



Target population: Children of mentally ill parents and their families

Location: Hamburg metropolitan area, Germany

Mission:

- a) Empowering children and giving them a voice
- b) Supporting parents with mental conditions to look after their children's needs as best as they can

Project partners: wellengang.hamburg is a project by ALADIN gGmbH. ALADIN is an NGO providing support and counselling for children and families in need. ALADIN and wellengang cooperate with pediatricians, schools, social services and psychiatrists. Hamburg University Hospital Eppendorf (UKE) is tasked with the evaluation.

Funding: Wellengang services to children and families are 100% funded through donations. The project development, administration and public relations of wellengang.hamburg are ensured by ALADIN which is mainly funded by social services.

Context

For children, their parents experiencing mental illness represents a considerable emotional burden. They may feel guilty and perhaps partially responsible for the difficult situation at home. Children often take responsibility for their younger siblings and empathize with their parents and their worries. Mentally ill parents have been stigmatized for a long time and the public often doubts their parenting abilities. However, more and more mentally ill parents themselves contact wellengang seeking help for their children and families.

Wellengang is a project focused on the well-being of children within the family context. It does not focus on the illness, but rather on its effects on children and the family system as a whole. Through prevention, education and lobbying, wellengang brings the topic of "Mental Illness in the Family" into the public eye.

Services

Wellengang is devoted to delivering services to families that are facing several problem situations including e.g. psychological instability, school problems, deficiencies in children's upbringing, mental illness and unemployment. Wellengang.hamburg provides services to children of mentally ill parents, to the parents themselves, as well as to other relatives. The services are free of cost for the recipients.

Wellengang has been running regular therapeutic children's groups since 2011. The groups are for children of 8-17 years. Children are referred to us by parents, relatives, teachers, social workers, psychiatrists and other professionals.

In 11 meetings, experienced therapists teach the children how to handle their parents' burdens and what strength they can draw from their experiences. Together they work out "emergency plans" for particularly difficult family situations. Wellengang groups:

- help children understand that they are not alone
- educate and inform children about their parents' illness
- teach them not to blame themselves for their mother's/ father's illness or to take up too much responsibility
- support the children in looking after their own needs

In 2018 wellengang.hamburg also facilitated the first parent-baby group for families with mental illness and their children under the age of 1. This group has the objective to support parent-baby communication and bonding.

In addition to the therapeutic children's groups (the "wellengÄng"), wellengang.hamburg currently offers specialist events on "Mental Illness in the Family". The experience and expertise gained in the groups is passed on in advanced training courses for professionals and individualized information events.

Aims and values

- Wellengang believes that every child has the right to a carefree and healthy childhood.
- We are convinced that the negative effects of emotional stress can be mitigated if the children have a strong sense of self-worth and trust in their own perception.
- Through our services, the affected children make contact with like-minded people. Wellengang groups promote contact and sometimes even friendship among participants.
- It is important to educate children about the causes and effects of mental illness and to build a sustainable support network to help them and their families in difficult situations.
- Our goal is to be a contact point for the children, their parents and families.
- We want to make a contribution to public discussion with the topic of "Mental Illness in the Family", which is still very much a taboo.

Impact

An evaluation is currently being carried out by the University Hospital Eppendorf (UKE). It has not yet been completed and therefore the information has not been published.

However, our experience so far is that children of mentally ill parents are becoming more visible to the public - they are given more attention. The media have increasingly contacted us for expert interviews and reports about our activities. Our film "Wir sind hier" (we are here), featuring former members of wellengang groups and their experience, was a great success.

There is also a PH.D. thesis underway to study the impact of the initiative but results are not yet available.

Lessons learned/Insights

Working with children of mentally ill parents is very rewarding and has given us insights we did not have before. However our work is based on donations and so requires a lot of patience and great staying power.