

# Supporting the social, emotional and communicative development of children within the spectrum of autism with the MARTE MEO concept



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## ••• Summary

*The education of people within the spectrum of autism is a challenge for parents, teaching personnel and other professionals. The concept of »Interactive Guidance according to Marte Meo«, which has been continually developed by MARIA AARTS (1996) in the last twenty years, is a very efficient concept for developmental support. It is based on the analysis of daily situations that are recorded on video. The video analyses make it possible to advise parents and professionals correctly as to how they can support the development and activate the*

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*resources of children, youths and adults with special needs.*

*On the grounds of those observations the ways the development can be supported and how this support can be built into the daily life are defined, so that the support happens continuously and is therefore sustainable.*

*The concept can be applied very flexibly and individually, be changed and realised in different ways.*

## ••• 1. Introduction

Since the first descriptions of infantile autism by *Leo Kanner* in 1943 and the delineation of autistic psychopathy by *Hans Asperger* in the same period, the theoretical concepts as well as the forms of support have changed considerably. Nowadays, a broad spectrum of autism is considered, distinguished into several sub-forms (DSM-IV and ICD – 10 F84). Autism is a »pervasive developmental disorder«, impairing especially social-emotional and communicative abilities. Symptoms appear usually before the third year of a child's life and manifest themselves very differently in their combinations and extent. The developmental impairment of children with difficulties within the autism spectrum is multifaceted and their developmental profile is very heterogeneous. Because of their different ways of dealing with information, those children need developmental concepts that focus on the support of interaction and communication and include the people responsible for their education and upbringing in the process.

The »Head Start« programmes in the USA have already demonstrated the importance of parents' influence on their children. More recent studies have asserted the influence of parental support for social, social-emotional and linguistic abilities (*Dong, et al., 2004*); *Kochanska; Lindsey et al., 1997*; *Dodge, et al., 1987*). Early interactions between parents and their children are a decisive factor for their socialisation (*Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2006*; *McCullum & Chen, 2001*) and have a lasting effect. The influence of such support on the neuronal development and the parents' role in this process are also subjects of neuropsychological research studies (*Spitzer, 2002*; *Hüther, 2006*). Comparative studies could prove that those concepts taking place in the natural environment of the child (Naturalistic Behavioural Interventions like Mileu Teaching, Mand-Model, Pivotal Response Training, Parent Training, etc.) are more effective than concepts applying structured behavioural techniques. Concepts taking place within the natural milieu of the children showed a much better improvement of their ability to generalize. Those studies assessing efficacy concluded above all that the developmental progress of those children whose parents are asked to incorporate education and support strategies into their daily life is much more considerable than the developmental improvement of children who were first and foremost confronted with structured behavioural interventions (*Charlop-Christy & Carpenter, 2000*; *Lovaas, 1987*).

Children within the spectrum of autism can be confronted with serious difficulties in coping with their daily lives, in regard to which the influence of the people responsible for their upbringing is very high and often is required well into adult life. In addition to the general promotion of development, it is essential to support especially the social-emotional and communicative development in order to enable these children to integrate themselves into school or society and be able to participate in daily life in the best possible way. The therapeutic intervention is therefore based on the one hand on the inclusion of the people responsible for education and upbringing, to whom the possibility of developmental support is pointed out by the means of a video-based coaching, and on the other hand on the support of social-communicative abilities of children and youths within group situations.

Every therapeutic intervention is based on an evaluation process and is oriented on diagnostic key points. This process consists of the recording of the infantile development and the social-emotional and communicative abilities, which become apparent in the child's interaction with its environment. The evaluation process of the social-emotional and communicative development is carried out according to the Marte Meo concept, developed by *Maria Aarts*. It is the starting point of the therapeutic intervention and the interactive coaching between parents and pedagogically working professionals and shows in a very concrete way how the development of the child or the youth can be supported (*Aarts, 2008; Aarts, 1996; Schopler, Mesibov, 1984;* )

After describing my concept of the first assessment and the interactive coaching according to Marte Meo, I am going to present the ways of working with children and teenagers with development disorders, using real-life examples, in this particular case with children and teenagers suffering from Asperger's syndrome.

