



Home-based programmes in The Netherlands: better school-readiness for children

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Introduction

Research confirms the crucial importance of the child's earliest years and of the need to support families in their role as the child's most influential educator. It also shows that the learning capacity and value orientations of children have largely been determined by the time they start formal schooling. In addition, well conceived quality early childhood programmes can help meet the diverse needs of young children during these crucial years of life, enhance their school readiness and have a positive and permanent influence on their future educational achievement. The Netherlands Youth Institute therefore supports, develops and implements several school readiness programmes, including several home-based programmes. Its programmes are successful in working with lower-educated parents. This factsheet deals with these programmes as well as the importance of a home learning environment.

The importance of home learning environment

A review from Desforges shows that parental involvement in the form of 'at-home good parenting' has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment. It means that parents give their children emotional support and cognitive stimulation, that there is a sensitive interaction between parent and child, parents have contact with school and that there is a 'home learning environment'; a range of learning related provisions and activities: reading, library visits, playing with letters and numbers, painting and drawing, teaching (through play) the letters of the alphabet, playing with numbers and shapes, teaching rhymes and singing.

Studies show that lower class, low educated parents on average are less sensitive-responsive to their children and offer them less emotional support in performing tasks, use less extensive vocabularies and engage less frequently in extended discourse with their children. They read less frequently to their children and less often in a dialogical way. In joint play and problem-solving interactions they use more directives and less open, cognitive challenging prompts and questions. These characteristics were found to mediate social class effects on development and early childhood achievement. More interactive behaviour that challenges an active response of children, stimulates the development of children and leads to better school results (Siraj-Blatchford 2009, Sylva K. et al 2004).



Ideally a home-based programme for low-educated families with children at risk for school failure would seek to change parental behaviour in all these aspects. The Step-programmes are designed to do that. The following paragraphs describe the different Step-programmes. They focus at different age groups, but the programmes are all based on the same concept and vision. Parents and children engage with each other, using toys and specially developed working sheets. Besides home visits, there are also group meetings in which parents can exchange their experiences and certain common themes can be addressed.

The Step-programmes

This paragraph describes three Step- programmes for children and their parents currently used in the Netherlands by the Netherlands Youth Institute (NJI) by focusing on their objectives, methods, materials and effects as well as their implementation in other countries.

These programmes have been designed to offer support to the children and their parents. They are aimed at children who, without this support, may fail to flourish, may not succeed at school and, in later life, may suffer social exclusion. The Dutch names of the programmes are given here. In these names the word ‘stap’ appears. Stap means ‘step’ in English, and in the programmes the word is used in a metaphorical way. It suggests a sense of movement and gradual attainment of objectives. The programmes are:

1. Instapje (1 – 2 year)
2. Opstapje (2 – 4 year)
3. Opstap (4 – 6 year).

These Step-programmes were originally modelled after the so-called Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) programme. The Dutch government decided to implement this programme in the 1980s as part of its policies directed at improving the educational opportunities of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including migrant children. Since then the programmes have been independently further developed, based on the concept of parent-child interaction.

Instapje

Objectives

Instapje is a home-based programme which provides the first step in stimulating communication between parents and children. The programme primarily aims at improving the quality of the interaction between parent and child. It focuses on four dimensions in the parent’s behaviour supporting the child in daily interaction:

- emotional support
- respecting the child’s autonomy
- providing structure and setting limits on the child’s behaviour
- providing information and explaining situations or tasks

Method

Instapje is an intensive programme. A professional visits the family at home on a weekly basis. She demonstrates the range of potential of the play materials and activities and shows the mother how to

adapt to the child's play. The programme is divided into four modules. Each module lasts several weeks and focuses on a theme referring to one of the dimensions of parental behaviour mentioned above. The objectives of the programme have to become an integral part of the parent's daily life. Therefore the parents are given ample room to reflect upon themes and advices within the framework of their own norms, values and cultural practices.

Materials

Instapje consists of worksheets for parents and children, play materials for the child, songbooks and manuals for coordinators and neighbourhood aides.

