



**FortSchrift Starnberg e.V.**  
Ferdinand-von-Miller-Str. 14  
82343 Niederpöcking  
Tel.: +49 (0)8151 20 41  
Fax: +49 (0)8151 91 69 49 8  
E-Mail: [verein@fortschritt-bayern.de](mailto:verein@fortschritt-bayern.de)

FortSchrift Starnberg e.V., Ferdinand-von-Miller-Str. 14,  
D-82343 Niederpöcking

*Erika Kolumbán, MA, conductor-teacher, Expert in Education*

## **The Conductive Off-Site Residential Group in Starnberg**

### **A possibility and a solution for young adults with disabilities to lead a self-determined life**

During direct, day-to-day work among young adults living with disabilities conductors see very different personal life courses, career options, successes and failures in social integration. One rather special problem is the difficulties that they meet when they leave formal education and aspire to live an independent life, their chances to create an independent home become rather limited, and thus also their chances of becoming adults in the psychological sense of the word.

For children living with disabilities the separation from the family is a process *a priori* harder and slower, susceptible to a number of additional factors. At the same time, even if the psychological process of becoming adult is successful, starting an independent life is still problematic, due both to the limited supply and high rent of fully accessible apartments, and to the high costs related to the care services needed. The main objective of the present study is to describe the most important factors required for independent living by young adults with disabilities, first in general, then more specifically in Germany (Bavaria), and to present a possible solution: an independent and “self-managed” lifestyle model based on conductive pedagogy. As conductor-director, my role in elaborating the concept of this new and innovative institution has been to develop and implement a new off-site conductive care service. This service applies the principles of conductive pedagogy to the everyday life of young adults, with particular attention to the specifics of adult education and to general difficulties related to transition into adulthood.

The functioning of the new institution is based on the traditions of conductive education in Bavaria, and the specific Bavarian professional, legal and financial framework related to the care of the disabled, which the present study will briefly summarize.

#### **I. Possibilities/difficulties of starting an independent life for young adults with disabilities**

After completing formal education (during which, although to a decreasing extent, children/young adults are usually told by others what to do and when to do it), the period of starting to work and creating an independent adult life (that is moving out from the parental home, finding and maintaining an independent habitat) is generally hard for everyone. In order to manage a new independent life successfully, one has to become psychologically adult; at the same time becoming adult supposes an independent, self-managed life. However, for young adults living with disabilities this phase of life raises far more important challenges than for their healthy peers.

When young people with disabilities leave formal education and aspire to live an independent life, their possibilities become rather limited. Most of them go on living at home with their parents, which

is not a good solution, neither for their parents, nor for the young people themselves, or end up living in long-term care institutions for the disabled. Both solutions make it almost impossible to create the independence necessary for becoming adults, that most young adults hope at this age: a free and self-managed life, in which they can decide themselves about their time, chosen activities, etc. Such a life is also vital in learning how to live together with their peers, how to assume responsibility for their actions, and how to create a looser, more adult relationship with their parents and family members.

Several psychological studies tackle this situation and its longer term consequences on social integration. According to relevant research the psychological separation of children with disabilities from their parents is obviously slower and more problematic, which makes the post-adolescent phase longer. In extreme cases the dependence between children and parents is so strong from both sides that the separation in fact does not happen as long as the parents are still alive.

One reason for this is that parents raising children with disabilities always worry about social segregation, since they know that their children have to face special difficulties, they need special care, and finding a suitable work environment for them will not be easy. When examining the characteristics of individual family models, it can be observed, that the supportive attitude of parents towards the children's aspirations for independence, their ways of communicating about this issue and the positive perception of future possibilities are greatly influenced by realistic assessment of employment and housing options, and by the severity of the actual disability. Another very important aspect influencing transition towards autonomy of the young disabled is the extent to which their former experiences in family and school life can help this process – that is by what kind of responsible tasks they have accomplished, what kind of useful knowledge and skills have they acquired in informal learning situations (i.e. camps, trainee jobs, etc.)

When separation from the parents is problematic, young adults living with disabilities are often unhappy about their lives, they feel uneasy in society, unable to control their future, their transition in adulthood may be delayed or entirely failed, their social and economic dependency further deepened. As a consequence society may also perceive people living with disabilities as weak and inefficient individuals may in fact keep considering them for ever as children. Without appropriate support, especially in the absence of inclusive development in the social environment, it often happens that young adults with disabilities lack competences that could have been realistically developed, and thus they also do not perceive themselves as independent, socially active individuals, which essentially prevents their real social integration.

This is the reason why supportive programmes, like conductive education, providing complex help to the entire family in this process, are of vital importance.

