

And what about the Parents? 40 years of Counselling in Germany

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In 2018, when the DGhK became a European Talent Point, the association was celebrating the 40th anniversary with a two day conference. It was a great opportunity to look back. Also it was a great honor to get the invitation to present the work of the association at the conference of the World Giftedness Center (www.worldgiftednesscenter.org) as one of five outstanding advocacy groups worldwide.

1. Development of the DGhK

In the 1970s gifted education in West Germany meant special schools (sports, ballet, music) or competitions (music, sports, science projects). Apart from this, nothing seemed to be useful, because giftedness was meant to be guaranteed success. Special schools also existed in Eastern Germany (music, maths, sports, circus artists) and classes in a foreign language in primary school (Russian). Apart from that, giftedness did not exist as a topic.

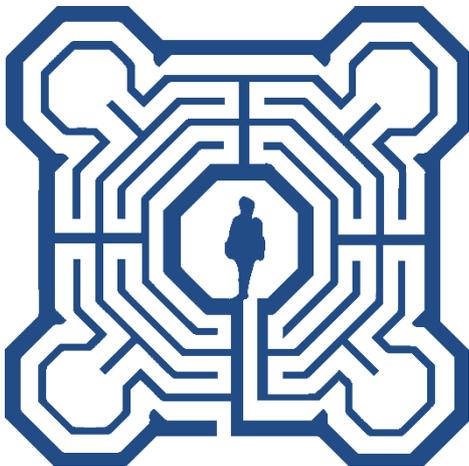


fig.1: Logo of the DGhK

The “Deutsche Gesellschaft für das hochbegabte Kind” was founded on the initiative of Dr. Annette Heinbokel in 1978 in Hamburg (West Germany). Made by experts to support parents, modelled on and first supported by NAGC, UK (today: PotentialPlus). Starting with regional work in the city where Annette Heinbokel was working, it took ten years to come up with activities in regional groups in all big cities in West Germany.

The DGhK in 2019 has more than 3000 members, mostly families (each paying 75Euro p.a., schools paying 30 Euro p.a., incl. free magazine). Still there is no financial support by any government (only support by foundations in particular fields).

The association is providing information, counselling and networking.

To spread information about giftedness and especially about the education and nurturing of gifted children the small group was publishing a magazine, the *Labyrinth*, right from the beginning. In 1978 there were eight pages, size A5, twice a year and made by private carbon copy. In 2019 we have about 48 pages, size A4, three times a year in professional 4-colour print – but still edited by members in voluntary work! Of course there is also a website at www.dghk.de with additional information.

In 2003 the DGhK decided to form regional branches instead of dependend groups. These fourteen regional branches stayed closely connected and are now the core network. They are mainly oriented on the national states, because the administration and politics regarding the educational system are organized a little bit different in every German state. Each of the regional branches is also a friendly society with their own homepage, their own board and budget, and with their own counsellors. This nationwide network is connected to international networks like ECHA/ETSN, WCGTC and HELP. In celebration of the 30th anniversary the book „Zukunft braucht Begabung – Begabung braucht Zukunft“ (Future need the Gifted – the gifted need a future) was published, including not only the history of the association but also articels from the regional branches showing their manifold activities.

The nationwide counselling by volunteers is still a unique characteristic of the DGhK and worth to be explained in more detail.

2. Mission, vision and values

In 2015 an internal specialist guided a working group through the process of putting down in writing the essentials of the association:

Mission

- *We are the competent partner and experienced companion on giftedness.*
- *We offer a nationwide network.*
- *We work voluntarily with a high degree of commitment.*
- *We are committed to a world in which different abilities are not only accepted, but also promoted, and in which potentials can develop individually.*
- *We demand an educational policy that takes into account the interests of the gifted.*

Values

- *The focus of our work is the gifted child.*
- *We stand for inspiration and encouragement through patience and tolerance and for the encouragement of gifted children.*

Vision

Our vision is a society in which all special talents are recognized and valued.

