification. If we compare what the specialists planned to integrate into their professional practice at the end of the qualification with that which they managed to achieve, according to their statements in the follow-up survey, a more reserved assessment emerges later.

*Changes in professional practice: task perception, access to the target groups and design of the cooperation with parents*

Already at the beginning of the qualification, the specialists' task perception demonstrated a very strong orientation towards matters of educational support, networking, and strengthening the parents, while outreach approach was less of a priority. The lesser value placed on outreach working methods may be attributable to a very large extent to the working fields of the participants, since educators, who made up the majority of participants in the qualification, generally do not carry out any outreach work. A similar ranking sequence in task perception was also present among the control group, which however did not identify as much with the programme goals of the federal programme. Over the course of the qualification, the task perception of the parental advisors changed only very little. By the time of the follow-up survey, only the area „strengthening parents“ had become more important to the specialists.

In terms of primary access to parents, both the participants of the qualification and the control group mostly chose the personal address, or they were contacted by the parents. The use of this and other access methods proved to be relatively stable over time, and seems to have been barely influenced by the qualification. In the follow-up survey, the direct question was posed as to which approaches were used more often now, or indeed were new since the qualification. In contrast to the before/after comparison, these data certainly suggest an expansion in the methods of access. In the opinion of the parental advisors, over one third of the approaches named were used more frequently after the qualification than beforehand, and a further seven percent of the approaches had been added to their repertoire.

The qualitative interviews showed clearly that not only is access to the parents of central importance to effective parental support, but also the development of stable educational and developmental partnerships. Specialists found it especially difficult to maintain contact with parents with a different cultural background or with socially disadvantaged families in the long term. In order to reach such parents better than before and to integrate them stably in the cooperation, various creative offers and approaches were developed. Above all, open offers such as parents' and mothers' cafés, parents' breakfasts, parent and child cookery courses, excursions and intercultural festivities were used to reach the parents over a low threshold. Such offers are – also in the opinion of the focus groups – promising „door openers“, with which parents can be motivated to take part in learning opportunities. The specialists' own work was also presented to the cooperation partners, in order to raise awareness of the parental support in the social sphere.

Already prior to the beginning of the qualification, the parental advisors, by their own account, had contact more frequently with families with a migration background, educationally disadvantaged families and low-income families than was the case with specialists in the control group. Specialists from family centres in particular had disproportionately high access to these target groups, while specialists from family education institutions did not work as often with such families. In a time comparison, a slight improvement in the frequency of contact could be established only for the cooperation with low-income families, which can be attributed to the qualification. After the qualification, the specialists did not reach more parents than beforehand, but the cooperation with the parents approached was more successful, in their own estimation.

During the course of the qualification the form and content of the cooperation with parents could be profiled more strongly in the desired direction. Thus by the time of the follow-up survey, the qualification participants managed to increase their offers in the area of family education and educational support, while no change was discernible in the control group. Also the frequency with which questions of education and learning, general life skills and language promotion arose in discussion with parents increased among participants in the qualification, at first very strongly compared to the control group, although it mainly declined again to the original level over time. Thus the permanent implementation of the programme goals does not appear to be a given per se, but rather – as suggested by the following findings – depends on the framework conditions and task profile in each case.

#### *Alleviating and aggravating conditions of parental support*

When asked about the conditions that ease or alleviate their work as parental advisors, the specialists mentioned above all the positive feedback of the parents (68 %), their personal interest (59 %) and the support from (direct) work colleagues (54 %). Important aggravating features, identified as hindering the integration of parental support in daily working processes, were lack of time (75 %), lack of funding (57 %) and workload pressure (46 %), often also caused by a lack of staff and high absenteeism due to illness.