## ••• 2. The Evaluation Process: An Important Cornerstone Of Development Support

If one observes the interaction between parents and their children, one will notice that parents deal with those children that have special developmental needs and those who have none very differently. In cases of children with linguistic and developmental difficulties, they often show a less supportive attitude. They tend to follow initiatives less often, name the actions similarly less often and altogether demonstrate a less developmental supportive behaviour. According to eco-psychological research (*Bronfenbrenner, 1981*) interactions with children in a micro system (family and direct surroundings) have the strongest influence on infantile development. Because of these assumptions the evaluation process has to also observe and interpret the interactions of the child with its family (parents and siblings), in addition to looking at peculiarities of the general development, language and communication, in order to encourage the family to realize effective and supportive educational attitudes.

In addition to the medical history, a directed observation and the recording of the infantile development, the process of clarification also consists of the analysis of daily interactions, which can be used to a purposeful support of the social-emotional and communicative abilities. These more recent concepts of interaction analysis, building on video analysis, note the children's and their parents' needs and show in a concrete way how and what kind of daily support the child requires and how these can be integrated into the own education repertoire. Based on these thoughts, I have developed an evaluation process (*Baeriswyl, 2005*) that can be used for a first assessment but also for all following ones. On the one hand, the assessment of the development of autistic children is carried out using the psycho-educational profile 3, PEP-3 (*Schopler et al., 2010, 2005*), representing the starting point for development support. On the other hand, the interaction analysis is a tool that can be used for the interactive coaching according to Marte Meo (*Aarts, 2008, 2002*). The mutual influence between people and their environment has to be included in therapeutic and pedagogic interventions according to *Bronfenbrenner (1981)*. The environment of the child with special needs has to be observed and be analyzed very carefully. The evaluation of interactions, based on the theory of eco-psychology, has been proven to be an important element within the evaluation process. Observing interactions provides us with information about what skills the child has not developed so far and how the parents can activate and support the language development, the social-emotional and communicative abilities of their



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child. The concept of interactive coaching according to Marte Meo has turned out to be very valuable in evaluating interactions and advising parents and professionals.

### ••• 3. The Marte Meo Concept

The Marte Meo concept (hereafter referred to as »Marte Meo«) observes and evaluates concrete situations from daily life that are recorded on video. The video sequences are then analyzed and show parents and professionals very clearly how they can support the development of a child, a teenager or an adult. These strategies are immediately realized in the individual's daily life and have a sustainable effect, which has a positive impact on the development of the CNS (central nervous system) (*Spitzer, 2006; Hüther, 2006*).

About thirty years ago, the Dutch *Maria Aarts (2005)* started to develop Marte Meo because of her work with autistic children and teenagers. Derived from Latin, Marte Meo can be translated as »on one's own strength« and aims to promote the social-emotional, communicative development and autonomy of people who are in need of help in such areas. The concept demonstrates, using video clips of daily situations, how one can recognize an opportunity for development and what kinds of natural and supportive attitudes are required in order to make development possible. The central thought of Marte Meo is to encourage people to use their own strength. By means of the video images their abilities are made visible for constructive interactions. The people applying Marte Meo only give guidance. The approach can be used individually, according to *Aarts (2000)*, independent of age, impediment or cultural background: a child with behavioural problems, a group with communication problems, an adult with a mental disability, older people, who have partially lost their autonomy etc.

Several theories form the basis of this concept: developmental psychology, the social and social-communicative learning theory, the eco-psychology, systemic approaches, which are based on the reciprocal interaction between individuals, as well as communication theories. The training and the professional exchange in the various countries are organized through an international network. In addition, research projects are conducted at several European universities.

#### ••• 3.1 Basic elements of development

In order for children to be able to develop and use their full potential, they need challenges and a feeling of security; curiosity and challenging tasks act as incentives. A good atmosphere, a »good work climate«, conveys a feeling of security.