3. Counselling families/parents

Counselling contact is mainly made by the website, mail and phone; a nationwide search engine helps users to get in contact with the next counsellor. Direct contact to regional and local counsellors is also possible and frequently used. The counselling may be in one-to-one conversation and at group

meetings as well. Due to the requests it is mainly focussed on family situations, personal development of gifted children and interaction with institutions. Many of the counsellors have special experience and expertise (i.e. as ECHA-Specialist in Coaching the Gifted). In addition, many of the regional branches offer further trainings - sometimes optional, sometimes mandatory – to keep an eye on the knowledge of the counsellors.

The counsellors are providing information (knowledge, Labyrinth, books), individual support (focussed on capacity building) and also networking (links, other parents, external experts). In a meeting of counsellors in 2013 three fields of parental interests and concerns were identified: family life, personality development and dealing with educational institutions. Oriented on this trisection the association published a small book. Parents were informed about basics of giftedness and some of the most frequently asked questions. “Alltag mit hochbegabten Kindern – Ein Wegweiser” (Everyday Life with a Gifted Child – a Signpost) was published in 2017 with 80 pages and distributed i.e. as a gift for new members.

4. Counselling concept

A nationwide division - together with longtime counsellors and based on their experience - set up a concept for counselling in 2011. In this concept a common sense about the counselling is verbalized and written down:

- The focus is the actual need of the calling party. If someone calls because of the child, the counsellor may give i.e. hints for siblings or the caller’s own development, but a counsellor is not meant to be a coach.
- The advice is oriented on the resources of the caller. Not everyone is able or willing to send a child to a residential school, moving to another city or even make a choice regarding the school for the gifted child.
- The development of gifted children is focussed on the personality and wellbeing, not achievements or academical excellence.
- The counselling is limited by the knowledge of the counsellor. All of them know contacts to professionals in the field like psychologists, psychiatrists or educational guidance offices.

The competences of the counsellors are grouped into knowledge about gifted children, methods of counselling and soft skills like time management. This advanced training is organized and given to counsellors in all regional branches.

5. A little sample of our initial consultation line

In addition to the regional counsellors the association provided an initial contact via a central phone number. This was ment just for first contact and information, how to get in contact to the regional groups and counsellors. Needless to say, parents often told stories about the difficulties they have and were glad to find someone listening with deep understanding. For 23 years this was done by one

person, another 2 years by another one. Both did this job in voluntary work for 24 hours a week just with a few weeks holiday, sometimes with substitution by colleagues. For this additional phone line we realized an evaluation from 2016/01 to 2017/04. Each month the calls were counted and a few dates were noted.

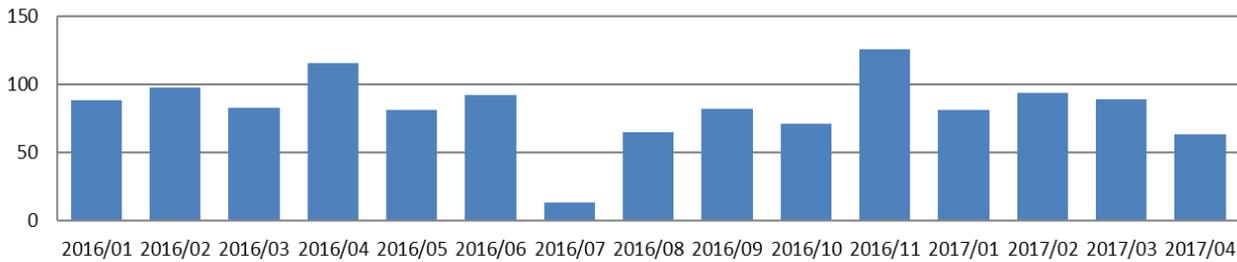


fig.2: Initial consultation calls log/total number of calls per month

The number of calls is mostly depending on the organisation of schools: In the summer only a few parents contact the phone line (13 for July in this sample). This corresponds to the general life of families, which enjoy their summer holidays. In April and October i.e. the usual talks of parents and teachers take place and problems are addressed (116 for April and 126 for October in this sample).

