

Sibling support projects in Europe

• Wilma Henkel¹

Abstract

In Europe, 12 out of 10,000 children >19 years suffer from life-limiting conditions. In Germany approx. 22,000 children are affected. About 75% of these ill children have at least one healthy sibling who is living in the shadow of the ill child. Main stressors for healthy siblings are the frequently disruption of family life, the limited availability of the parents and the lack of resources. Healthy siblings of seriously ill children are at risk of becoming physically or mental ill. Negative effects can be headache, abdominal pain, sleep disturbances, low self esteem, an increase in anxiety and depressive mood, decreased social competencies and less good school performances. There are positive effects too. Healthy siblings can achieve an advanced personal maturation combined with an increase in social competencies and they can develop a deep understanding for their ill siblings and parents situation.

There are several published projects for healthy siblings established in Europe (in chronological order):

- Seminars for well siblings of handicapped young people by Winkelheide in Bremen (D)

- Sibling Project for Acorns Children in Birmingham (UK)
- Sibling support groups by Houtzager et al. in Amsterdam (NL)
- Sibling support program by the Diana Community Nursing Team in Coventry and Warwickshire (UK)
- Sister and Brother Project by the Vodafone Foundation Institute in Datteln (UK)

These projects offer healthy siblings social support and thus empower and strengthen them as the outcomes of the conducted studies could show. The offered social support includes the four categories of appraisal, emotional, informational, and instrumental support. Essential for supporting healthy siblings are raising of awareness, a program based on evidence and an assessment of the children's needs which offers social support in all four categories.

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