Depending on the type of institution, different weighting applied in the assessment of the specialists: those working in family education centres complained above all about the lack of funding (81 %) and the low awareness of parental support in the social sphere and in public perception (62 %). Where these specialists are self-employed or freelance, there are probably few possibilities to integrate elements of educational support into their work. According to reports by freelancers, these were often confronted by questions and concerns of the parents, also outside paid working hours, and indeed dealt with these matters, but at the same time they complained about the lack of recognition for this performance on the part of the institutions. Particularly in this area it would be helpful to raise awareness among institutions with regard to the benefits of providing counselling and educational support to parents, in order to increase their willingness to pay an appropriate fee for the additional work.

In contrast, specialists who worked in day nurseries or family centres identified the main difficulties as the lack of time for parental support (84 and 75 %) and the heavy workload pressure (51 and 49 %). In total, it was shown that the anchoring and permanence of the parental support on site is greatly influenced by the institutional framework conditions. It would appear to be advantageous when many specialists of an institution or a charitable establishment have completed the qualification. This eases not only the acquisition and integration of the teams in issues of parental support, but also the networking between parental advisors from different institutions in the social sphere. The acquisition of funds also becomes easier if the cooperation with the parents is systematically anchored in the institution.

The qualitative interviews with the specialists in particular show that the knowledge and skills attained were effective in practice when the parental advisors were integrated in the team and organisational development of the relevant institution, and all those involved shared the ideals of parental support. It proved to be especially favourable when the institution or charitable establishment already had a concept for cooperating with parents and implemented this rigidly while also being open to new impulses (e.g. opening a family education facility in the social sphere or converting a day nursery into a family centre). Not least, the transfer was also more successful when the whole team was informed about the objectives of parental support and identified with them, rather than seeing parental support as competition or interference.

## Findings from Module 2: Pilot project institutions „Parental Assistance Plus“

In addition to the qualification of specialists, the federal programme „Opportunities for parents are opportunities for children“ also funded 100 institutions and their services, as well as networking in the social sphere. Thanks to the additional funding „Parental Assistance Plus“, 100 pilot project institutions were able to expand their services, test low-threshold access to the target groups, and develop the cooperation with local agents. The analyses of Module 2 focus especially on institutional framework conditions for the work of parental advisors and the use, advantages and conditions of success of networking and cooperation between institutions. The data basis was provided by standardised surveys of the management staff of all institutions that were funded by „Parental Assistance Plus“, as well as eleven focus groups that included cooperation partners of the pilot project institutions.

### *Characteristics and context of the funded institutions*

Most of the „Parental Assistance Plus“ pilot project institutions were family education institutions (52 %), followed by parent-child centres or family centres (22 %), day nurseries that were in the process of converting to family centres (8 %) and conventional (4 %). Another 15 percent were other institutions. Thus, in contrast to the qualification to become a parental advisor, where half of those who availed of the programme were specialists from the day nursery field, the „Parental Assistance Plus“ programme was aimed more strongly at classical family education.

The vast majority of the institutions were located in medium-sized cities (43 %) or metropolises (37 %), while only a few institutions were based in towns (17 %) or rural areas (2 %). The geographic catchment area of the funded institutions was often restricted not only to the city or community concerned, but also included neighbouring parishes, the surrounding area or other administrative districts and towns (37 %).

Most of the institutions estimated the number of target groups for parental support (families with a migration background, educationally disadvantaged families, and low-income families) in their catchment area as being high or very high. This is not surprising in view of the geographical proximity to a „focus day care centre for language and integration“, which was the prerequisite for funding. At 59 percent, the share of institutions with a (very) large number of low-income families in their catchment area was much higher than the share of institutions that estimated a large number of migrants in the vicinity (48 %). Family centres, in particular, claimed a higher-than-average share of the target groups. These target groups were considered by the participants in the framework of the focus groups to have a very great need for promotion and support in many cases – whether due to a lack of language skills or only weak educational skills. At the same time, however, obstacles to access due to a lack of trust on the part of the parents were also pointed out. Especially educationally disadvantaged parents without migration backgrounds were considered to be difficult to reach.