Many counsellors had the impression, that parents call more often because of their sons than for their daughter. So the callers were asked about the gender of the child.

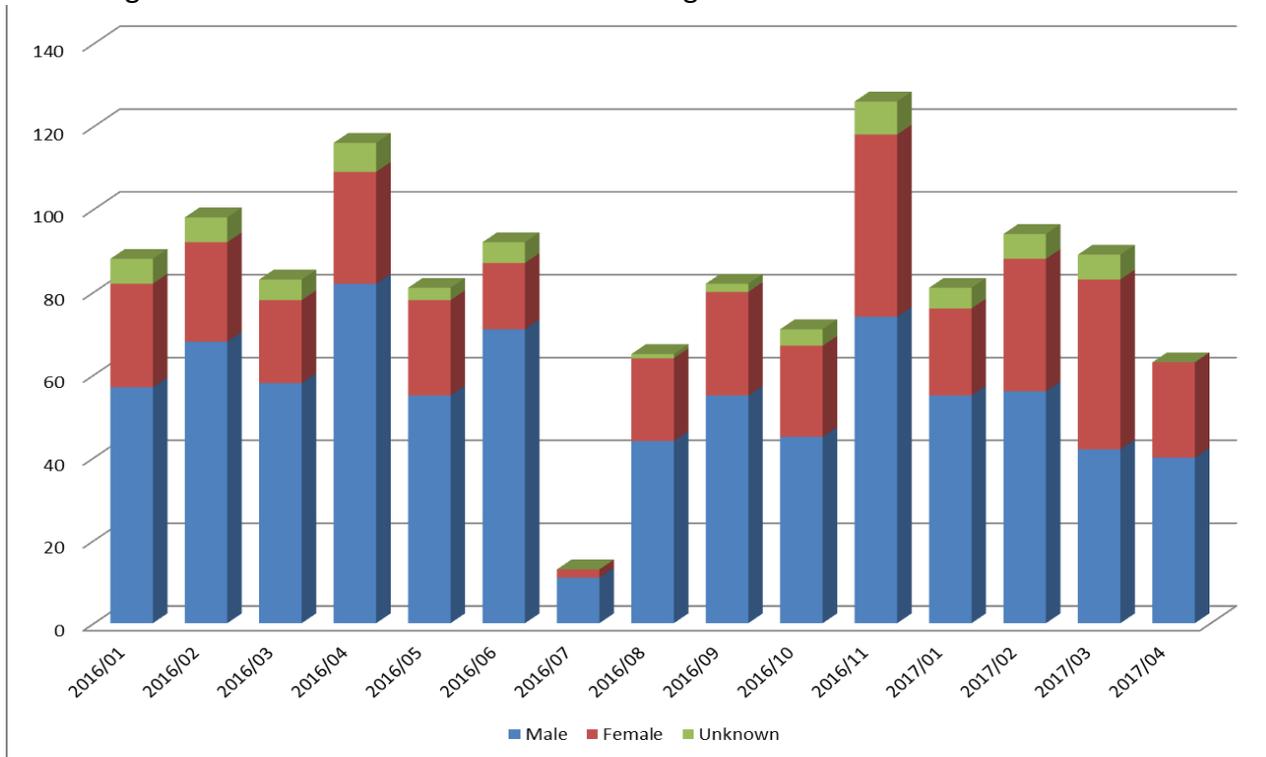


fig.3: number of calls grouped by gender of the child

The numbers are showing an approval: in nearly two out of three cases parents were calling for boys. So still gifted boys get more attention, when the access is triggered by problems: parents (and educators) are waiting for problems before they look for help and support.

