

**Eating Disorders Alpbach 2015**  
**23rd International Conference**  
**October 15-17, 2015 Alpbach, Tyrol, Austria**

**The Effects of Peer Counseling  
in a Group Therapy Program  
for Obese Children and Adolescents (Age 11 – 16)**



**Monika Amann-Morach**  
**Andrea Zumbrunn**

**University of Applied Sciences FHNW, School of Social Work**  
**Institute for Social Work and Health, CH-4600 Olten/Switzerland, [www.fhnw.ch/sozialarbeit](http://www.fhnw.ch/sozialarbeit)**

## **KEEP ON MOVING – a multi-professional group therapy program for obese children/adolescents and their parents**

- **Approximately half of all obese children and adolescents become obese adults [1].**
- **Thus, it is crucial to intervene at an early stage. For the first time, a peer-counseling approach is used in an obesity program.**
- **Accompanying peers that are obese as well but that have stabilized or lowered their weight and changed their behavior (peer coaches) are supposed to motivate participants (peers) to achieve a behavioral change and shall enable mutual support and observational learning.**

[1] Holub, M./Götz, M. (2003). Ursachen und Folgen von Adipositas im Kindes- und Jugendalter. In: Monatsschrift Kinderheilkunde. 151. S. 227-236.

## **KEEP ON MOVING - a multi-professional group therapy program for obese children/adolescents and their parents**

- **The outpatient program contains practical and educative training units in exercise, nutrition and behavior for adolescents and their parents.**
- **The peer pairs are trained in general conversation rules and in goal-setting and are being accompanied by an expert during the duration of the program [2] .**
- **Two group lessons are intended to get to know each other and to facilitate the first exchange within the peer pairs.**



[2] Kästner, M. (2003). Peer Education - ein sozialpädagogischer Arbeitsansatz. In: Nörber, Martin (Hg.). Peer Education. Bildung und Erziehung von Gleichaltrigen durch Gleichaltrige. Weinheim, Basel, Berlin: Beltz. S. 79-93.