### *Services and approaches to parents*

Around two thirds of the pilot project institutions finance between four and eight services via the „Parental Assistance Plus“ programme. It could be seen from the more exact information on up to three of these services that open meetings and discussion groups were held most often (by 69 % of the institutions), followed by individual meetings (61 %) and individual counselling (56 %) for parents. Around half of the institutions each offered individual lectures or information evenings, but fixed courses (48 %) and parent-child groups (44 %) were represented just as frequently. Home visits (33 %) and accompaniment to administrative authorities, schools, etc. (32 %) were offered less frequently. Generally, many forms of offer were combined, in order to access parents more easily.

In the vast majority of cases, access to the target group was sought via the institution itself, by outlining the services available there (75 %) or potential interested parties were

addressed personally (74 %). No fewer than 61 percent of institutions often relied on word of mouth to access parents. But in 59 percent of the institutions, interested parties were also addressed personally outside of the institution, and in 37 percent of cases the acquisition was made via other offers in other institutions. By these means, family education centres often sought access to parents outside their institution and via word of mouth among parents.

Yet other institutions were not only involved in participant acquisition, but also in carrying out the offers, which even took place as frequently on the premises of cooperation partners as in their own institution. Public spaces were used for the activities only rarely (9 to 12 %).

The focus groups suggested that in the context of „Parental Assistance Plus“, in particular the personal approach to parents was at the forefront. The specialists were not only interested in the successful participation of the parents, but even more so in building up a long-term relationship of trust, which was seen as a precondition for the successful mediation of suitable offers (e.g. parents' café, parents' courses) to parents in the target groups. In the personal approach, the respectful and fair attitude towards the parents was considered to be particularly important. The potential success of advertising in the form of flyers or posters, on the other hand, was viewed with scepticism.

In order to secure the regular participation of newly acquired parents, different strategies were used (e.g. reminders by telephone before the start of the offer, renewed contact with parents who have missed appointments). Participation in regular offers was made more attractive by paying attention to the composition of the groups and on the content and form of the courses. The coordination and scheduling of the offers was also aimed at binding parents to the institutions in the long term.

#### *Cooperation and networks to support education*

In view of the increasing specialisation and institutional fragmentation of social services, cooperation and networking have a key function in securing the quality of family-related services. Institutional cooperation is also an important prerequisite in family education for the successful support of families: cooperation improves the care of families by coordinating offer with each other. It allows a socio-spatial combination of family-related services, so that family education can be oriented more closely towards everyday family life. Furthermore, networking can ease access to certain target groups that might otherwise be difficult to reach. In fact, the cooperation of the pilot project institutions was aimed especially at developing new access approaches and reaching new target groups.

In order to be funded in the framework of „Parental Assistance Plus“ it was a prerequisite that the institutions work together with their cooperation partners in the social sphere. This applied particularly to the cooperation with a „focus day care centre for language and integration“. In that respect it is probably not surprising that the cooperation with a day nursery was the first choice for many pilot project institutions. This can be seen also in relation to the three more extensively described offers funded by „Parental Assistance Plus“. Here, most institutions mentioned a cooperation with day nurseries (69 %), followed by cooperation with education and family counselling centres (58 %). But around half of the locations surveyed also cooperated with primary schools (52 %), family centres (47 %) and youth welfare offices (46 %). A good third of those surveyed also worked in the framework of the funding with social pedagogical family assistance institutions (39 %), while around a quarter cooperated with multigenerational households (26 %), migration services and paediatric doctors (25 % each). In total there was a wide range of cooperation partners, which were by no means limited to institutions under the same responsible body. Around half of the institutions also cooperated in each of the three offers mentioned with external partners. Only around ten percent of the pilot project institutions had cooperation partners mainly from the same responsible body.

In developing the cooperation network in the framework of „Parental Assistance Plus“, the pilot project institutions particularly intensified the cooperation with previously known

partners. But 62 new cooperations also arose, spread across numerous cooperation partners. Day nurseries also held the top spot among these new cooperation partners.