For giving individual advice, the counsellors usually ask for the age of the child. So we get to know, at which age giftedness becomes a 'problem' for parents. To get this into groups, the children were assigned to the educational institutions. In Germany children usually go to the kindergarden until they enter primary school at (approx.) the age of six and moving to secondary school at the age of (approx.) eleven years. Especially for gifted children these limits are not very strict. In addition, parents may have questions regarding this transitions, acceleration etc..

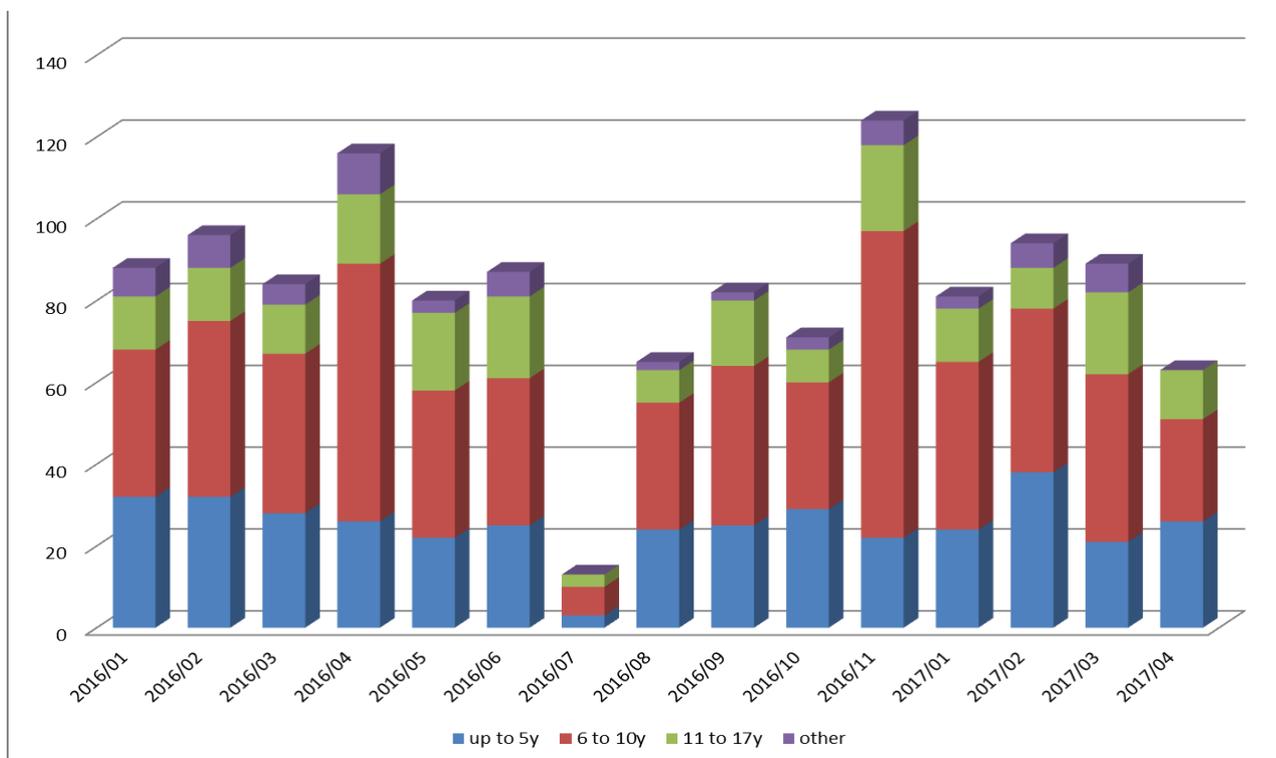


fig.4: number of calls grouped by age of the child

Most of the callers are asking for support for a child in primary school. There are some peaks in the numbers for kindergarden and the rate gets higher than 40%

- A reason in October may be, that some of the children could have gone to school but were kept in kindergarden to 'play'. Some of them lost their playmates and peers, which went to school, and they get very downcast or aggressive. A counsellor called this humorously the 'October Revolution'.
- In February the reason maybe the upcoming need for finding a suitable school for a kindergarden child. Parents are looking for advice, which is later on usually given by experienced parents in the region.