# Modular setup of the two-year group therapy program **KEEP ON MOVING**

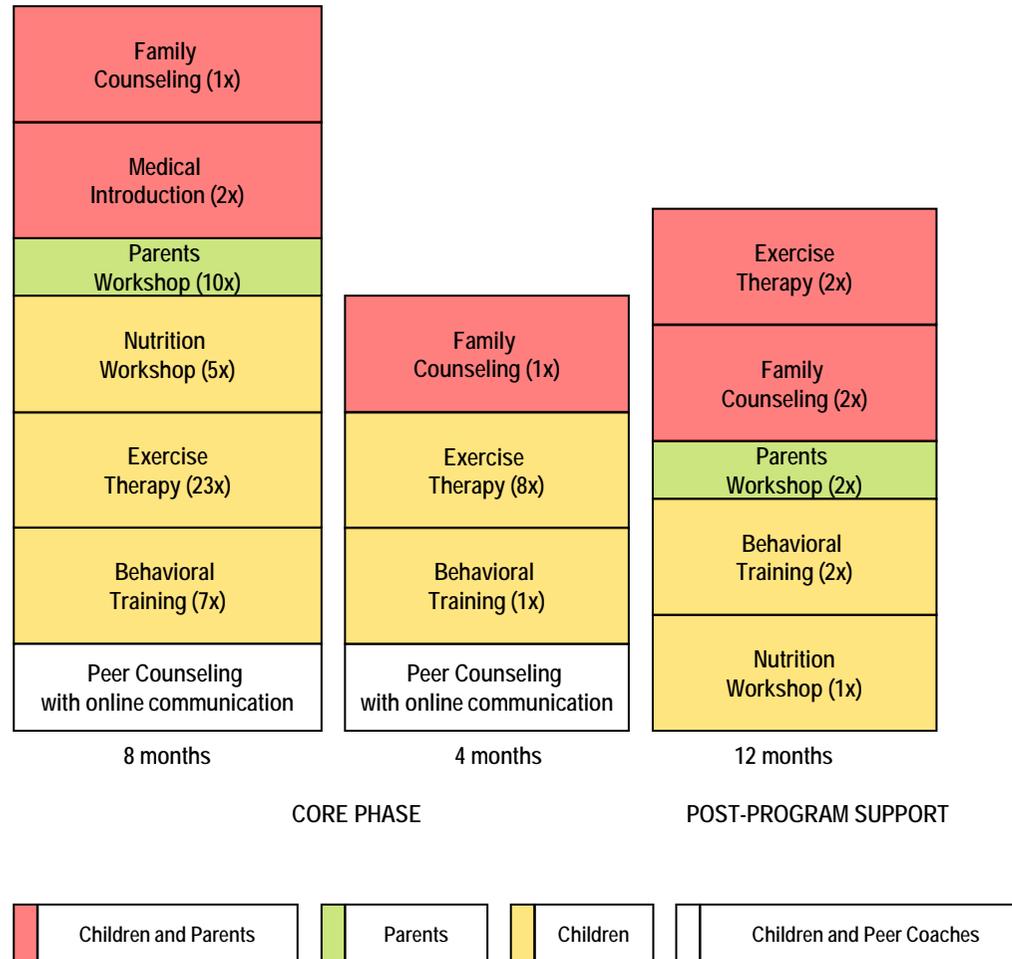


Fig. 1. Setup of the program **KEEP ON MOVING**

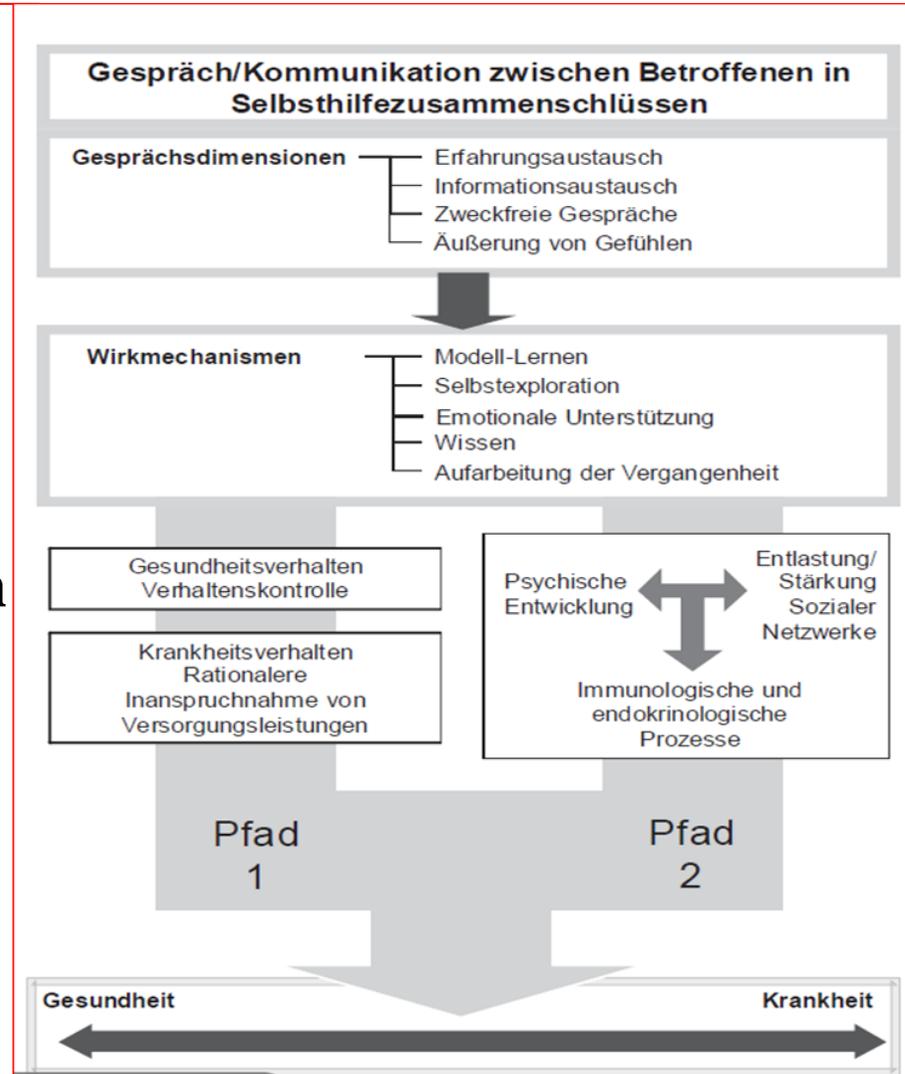
# Peer involvement approaches in general and within the project **KEEP ON MOVING (KOM)**

- Peers become active with and for their peers (Backes/Schönbach 2002)
- Substantial effects on the psychosocial increase of competencies in resource-oriented peer counseling (Nörber 2003; Kaestner 2003)
- **Justification: Theories of developmental psychology, of learning and of social immunization (Oerter/Dreher 1995)**
- **Observational learning as a central factor (Bandura 1976, 1979a, 1986)**
- **Development and modification of individual behavior and capabilities, observational learning (Nörber 2003)**
- **Increase in the relationship network (Kaestner 2003)**
- **In KOM since 2013: Peer counseling with additional, voluntary communication on the social online learning platform «edmodo»**



