

STEPS: group therapy-educational program for siblings of children with autism spectrum disorders

Havelka, David (2020). *STEPS: Skupinový terapeuticko-edukační program pro sourozence dětí s poruchami autistického spektra*. Praha: Pasparta

Reviewed by Petr Kosek

The sibling relationship is one of the longest and most important relationships in life. However, this relationship can get very specific when one of the children is diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. And what does it feel like to be a healthy sibling? As the care of a child with disability is demanding, it is often the healthy sibling who has to help with care, and thus becomes another carer. David Havelka calls those siblings “special”, and together with Kateřina Bartošová (2019) already wrote about their needs in their earlier book “Speciální Sourozenci” (Special siblings). In the book STEPS: Skupinový terapeuticko – edukační program pro sourozence dětí s poruchami autistického spektra (STEPS: group therapy-educational program for siblings of children with autism spectrum disorders) he introduces the first manualised supportive program in the Czech Republic for special siblings. The book has been published by Pasparta publisher and is 200 pages long. The author has also attached to the book an online manual containing 160 pages of other materials useful for leading this program.

Supportive programs

There are two main types of supportive programs named after the country of origin: French and North American. The first one comes from psychodynamic approaches and the content and the length of these programs are not defined in advance. The French programs are completely open to the needs of children as they appear in the process of the group and the length of this type of programs is not defined in advance. The North American programs come from a cognitive – behavioral approach and are structured and the length of these programs is limited. These programs combine education with the practice of problem solving, discussion about troubles and worries of the children and learning how to work with emotions.

The STEPS program

The STEPS program belongs to North American programs. It has been created by the author who got inspired in the foreign countries. The STEPS program is founded on four pillars: screening study of the needs of parents in the Czech Republic (Havelka, 2015), cognitive – behavioral therapy, foreign supportive programs and on the experience pedagogy. The whole STEPS program has been further evaluated, and the methodology of the evaluation is part of the last chapter of the book.

The book as a whole is divided into five parts: about the siblinghood of children on the autism spectrum, theoretical and philosophical foundation of the program, description of each of the meetings, the research summary and possible alternatives to the STEPS program.

The first part describes the difficulties of siblinghood and cites a research on the mental health of healthy siblings. According to the research cited by the author, the special siblings are 3–4× more in danger of the emotional and behavioral disorders. Also there is a bigger chance of insomnia, enuresis, depression and behavioral problems in the family. The common problems which confront special siblings are: the lack of understanding the troubles of the sibling, changes and difficulties in the life of the family and confrontation with the troublesome behavior of the siblings. Also there is a fear of getting infected by the autism spectrum disorder. Those themes are incorporated into the STEPS program.

The STEPS program is divided into eleven meetings.

Main themes of the meetings	
Meeting 1	Introduction and meeting of participants
Meeting 2	Me and my sibling
Meeting 3	About autism spectrum disorders
Meeting 4	The sibling relationship and the breaking of myths about the autism spectrum disorder
Meeting 5	What do I feel and experience
Meeting 6	The problem solving
Meeting 7	The family and its context
Meeting 8	School and the world around us
Meeting 9	Revision of what we know
Meeting 10	The celebration
Meeting 11 (after three months)	The meeting again

Each of those meetings is highly – developed and described in detail. There are many tasks and games which help the children to work out the topics mentioned above. As already mentioned – there are also many materials which are part of the online manual. The access to the online manual is part of the book.

Who can lead this type of program?

There is no need to pass a course, and so the author has limited the demands into the education of the leader of the program. The main leader should have a master's degree in psychology and at least 3 years of experience in work with children and with people on the autism spectrum. For the co-leader it is enough to have a bachelor's degree in education, special education or psychology. The purpose of this limitation is to protect the children from nonprofessional intervention. This can be a little limiting to spread out the use of this program, on the other hand this book can be useful even to the workers who do not qualify for this program as a big source of inspiration for creation of their own supportive program more in line with their own skills.

In conclusion

This book is a great resource to anyone interested in support of the siblings of children with disabilities. While the program has been established for support of siblings of children with autism spectrum disorder, it can be adapted for siblings of children with other types of disability. There was already an alternative version for siblings children with Williams syndrome (Havelka, Hrnčířová, 2019). Overall this book helps to cover one of the blind spots of the special education in the Czech Republic, it is really needed material.

Resources

- [1] Havelka, D. (2015). Skupinové terapeuticko-edukační programy pro sourozence dětí s poruchami autistického spektra. Brno: Masarykova univerzita
- [2] Havelka, D., Bartošová, K. (2019). Speciální sourozenci: život se sourozencem s postižením. Praha: Portál.
- [3] Havelka, D., Hrnčířová, L. (2019). STEPS – Skupinový terapeuticko-edukační program pro sourozence dětí s postižením – intenzivní alternativa programu pro sourozence dětí s Williamsovým syndromem, *E-psychologie*, 13 (2), 33–46.

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