- In April (after holidays in March) the need for a primary school gets strong. Problematic situations are brimful favoured schools and getting younger children to school.

Because of the manifold of questions and topics in the initial call, no grouping by topic was even tried in this evaluation. Some parents keep this first contact via telephone short, just asking for a regional counsellor, others use the opportunity to talk frankly (and anonymously) to a friendly ear.

The counting of calls stopped, when the one person doing this – 24 hours a week, unpaid voluntary work – gave up and no one else wanted to do this job. The DGhK tried to do this with a team of counsellors, but it was still additional work for regional involved volunteers.

In the long run the DGhK counselling is not only giving help but also making the parents look over the rim of their teacup:

- Parents and teachers/schools need to talk about the different situations at home and at school, focussed on the development of HLP children (not just “excellent students”)
- Parents and politicians need to talk about structural requirements and ongoing processes to improve social life (not just “individual solutions”)
- Parents and scientists have to work together for giving/getting more empirical data and publications (not just in scientific papers)

6. Counselling schools/teachers

The association is also providing information, help and networking contacts for schools and teachers. Counselling contact is mainly made by mail and phone, via our website or via direct contact to regional specialists. These are counselling in one-to-one-conversations and at seminars. All of these counsellors have pedagogical background, experience and many of them, formal certificates (i.e. ECHA-Certificate or ECHA-Diploma). They are providing information (counsellors knowledge, Labyrinth, books, teaching material, concepts and methods), individual support (regarding a single student or situation) and also networking (institutional networks/projects, external experts, i.e. contact to ECHA-degree-holder).

To reach this group of professionals, presentations on national and international stages are used, i.e. national educational talks (Münster 2012, 2018) or our own congress in 2018, or international conferences like ECHA-conferences (Salzburg, Dublin). The DGhK is also contributing at regional and national fairs like the Didacta. For this we edited additional material, like posters, thematic papers or our explainer video (trailer at https://dghk.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Download_Didacta2015-Explainer-2_cut-1.mp4)

7. Additional Public Support and Connecting

Generally the association is talking to everyone interested in the field of supporting gifted children. So the DGhK is also working with interested psychologist i.e. in a initiative against misdiagnosis (based on the SENG initiative and the book of James Webb, <https://www.sengifted.org/misdiagnosis-initiative>).

In the national initiative promoting HLP students (www.leistung-macht-schule.de), which started in 2018, the DGhK is talking to and working with politicians, school advisors and teachers. This project is remarkable, because it connects scientific and educational activities regarding educational support for gifted students in all German states for ten years.

For lasting information the DGhK is also publishing books (i.e. „Alltag mit hochbegabten Kindern – Ein Wegweiser“ (A Guide for Everyday Life with Gifted Children) and „Gesichter von Hochbegabung“ (Faces of Giftedness)). In addition the selective recommendation of books also spreads useful information.

Public Relations (i.e. interviews or press releases) is mainly the usual work of the national board of the DGhK.

On the other hand, we support theoretical work by starting and keeping collaborations with scientists or national institutions at fairs, with conferences and via the Labyrinth. The scientific board consists of several scientists, mainly from pedagogy but also from psychology. Their contribution supports the evidence-based approach.

So in the end the association is working to empower parents to stand for not only their child, but gifted children as a group. For many parents this leads to becoming an active member of the DGhK, organising events, becoming a counsellor, and/or working in the regional or national board.

The DGhK has a lot of staying power. As long as people – and especially parents - in Germany are looking for counselling regarding their gifted children, the DGhK is working for them.