#### *Findings of the focus groups*

The special features of each cooperation, and how these were achieved, was discussed in the context of the focus groups. It was defined as an institutional cooperation in relation to a specific project or objective. A concrete verbal or written agreement was considered important, although it also emerged that formal arrangements cannot ensure the success of a cooperation alone, but rather it is the commitment of the management staff and personnel of the different institutions that is decisive. In contrast to the cooperation, the network was described as a less binding, informal contact between different partners, serving no specific objective.

As well as joint goals and reciprocity, other important factors for the development and maintenance of a continuous and binding relationship between the partners were identified by the focus groups as follows: personal contacts in advance, which create a basis of trust, geographical proximity, a regular exchange, sufficient time, financial resources and stable personnel resources, and not least the support of the institution management. The latter is especially important if there are not yet any sustainable personal contacts and cooperation is advised.

The reconstruction of the cooperation networks of the pilot project institutions in which the focus groups participated also confirmed the key role of day nurseries as partner institutions of „Parental Assistance Plus“, as they ease access to the target groups of the programme by means of personal approaches, and they support access to primary schools and thus the development of educational support structures. Frequently, parental advisors were deployed by the family education centres as external specialists in the institutions of the cooperation partners, above all day nurseries. This work succeeded when a trustworthy cooperation basis could be built up with the staff in the institution, while a lack of trust in the external specialists on the part of employees severely impaired cooperation and made the procurement of parents unlikely.

Beyond the preschool area, in which the need for parental support was especially high in preparation for starting school, the cooperation with schools was difficult, as access was rarely successful, despite the very large relevance ascribed to educational support in schools. The reasons for this include a lower acceptance of cooperation with parents in the school context, but also a lack of communication among equals. It is probably easier to anchor parental support in schools where it can be accessed via the day care facilities of youth welfare schemes, for example.

The cooperation networks under examination differed with regard to the type and density of the network relationships and the role taken within them by the pilot project institution. While the cooperation in some networks was initiated and controlled centrally by the pilot project institution, yet without much networking beyond that *between* the partner institutions, other networks were organised in a decentral manner, and characterised by a high density of relationships between all institutions involved. In such cases, the pilot project institution took on a more coordinating role. These networks are likely to endure also after expiry of the model funding.

#### *Role of the parental advisors in the cooperation networks*

Already at the time of the initial survey an average of one or two qualified parental advisors were working at the pilot project institutions, and a further qualification of staff as parental advisors was being planned. Parental advisors were involved in the wide-ranging offers made to parents within the cooperation networks to varying degrees, depending on the type of service. Primarily they were active in open meetings and discussion groups (71 %), individual meetings with parents (69 %) and parents' and information evenings (62 %); they held

isolated lectures (46 %) or conducted parent-child groups (45 %). Among the forms of outreach work, around one in three qualified specialists accompanied parents to administrative offices, schools or counselling facilities (34 %), one in five was active in mobile educational or social work on location (19 %), and at least one in four conducted home visits (7 % home visits in the context of programmes, 25 % other home visits). This would suggest that the parental advisors implemented outreach access via the pilot project institutions to a much greater degree than qualified specialists per se.

However in many cases the parental advisors also took on tasks beyond the cooperation with parents. This is especially true for peer counselling (31 %) and the further education and training of other specialists (28 %), in some cases also the procurement of further assistance (51 %) or childcare (13 %). The qualitative reconstruction of individual cooperation networks leads us to conclude that some of the specialists did not have any direct contact with parents, but rather were primarily involved in organising offers and coordinating the specialists. This was especially true of parental advisors in management positions.

In all, the parental advisors in the focus groups were very appreciative of the involvement in the „Parental Assistance Plus“ cooperation networks, also because it eases the deployment of the qualified specialists in partner institutions. The procurement of parents by one institution for another was also clearly supported by the network. In this respect the promotion of institutional networking proved to be a good complement to the qualification of the parental advisors.