## **II. Basic principles of conductive pedagogy, the theoretical basis of the Conductive Off-Site Residential Group**

Among many pedagogic trends dealing with the disabled, it is conductive education that puts its main emphasis on providing its clients with tools to independent living. The essence of conductive education is that through education and motor function therapy, taking into account the age and condition of the given patient, children are basically taught and encouraged to discover solutions for themselves. Therefore, from the very beginning of formal education, conductive development objectives must be set with the ultimate aim of helping clients with disabilities to live as independently as possible in their adulthood. From this point of view, conductive education it is not a simple motor function therapy, but a complex method of personality development, focusing on "learning to learn".

An educational objective, enabling clients to live as independently as possible, is the core principle of the conductive approach. It also aims at creating and strengthening clients' need for autonomy, and at developing one of the most important competences: resilience – that is the ability for recovery. With the help of this competence the individuals will be able to believe in and act for a life equivalent to that of their healthy peers. This competence enables them to become adults, to fight social stereotypes that regard people with disabilities inactive and ineffective, to control and manage their own lives instead of living a life of vulnerability.

This holistic approach of conductive pedagogy is exceptionally suited to follow and assist disabled clients across the transitional years into young adulthood – and beyond. After leaving formal education, many young people and their families socialised by conductive education still have the need to receive the same complex conductive support as before. At the same time, practically no institutions exist which would provide conductive pedagogy services for young adults, besides motor therapy targeted on reducing physical symptoms.

The new **Conductive Off-Site Residential Group** described in the present study may present a solution to the above problems. On the one hand it can offer an appropriate framework for young adults with disabilities to start a self-managed life; on the other hand it can provide them with complex off-site conductive-pedagogical services to help them in the difficult transition to adulthood and to social independence and self-determination.

### **Traditions of conductive education in Bavaria**

By the nineteen-eighties news about the legendary success of conductive education and the Hungarian Pető Institute reached European countries, among them Germany. At that time Peter von Quadt, founder of the FortSchrift association worked closely in Munich with André Kostolany, a well-known economist of Hungarian origin. Peter von Quadt had a son with cerebral palsy due to lack of oxygen during birth, and was told by German doctors that his son would never be able to walk. In 1988, following Kostolany's advice, von Quadt travelled to Hungary with his son, to get acquainted with conductive education carried out in the Pető Institute. This personal encounter and the wonderful results of the conductive care given to his son proved a life-changing experience for von Quadt and his wife. Returning to Germany, with the involvement of other concerned parents, they laid down the foundations for conductive education in Bavaria, through creating the first conductive nursery and day-care in 1996.

Due to their persistent work, and the professional success of the first Bavarian institution, general recognition of conductive pedagogy has continued to grow. Conductors took part at various professional forums and conferences. In 1998 the union of German conductors was founded, several professional reviews published appreciative articles, relevant literature was published, and renowned German intellectuals also began to support the cause of conductive education. Thanks to the results in Bavaria, since 2000 many other FortSchrift institutions have been founded all over Germany. According to the demand, these institutions have tried to cover all age groups, from nursery and kindergarten to conductive schools and to special conductive development courses and camps.

### **III. A brief summary of the German social system, with special attention to regulations concerning people with disabilities**

The first article of the Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*) of the Federal Republic of Germany states that each and every human life is equally valuable and human dignity shall be inviolable, while the second article states that no person shall be favoured or disfavoured because of disability. The law also states that the state has to create an economic and social order that guarantees social security for individuals who face difficulties that they cannot overcome by themselves. The principles laid down in the Basic Law are detailed in the Social Code (*SGB Sozialgesetzbuch*). Social Code governs protection for people who are financially unable to provide for themselves, due for example to unemployment, illness or disability. It comprises the social security system such as health insurance, pension fund and long-term care insurance, as well as unemployment benefits. Based on individuals' specific situations different financial, or in-kind benefits can be provided, which may also be combined. In case of the motor disabled the most important benefits are the disability living allowance, attendance allowance and carer's allowance based on the classification of functioning disability and health (ICF)

## **Life is more than simple subsistence: support for mobility and leisure activities**

In addition to basic social benefits the Administrative District of Upper Bavaria (*Bezirk Oberbayern*) may also finance the services of a personal assistant to help young adults in their leisure activities. The primary objective of this benefit is to enable young adults living with disabilities to participate in cultural events and other leisure activities, and thus to enhance their successful integration into society. People with restricted mobility can also apply for regular monthly support to cover their transportation costs (e.g. taxi). Beneficiaries can select transport service providers and leisure assistants independently, on the free market.

It is a very important aspect of the above benefits that the beneficiaries become “employers”, who can themselves within the limits of a specially assigned budget choose and contract their own “personnel”. At the same time they must also assume all responsibilities related to this role (management of the funds, budgeting, planning, selecting, contracting and paying of the assistants, accounting, etc.), which in the case of young adults may be an important step toward independent living.