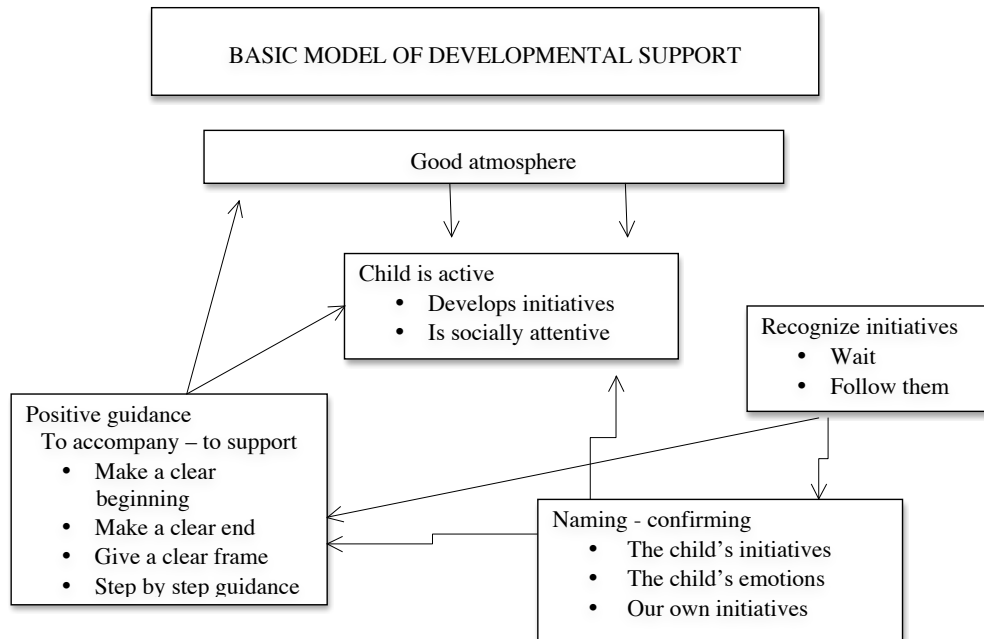


IMAGE 1: Model of development support with the basic elements.

Furthermore, they require role models that they can use for orientation. The »basic elements« are geared on these corner stones of development and were derived from the observation of positive interactions between children and their families (Aarts, 2008). In order to support parents and people responsible for education, a good knowledge of the basic elements, presented in the following model, is indispensable.

In addition to the good atmosphere, it is important to perceive initiatives, to follow them, to name them and confirm them. To name one's own initiatives and to give positive guidance are further cornerstones in the development support. These cornerstones make it possible to observe interactions more precisely and to analyze them, in order to purposefully plan the support. Aims are planned beforehand and realised step-by-step in order to activate those resources that promote development.

Considering the amount of questions that are asked in daily practice, it is often difficult to focus on the general problem and to competently advise the parents or professionals. Therefore, supervisors, colleagues and therapists have to learn how to retain their focus on the problem. In the interactive coaching, it is imperative to use the Marte Meo basic information for the development support. In order to ask the right questions in the process of focalisation and to connect them to Marte Meo information, the 3W-concept has been developed (Aarts, 2007). Aims of development are geared to the following 3W-questions: **WHEN:** in what moment is developmental support necessary. **WHAT:** is one supposed to do, explains in the level of action what is supported, and **WHY:** forms the link to the meaning of the developmental support, in that we specify what advantages are created for the child, the adult with the connection of the aim with the problem.

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The 3W-advise system is a sort of guideline that allows to approach counselling more open and efficiently. When parents, teachers or other professionals know in specific moments of interaction what they are supposed to do, they have the strong need to use their most positive and effective strengths. They surely will act that way, if they realize that what has been given as advice to them, is concordant with the aim and supports the development with a lasting effect.