### **Findings from Module 3: Parents and children**

The aim of the federal programme was to respectfully support parents in matters of formal and informal education processes and in questions relating to the education and development of their child, using trained parental advisors. Here, the parents took on the role of „end consumer“. Module 3 tested and analysed the effects generated by the federal programme at the level of the parents. To record the evaluation effects on the part of the parents, more than 1,000 telephone interviews were conducted. The trained parental advisors passed on the contact details of the parents they were supporting to the evaluation team. The assignment of parents to their respective specialist represented an important part of the multi-level approach. Most of the supported and surveyed parents came from the former West German states, and half of them lived in a city. In 95 percent of the cases, the interview was conducted with the mother. On average, the parents had a net income of 2,700 €; 26 percent of the parents were categorised as being at risk of poverty. Two thirds of the surveyed parents stated that they had been born in Germany.

#### *Cooperation between parents and specialists*

The results of the parent surveys showed that most of the cooperation between parents and specialists took place in childcare institutions. The parents tended to avail of special parent or child offers in family education institutions less frequently. According to statements by the parents, the parental support consisted mainly of information or counselling meetings sessions. In addition, the parental advisors offered different events such as parents' cafés, parent-child groups or informative talks, which were supplemented by informal conversations in passing. Home visits, excursions or accompaniment to administrative offices were also availed of by parents, albeit rarely. The cooperation took place mainly in the office of the specialist or in the institution, and only in exceptional cases at the parents' home. Different topics were addressed in the context of parental support. This generally included questions regarding the development and education of the child, learning opportunities in daily life, and school entry. Some of the parental advisors also took on a mediating role, by recommending offers or contact persons to parents. These recommendations demonstrated a

predominantly high degree of suitability and relevance to the needs and situations of the parents; this was confirmed, for example, by the fact that the parents gave a very high satisfaction rating with regard to the support from the parental advisors.

#### *Satisfaction, trust and a respectful relationship*

The results of the evaluation indicate that the parental advisors succeeded in developing a pleasant and respectful relationship with the parents: almost all parents (99 %) were satisfied with their parental advisor, and the vast majority (79 %) was even very satisfied. Furthermore, 94 percent of the parents stated that they would recommend their parental advisor further.

The evaluations of the qualitative interviews can be summarised as follows: what the parents appreciated most about the work of the specialists was their knowledge and commitment, as well as easily understandable explanations and advice. Events offered by parental advisory, such as parents' cafés, were praised by those parents who participated. Parents found particularly helpful the informative exchange with their parental advisor and with other parents in a pleasant group atmosphere. For parents with a migration background, whose language in the home was not German, it was also important that the parent advisor spoke their language.

Trust and respect shaped the relationship of the parents with the parental advisors: eighty-two percent of parents stated that they had a lot of trust. Most of the parents felt very accepted and experienced great respect from their parental advisor. The parents perceived the parental advisors to be open and helpful people who are always at hand as contact persons for questions and problems. The relationship of the specialists with the children was also described by most parents as being close and warm-hearted. The specialists were particularly successful in developing a trusting relationship among the subgroup of parents threatened with poverty.

#### *Offer uptake and knowledge of contact persons – changes in the competence of parents to seek and use possibilities of support with regard to education*

The evaluation also tested whether access to professional contact points in the social environment of the family changed after they had worked together with parental advisors. The results showed clearly that a parental advisor makes it easier for the family to seek support – and above all professional support – in education matters and other associated topics. As examples for this issue, both the use of education offers in the widest sense and the awareness of contact persons in the social environment were examined. The parental survey showed that families that had contact with a parental advisor generally used more offers than parents without parental support. Above all, families with parental support availed of more offers for encouraging and educating children, such as offers to learn foreign languages, develop language skills, or scientific-technical offers. Families without parental support used these offers much less frequently. According to the parents surveyed, when services were not used, this was often due to a lack of interest on the part of the parents, or barriers to use, such as difficulties with childcare, or a lack of trust in the effectiveness of the offers, or unfavourable organisational conditions, such as high costs. Accordingly, the parents expressed a wish for an improvement to the offer structure, such as offers in their own native language or offers corresponding to the age of their own children. These statements indicate that the mere number of offers available is only *one* problem factor, and that other inhibiting framework conditions and access difficulties to parent and child offers must be removed, so that existing offers can be used better.