Effects

Research shows that participation in the programme has a positive impact on the quality of parental support; parents show more respect to the autonomy of their child, give more structure and more emotional support. Moreover, children from the experimental group had significantly better scores on the Bayley Development scales than children from the control group. Their development was better in all aspects: language, cognition, motor skills as well as learning capacities (Riksen-Walraven 1994)

Implementation abroad

This programme has also been implemented in Genk in Flanders in Belgium as a pilot project. At the end of the pilot phase, this programme will probably also be implemented in other cities in Flanders.

Opstapje

Objectives

Opstapje is a home-based programme for children between two and four years of age from disadvantaged backgrounds and their parents. The general objective of Opstapje is to facilitate the transition from home to the Dutch primary school for two to four year old children from disadvantaged backgrounds¹. To achieve this objective, the programme concretely aims at stimulating certain aspects of mother-child interaction. Therefore, goals have been formulated for both the mother and the child. The most important goal for the mother is to stimulate the mother-child interaction by broadening the responsive instruction behaviour of the mother. 'Messages' for the mother, formulated in the form of concrete behaviour, make it both easy for her to understand the programme objectives and to carry out the programme activities. For the child, the programme aims at enhancing the skills and knowledge that the Dutch primary school assumes and expects him/her to have. Developmental areas, such as language development, fine motor and sensory development, are encouraged by providing and carrying out various types of play activities with the child. By thus promoting the mother's responsive instruction behaviour, a range of the child's own skills is stimulated, such as perseverance, problem solving, task-orientation and the ability to plan and carry out activities.

¹ Children in the Netherlands enter primary school (kindergarten level) around their 4th birthday (school entrance throughout the entire school year). The primary school is 8 years of which the first two years are kindergarten level.

Method

The programme lasts two years and has been roughly divided into two parts. During the first year, the emphasis is on play and child development; the second year focuses on mother-child interaction. This division is expressed in the worksheets for the mother, the instruction sheets for the neighbourhood aides, the way of working during home visits and in the training of the neighbourhood aides.

Opstapje consists of home visits, group meetings for the mother and participating in a playgroup for the children. The programme lasts two year. Each year consists of thirty weeks. The duration and frequency of the home visits differs per programme year.

Home sessions are led by a paraprofessional. She is responsible for supplying the programme materials, carrying out play activities with mother and child and for transferring information. For the mother, the paraprofessional functions as a role model of how to associate with the child.

The fortnightly group meetings are led by the project coordinator (professional) assisted by the paraprofessional. These meetings support mothers in carrying out and staying with the programme. They also support them with their children's upbringing. During the group meetings, the mothers discuss and are informed about topics such as child development, education, and various aspects of child rearing. Another function of the meetings is to familiarize the mothers with neighbourhood facilities and services, such as playgroups, schools and toy and book libraries.

Materials

Opstapje consists of worksheets for parents and children, children's books, play materials for the child, a script and a programme for group meetings supported by audio-visual materials, and manuals for coordinators and neighbourhood aides.

Effects

Children in the *Opstapje*-programme are more engaged with play and other materials and are better socially adapted. The mothers pay more attention to their child and make more conscious choices to bring toys and books to their home. German research shows that school-readiness has improved and that children show more interest in playing and deal better with emotions. Mothers feel more competent in raising their children. *Opstapje*-mothers have more social contacts, need less professional help and are better integrated (Sann 2005).

Implementation abroad

Positive evaluation results resulted in the founding of a German foundation directed at the implementation of *Opstapje* in Germany. At the moment, this programme is carried out in 54 German locations, 12 Swiss locations as well as among Roma children and their parents in the Hungarian town of Hódmezővásárhely. During 2011, and pilot programmes will be carried out in locations in France and Italy.

Opstap

Objectives

Opstap is a home-based extra-curricular programme for children between four and six years of age from disadvantaged backgrounds, and their parents. The general objective is to adequately prepare these children for schooling. More specifically, the programme aims to stimulate language and cognitive development as well as socio-emotional development. Enhancing learning conditions by providing children with the knowledge and skills required for successful school learning goes alongside supporting pedagogical family interaction. Encouraging parental responsive behaviour is therefore a key element in the programme. A responsive child-oriented style of interaction has a positive impact on the child's socio-emotional and cognitive development and promotes skills, which are highly valued in the Dutch education system. By providing activities and materials, parents learn to:

- respect their child's autonomy;
- praise and encourage their child's initiatives;
- provide structure and set limits on their child's behaviour.