### ••• 3.2. Interactive Coaching

When a Marte Meo intervention is planned, the professional suggests video recordings of situations of interaction. At home or in another everyday situation five minutes each of a structured and an unstructured situation are filmed. During the video recordings, the professional does not step in, in order to capture a situation that is as natural as possible. Afterwards, the video is analyzed, a »professional diagnosis« is given and aims are defined. Together with the parents or other professionals, chosen video sequences are watched in the so-called »Reviewing«. These video sequences concretely show the aims of support and the potential of the interaction partners (children, parents or professionals). During the reviewing the person with the special needs is usually not present. This makes it possible to concentrate on the pictures and commentary and to have room for discussion. In the case of an analysis of a group situation, however, the presence of the people involved is necessary. This enables the teenagers to recognize their behaviours clearly and thus to try new ones and build on them.

In the coaching of groups of people with Asperger's syndrome, which are intended to support the development of social-emotional abilities of children and teenagers, group situations are recorded. These sequences are analyzed, presented to the group and commented on. Positive interactions are emphasized and aims agreed upon, which are then practised in role play and which improve the social-emotional abilities. The children and teenagers of the Asperger's group, who have been meeting once a month for about two years, have improved their interactive behaviours very much and increasingly developed empathy; it is very pleasant to observe the children and teenager's abilities to transfer the learned things into family and school life.

In special cases one can also work without video, for example when a family does not want to be filmed or when it is decided that recordings are not considered to be useful at that point. Then, the interactions between the people involved are observed, the important elements commented on »in vivo« and the aims of development determined.

### ••• 4. Clinical Adjustments

Linguistic and communication therapy is based on several axes in my practice: the individual therapy with the child, the work with children and teenagers in groups for the promotion of social-emotional abilities and the interactive coaching with parents. In different cases, for example, only a coaching is offered because another professional is treating the child in linguistic therapy. Teachers who are faced with the challenge to integrate children with Asperger's syndrome into their class can likewise demand an interactive coaching.

In order to plan the development support, first of all a broad evaluation of the development is required. This consists of anamnestic information, specific observation, a development

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evaluation and an analysis of the child's interaction with its family. The results of this evaluation process determine the key activities of the therapy and coaching.

### ••• 4.2. *Therapeutic Intervention*

Therapeutic intervention is planned according to the areas, in which the person concerned is able, the development potential, corresponding to the »proximal zones« (*Vygotskij*). The so determined aims build upon the children's individual resources and arrange the start of the learning process at an adequate level, which increases the probability of success. The tasks are neither too hard nor too easy, the possibility of positive interaction increases and the motivation as well. The parents, often the mothers, are present during the therapeutic work, so that a continuation of the stimulation, which is integrated into daily life and flows into one's own education repertoire, is provided for. The transfer of information into the child's various contexts of life is sustainable and improves the ability to adapt. Thus, one improves the ability to transfer the learned things, which represent an additional problem for children with difficulties within the autism spectrum. The linguistic therapy takes place one to two times per week. In addition to regular linguistic and communication therapy, the parents are offered to get to know Marte Meo in form of a parents coaching.

### ••• 4.3. *The Parent Coaching*

The parent coaching aims to guide parents and other professionals how they can support the development of people with development disorders in daily life. Using video sequences of daily situations of interaction, the child's resources and special needs are recorded. In the central part of the concept, the Reviewing, the parents and professionals are concretely and visually advised how they can support the development. Thus, the necessary connection to development is made. Sequences in which parents show the supportive behaviour are primarily chosen. If these pictures are lacking, then one will watch sequences in which the child makes clear what kind of development it requires. Using the information from these images, aims are determined that parents and professionals should integrate into the daily life. At the same time, a connection between the decided aim and the development theory is established, so that the parents can comprehend the relevance of the aim. The parents' participation in the linguistic therapy makes a coaching "in vivo" possible. Thus, video recordings are only required in greater intervals.

The influence of this working method on the child's development as well as on the behaviour of the educating people is impressive. In addition to the children's considerable progresses, one can observe big changes in the parental behaviour. Parents are aware of their resources again, use them, show increasing development supportive abilities, which they operate flexibly and use in their daily life. Parents report that they feel competent again in regard to education issues and their children with special needs and have developed a new feeling of self-confidence. They appreciate that Marte Meo does not convey recipes, but shows concretely which basic functions can be developed and supported in various situations and which influence these have on the development.