In terms of the parents' knowledge of contact persons for educational matters, the evaluation showed that parents who were in contact with parental advisors knew much better who they could turn to with questions concerning education than parents without parental support.

### *Changes in the families – features of everyday family life*

The aim of parental support was to stimulate parents and to encourage them to become involved in the education of their children. The parental survey showed that parents who were in contact with parental advisors did not necessarily feel much more secure in their knowledge of the German educational system than parents without parental support. Nevertheless, the parental support helped to reduce anxiety prior to their own children starting school: in general, parents whose children were about to start school said that they knew how to help and support their child in this transitional phase. At the same time, however, they were worried about what their child would experience during school hours. Parental supports reduced these anxieties: the evaluation of the survey showed that parents who had not yet had contact with a parental advisor had much more distinct fears than parents with parental support. Yet as soon as these parents also worked with parental advisors, their fears declined to a similar level as that of the parents who were already receiving parental support at the time of the initial survey.

In order to strengthen the family as a place of learning, the informal educational aspect proves to be just as important as formal education. Parental support should help to integrate education into everyday family life and to promote it there in particular. In order to find out which aspects most shape the surveyed parents' understanding of education, they were asked to explain what they understand by education. In general, the qualitative analyses showed only a few differences between parents with and without parental support in terms of the number and content of the aspects named. However, these few differences indicate that parental support leads to a greater understanding of education on the part of parents, towards a stronger consideration of informal educational aspects: whereas parents without any contact with a parental advisor associated the keyword education more strongly with, for example, a day nursery (a formal educational institute), parents with parental support stated more frequently that education is about discovering and trying out new things. They therefore referred more to processes of informal learning that can also take place in the family context.

As the family system represents the framework for the support given by parents in the education of their child, this evaluation studied not only the topic of education in its narrow sense, but also changes in other areas of family life. The examination of the familial stimulation structures for the children showed that parents in contact with a parental advisor spent more time with their children doing everyday activities such as playing, undertaking things, homework or chats than parents who had not yet had parental support. The educational competence experience of parents (and here in particular the parental self-efficacy, how they experience their effectiveness in upbringing) suggested an impact in terms of parental support only among low-income parents: among these socially disadvantaged parents it could be proved that parents who developed contacts with a parental advisor only at a later stage experienced an increase in their own feeling of competence (or self-efficacy in upbringing), whereas those who received parental support throughout the entire survey period were characterised by a consistent, or even slightly declining course. Statistically, no effects of parental support could be identified on the level of parental stress caused by the behaviour of their own children; further sub-group analyses also showed no further effects in any of the subgroups.

Finally, the parental survey was also aimed at testing whether any effects of the qualification could be discerned at the level of the children. Here, the parents were asked to assess the development of their children in four areas: in their linguistic, emotional, cognitive and motoric development. In all, there was a strong stability: those who assessed their child to be average, or slightly better or worse than other children of the same age at the time of the first survey usually also made the same assessment in the second survey. While in the area of emotional development there were indications that the cooperation with a parental advisor

led to a slightly improved assessment of the child's development, this effect was weak and not statistically significant. In terms of the other areas of development, no difference could be established between the two groups of parents. In that respect, a differentiated observation of the parental support would appear to make sense, in order to assess its potential appropriately.

## **Recommendations and further outlook**

To evaluate the federal programme „Opportunities for parents are opportunities for children“, a comprehensive research evaluation was developed, which provides differentiated information about the acceptance and effectiveness of the programme at the level of the specialists, the institutions, and the parents and children. Of particular advantage was the combination of standardised surveys over time with qualitative data collection by means of interviews and focus groups, which delivered valuable and mutually complementary information. Interweaving all those involved was also very valuable, as it meant that the perspectives of the specialists and of the parents were not observed in isolation. There is still a lot of potential for further analyses that could provide additional clues about effective parental support.