Furthermore, they learn to support their child in carrying out and completing a task by organizing its attention and activity and to be sensitive to their child's competence in particular tasks so that responsibility is given to the child when he/she is able to handle it. The child can thus become an active learner.

Method

Opstap lasts two years and consists of fortnightly home visits and group meetings. Most programme activities take place in the home environment as mother and child carry out these activities together. As in *Opstapje* a paraprofessional visits the parents every fourteen days to demonstrate the accompanying activities and materials. She instructs and supports the parent by role modelling, and other methods of transferring knowledge and skills.

The group meetings are led by the coordinator (professional). The group discusses the programme materials and activities as well as themes regarding parent-child interaction and other aspects of child rearing and education. The coordinator also trains and assists the paraprofessional aides.

Materials

Opstap consists of worksheets for parents and children, children's books, a materials box, a script and a programme for group meetings supported by audio-visual materials, and manuals for coordinators and neighbourhood aides.

Effects

Research shows that *Opstap*-children less often stay down a class at primary school (Van Tuijl & Siebes 2006). There was a difference of 17% compared with children who had not followed the programme. Especially the most disadvantaged children benefit from *Opstap*. Observation research has also shown that *Opstap* enhances the quality of the mother-child interaction cognitive and social emotional respect. Mothers from the *Opstap*-group in interaction with their child were more supportive than mothers from the control-group. They participated more in the community and were more involved in school.

Implementation abroad

Opstap is carried out in Aruba, Curacao and St. Maarten. It is also being translated in Hungarian for use by Roma children and their parents in the Hungarian town of Hódmezővásárhely

Combining home-based and centre-based programmes

In many domains relevant steps have been made to improve the position of disadvantaged children and their parents through the Step-programmes. The Step-programmes can be offered in cooperation with centre-based programmes. These programmes will mutually enhance each other. This combination – also in the longer term – will lead to positive changes for the children involved. This section deals with combining these programmes.

Centre-based programmes

In the Netherlands children go to school when they are four years (all through the school year). The first two years (called group 1 and 2) are the 'kindergarten'. Its focus is on playing. In group 3 the formal learning begins; children learn to read and mathematics.

For children from zero to four year olds there are two kinds of provisions for young children: children's day care en preschool playgroups. Children's day care centres provide care to 0 – 4 year old children, during whole days. In contrast, preschool playgroups provide playing opportunities for children of 2,5 up to 4 years of age during two, three or four shifts per week, approximately three hours per shift. From 2000, the Dutch government has been carrying out a more intensive preschool and early childhood education policy. In the Netherlands, we call this early childhood education (VVE in Dutch). This is an umbrella term for programmes intended to increase young children's educational chances of children that run a greater risk of incurring educational deficits due to their socio-economical circumstances. The majority of these children come from migrant families and have little or no command of the Dutch language.

The necessity of a combined approach

The national government is making funds available to local councils and school boards to carry out the early childhood education programmes in preschool provisions for children ranging from 2,5 up to 6 4 years of age, including group 1 and 2 of primary education. However, they do not make funds available for home-based school ready programmes. Municipalities therefore have to invest their own money in these programmes. Consequently, too little families benefit from the Step-programmes, while many families are interested in participating. Lately, there has been more societal attention for such home-based programmes as society is confronted with the consequences of poor parenting skills.

Centre-based programmes often do not reach the most needed families and don't improve the situation at home. Research shows that programmes that are both centre and home-based are most effective. Step-programmes are more and more carried out in combination with centre-based programmes. This is the consequence of several studies showing the benefits of a combining such programmes. For example, research from Leseman and van der Leij (2004) showed that stimulating children in centres as well as at home showed improvements in school performance and better societal functioning. In the long run, that will result in less delinquency and other psychosocial problems and less dependency on state benefits (Blok, Fukkink e.a., 2003).

New programmes are also developed, such as VVE Thuis (early childhood education at home). In this programme, parents carry out activities at home. These activities are linked to the activities of specific centre-based programmes, such as *Kaleidoscoop* and *Piramide*. This will enhance the positive effects of these programmes. Research and practice thus show the benefits of intensive stimulation of children, in particular by using home-based as well centre-based programmes.

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