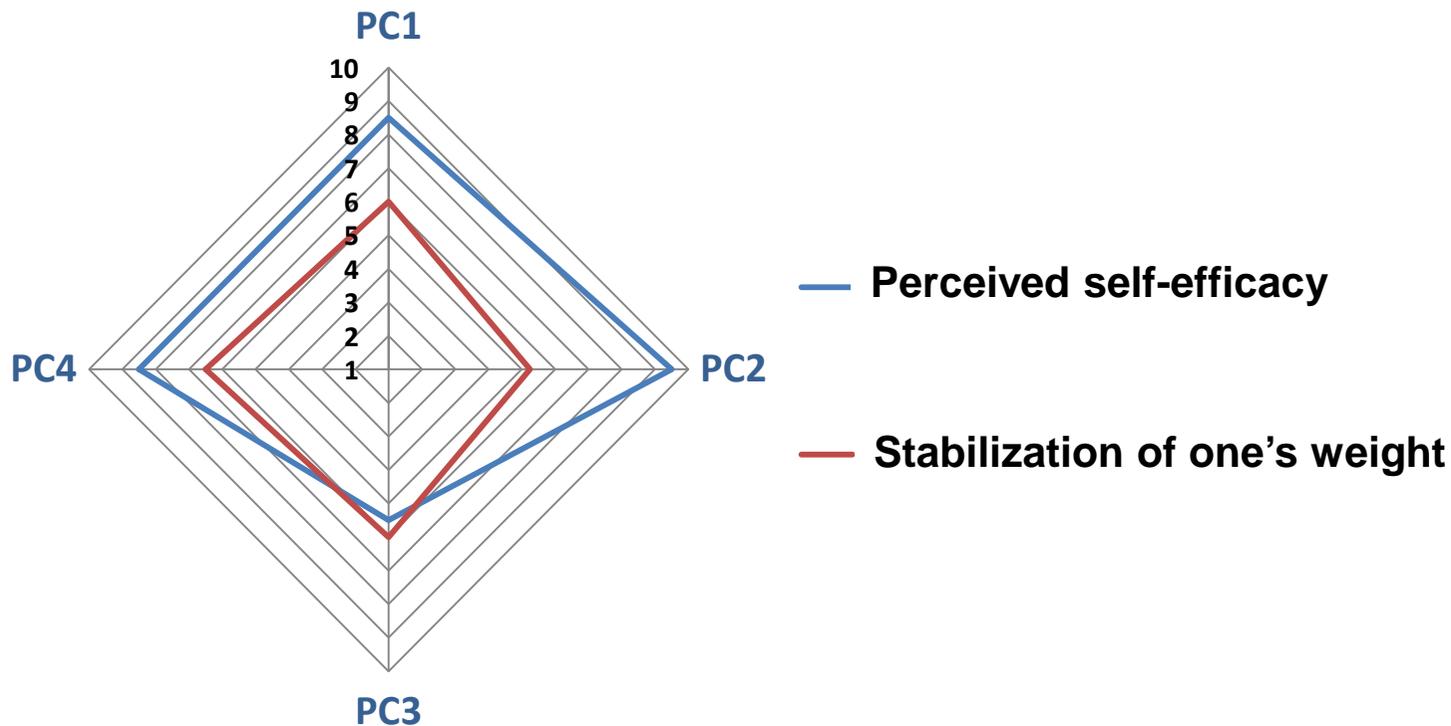
## General heuristical impact model of self-help communication in the context of peer counseling (Borgetto 2004/2013)

- Approaching each other with appreciation, respect and trust
- Extensive interest and sympathy for the peer's concerns
- Achieving a meaningful, rewarding task
- Topic-related knowledge transfer, presentation of alternatives for action
- Attractive, credible models
- Emotional/social support via comfort and encouragement
- Releasing pressure



## Supportive effects of peer counseling

- 1) on the increase of **perceived self-efficacy**  
scale 1-10, median 8.5
- 2) on the **stabilization of one's weight**  
scale 1-10, median 6



## Important factors fostering relationships and enhancing benefits

- Remembering behavioral changes and alternative ways for action
- Experiencing higher perceived self-efficacy
- Enhancing knowledge-, communication-, social- and media competencies
- Consolidation of knowledge
- Enjoying to provide social support and to fulfill a meaningful task
- Being perceived as an attractive model
- More optimistic self-esteem; enhanced repertoire of resources

## Factors impairing the benefits

- Reciprocity was not established on all communication channels
- Knowledge transfer happened only in one direction
- Too few activities related to strengthening relationships during the program
- Online learning platform did not provide a framework of trust and safety
- Experiences of discrimination related to weight
- Embarrassment and reluctance as the largest barriers in the process of establishing a trustful relationship

## Conclusion: peer counseling with additional option of communication via a social online platform

The exchange via a social online learning platform and/or online counseling by an expert in order to discuss topics related to therapy, problems and embarrassment require a basis of communication based on:

- Mutual trust
- Peers must accept and have trust in the competences of the coaches and the program managers
- High (data) protection
- Anonymity
- User-friendliness and chat-/forum features