The positive findings of the evaluation speak for the success and thus also the quality of the programme. This can be seen in the large uptake of the qualification offer, in its positive assessment by the specialists, in the changes to practical knowledge and skills, in the progress made by the pilot project institutions in the areas of cooperation and networking, and not least in the high degree of appreciation shown to the specialists by the parents, as well as the positive changes that were initiated in the families. At the same time, the evaluation also revealed possibilities to optimise the programme. The findings of both the extensive standardised surveys and the open interviews and focus groups give some essential indications with regard to the continuation of the qualification to become a parent advisor and how the programme can be made even more effective. Starting points for such a fine-tuning are outlined below.

The findings of the standardised surveys of the specialists show that the knowledge and further skills learned over the course of the qualification cannot be readily preserved. Therefore it is worth considering how the sustainability of the previous successes can be safeguarded. Professional support and a regular exchange with those parental advisors who are already qualified could be of strategic importance for the sustainable reinforcement of professional skills. Some offers of this type are already being provided by the organisers of the qualification in the form of conferences and meetings. In addition, peer counselling could support the specialists addressing difficult challenges in the cooperation with parents in a timely manner, reflecting on these on a case-by-case manner, and developing solutions by reverting to the skills they have learned. For parental advisors who have few opportunities in their working environment to cooperate with other specialists, an access to exchanges with these colleagues could be very helpful. One possibility here might be protected discussion forums on the internet, in which the specialists can talk about everyday problems. Working groups could also be formed in this context, which could pursue specific issues, such as the improved reachability and encouragement of parents with a migration background or the more successful involvement of fathers in parental work (e.g. with a greater consideration of the working hours of fathers; with special services for fathers). In conversations there were frequent complaints about the „lone warrior“ nature of being a parental advisor; teamwork could also represent an outlet in this respect.

However, some of the specialists seem to have only limited opportunities to try out and consolidate the skills they have learned in their everyday work to the full extent they would prefer. Reasons given for this often included a lack of time and resources. In some cases, the

areas of activity of the parental advisors seem to shift away from the specific cooperation with parents and towards organisational tasks. These shifts could represent an unintentional side-effect of the development of cooperation networks. In that respect it should be examined how these different, and perhaps even conflicting tasks can be better coordinated in day-to-day work, and how teams of parental advisors might be able to work together on this aspect.

The cooperation of other existing family support structures is very important, as these can ease both the access to parents and the provision of suitable offers. This could be safeguarded in future with an even stronger cooperation with the early support centres and the expert advisors for day care. Stronger cooperation with the early support centres in the area of day care is already being planned, in which the qualification as a parental advisor was availed of particularly frequently. In that regard, favourable prerequisites for cooperation already exist. The cooperation with schools, which was mentioned by many qualification participants as being equally important, requires more intensive preliminary work, in order to initiate viable cooperation structures. At the level of the „Parental Assistance Plus“ institutions, greater efforts must be made to anchor network structures of education support at a municipal level.

In general it can be said that the federal programme „Opportunities for parents are opportunities for children – parental support for the educational paths of children“ makes a significant contribution to the professionalisation of specialists and thus to the strengthening of parents. As a large number of specialists in day nurseries were reached – both in family centres and in conventional day nurseries – the programme also makes an important contribution to strengthening the educational and development partnership between the parental home and the day nursery. The associated hope is that, by focusing on socially disadvantaged families, parents with few educational resources, and families with a migration background, this programme can help to remove social inequality in the educational opportunities of children in Germany. To what extent this can succeed in the long term, also beyond the timeframe observed here, remains to be examined by a further scientific analysis of specialists and families.

© 2015 Deutsches Jugendinstitut e.V.

Projekt: Evaluation des Bundesprogramms „Elternchance ist Kinderchance“

[www.dji.de/elternchance](http://www.dji.de/elternchance)

Nockherstraße 2, 81541 München

Telefon: +49 (0) 89 62306-0

Fax: +49 (0) 89 62306-162



Funded by the