### ••• 4.4. *Coaching Of School Situations*

When children and teenagers with Asperger's syndrome are integrated into a standard

school, I am often asked to offer the teachers and students orientation on the working principles of the children with difficulties within the autism spectrum. In addition, it is possible and also often wanted that the teachers are also supported with Marte Meo in their increasingly difficult task of educating such a child.

Situations in school are recorded on video and analyzed afterwards. In the analysis, one looks first whether structure and atmosphere are in balance in the class. If there is an imbalance, there will inevitably be disruptions during the lessons. If the basic elements are lacking in the pupils, there will be similarly learning and behavioural problems. In the analysis, the focus is on what is at hand, what the teacher or the pupil is good at, in order to determine what has yet to be developed. If it concerns the atmosphere, those attitudes that create a good atmosphere have to be supported: how to show a »good, friendly« face, how to share emotions, how to »recognize«, name and mirror, how to name own emotions, how to repeat »emotional signals« of individual pupils and of the group, how to bring pupils together, how to name, what is happening in the group, in order to establish a good group atmosphere and to give positive signals and feedback.

Often absent structures with which people with Asperger's syndrome are confronted have a rather impeding effect on daily school life. That the support is enough and well structured then has to be another concern. The following elements support the creation of structure: to identify a clear beginning and a clear end and set a clear picture, to use starting and guiding signals, to have a shared focus, to look around in order to perceive and recognize social information, whether all pupils are attentive, are only a few of the elements. Further elements are: to name the social situation and structure, to name the own initiatives, to choose the pupil's initiatives, to give a clear assignment and convey information step-by-step. It is very important to take turns and hold a balance between contact and information. Without previous contact, the information cannot be absorbed.

Children and teenagers with Asperger's syndrome are lacking these basic elements to a great extent. The basic elements illustrate in a concrete manner how new concepts are build and how development can be supported in a sustainable way.

#### ••• 4.5. *Social-Emotional Training Of Children And Teenagers With Asperger's Syndrome*

For a few years now, I have been offering group training for children with Asperger's syndrome. Similar to the language therapy, I combine different concepts, which have been proven to be very efficient in the cases of people within the autism spectrum. In addition to using elements from other concepts as TEACCH (*Schopler et al.*); the contact training (*Herbrecht et al., 2008*), Marte Meo can above all develop the social-emotional abilities. In the group training, social competences are made apparent in order to gain abilities in the area of social-emotional interaction and communication. Topics such as how can one gain empathy, how can one recognize non-verbal communication elements and use them, how can one form relationships, how can one start conversations or continue them, how can one make compliments and ask others for a favour, are discussed. Marte Meo is especially suitable to make these abilities visible, to practise them and to provide possibilities for transfer.



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## ••• 5. Conclusion

To combine language and communication therapy with the concept of interactive coaching according to Marte Meo has proven to be a success. Its strength is the daily support through family and direct environment. The video recordings can illustrate abstract concepts as for example »to structure the environment«. Because of the link to developmental theory, the parents get a better understanding of the goals and the impact on the development. The objective decided upon allow to point out the necessary support and to determine the essential interactions. The child's behaviour gives us the message »I haven't developed these abilities yet, I need support«. The Marte Meo basic elements demonstrate how competences that support and promote development can be build up.

The presence of the parents during the therapy increases the activation of parental resources. They allow us to conduct interactive coaching »in vivo« during the therapy. By actively participating, the parents can concretely test the goals and realize them or merely observe the process. This approach has been proven as very useful in the work with children with serious developmental disorders. They are the ones that are in need of this daily support.

In the context of school, Marte Meo can be applied very efficiently. The video analyses indicate whether enough structure or good atmosphere exist and whether they are in balance. In case of an imbalance, disruptions of lessons can be observed. The video analyses make it possible to recognize what is present and what still has to be developed. Children with special needs, especially children with Asperger's syndrome, lack basic elements that represent important elements for development. When they are made visible, they form a crucial part of the developmental support.

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