## **IV. One possible form: residential groups.**

In Germany residential communities (*WG = Wohngemeinschaft*) are very popular. In these five or six young adults together rent a large apartment, sharing the costs and tasks related to maintaining it.

In Bavaria there exist several special forms of these residential communities, for instance an institution where generally nine tenants live together, five of whom are mentally disabled, the other four being university students, who, in exchange for housing and according to a very well organised system, provide daily help to their disabled peers.

The situation becomes more complex in the case of the motor disabled. They need fully accessible apartments, their need for day-to-day care is higher, in some cases they might need permanent help, and thus independent living may be considerably more complicated and more expensive.

## **Advantages and challenges of life in a residential community**

- lower housing costs (rent, overhead costs) and lower costs to create an accessible home with all the necessary equipment;
- household tasks, like cleaning common spaces, cooking, shopping, looking after flowers, checking the mail, etc. can be shared;
- a residential community may also function as a “self-help group”, enhancing the flow of information and thus its members' social integration;
- young adults can learn how to manage eventual conflicts, relating for instance to the common use of utilities, to the necessary harmonisation of different habits and lifestyles or to the use and cleaning of common areas;
- through creating and adhering to a jointly accepted set of rules young adults can learn how to live together as equal partners. Cohabitation teaches them that these rules apply to everyone and they all have to adapt to them (for instance keeping an order in common spaces, having guests without bothering each other, etc.)
- 

## **V. Presenting the Conductive Off-Site Residential Group in Starnberg**

**The above factors (Bavarian social policies and financial possibilities, the tradition of conductive education, the professional experience of the FortSchrift institutions and the popularity of residential communities), all contributed to the creation and successful functioning of a new institution: the Off-Site Residential Group in Starnberg.**

In this pilot project my role, as professional leader and conductor was to plan how conductive principles can be applied to and used in a programme to help young adults create self-managed living, in accordance with Bavarian regulations and the methodology of adult education. It was also my task to create innovative professional content based on conductive pedagogy that is the most suitable for helping young adults starting independent living and coping with everyday problems, while in the longer term also enhancing their successful social integration.

The residential group was established 16 kilometres from Munich, in Starnberg, at a location easy to reach with public transport. It consists of six rooms on the second floor of a fully accessible building. At the moment six young adults with cerebral palsy rent individual rooms with bathrooms in the residential community. For all of them this is the first step leading to creating an independent home. They have different occupations, some of them are still at school, some of them work, either in sheltered workshops or employed on the free labour market.

### **Self-managed living in a conducted residential community: a package of diverse services**

The offer of the conductive Off-site Residential Group in Starnberg is based on three pillars. It provides a fully accessible housing unit equipped for a possibly most self-reliant way of living, a personalised conductive-educational support enabling the inhabitants to organise their everyday life more independently, and the necessary personal care and household help.

The above modular services can be combined according to the personal needs of the inhabitants. Therefore in some cases a young adult with disabilities, who had just left the family home, receives comprehensive conductive support, while physical and personal care are provided by a care service. Other residents may need less conductive support or personal care, and thus they simply rent an accessible and adequately equipped room from the FortSchritt Association.

It depends on the individual needs and demands of the inhabitants which kind of services they will request, to what extent, and how will they finance them. The professional team of FortSchritt also provides guidance related to available social benefits. The Social Code has separate regulations in relation to residential communities. It states that contracts concerning educational services, personal care and rental of rooms must be created in a way that they can be signed separately, and that inhabitants must be able to choose freely the most appropriate service-providers. This is the most important difference between off-site residential groups and residential homes.

### **Renting independent rooms and common spaces**

The FortSchritt Association is the main tenant of the entire building, on the second floor of which are located the accessible rooms and common spaces sublet to young adults with disabilities: four single rooms with own bathrooms, a double room with bathroom, and a room without own bathroom. The common spaces include a spacious kitchen-living room, a common bathroom, a room for care assistants, a huge terrace and a wide corridor, with two lifts and stairs at the end. The rooms are unfurnished, so residents can furnish them according their own taste. The common areas have some basic equipment (accessible pieces of furniture with adjustable heights and some kitchen utensils), but further accessories have to be bought by residents according to their own requirements (e.g. coffeemaker, pots, etc.)

A reduced rent is specified by the Rural District of Starnberg. The FortSchritt Association signs an individual lease agreement with each inhabitant. According to the Social Code, on the basis of this contract the Administrative District of Upper Bavaria and the local Job Centre partly or entirely cover the rent and the overhead costs (excluding electricity) of those who do not have the necessary financial means.

### **Personalized conductive-pedagogical service**

Conductive education for the residents is provided by the conductive-pedagogical service aimed at offering professional assistance for individuals living with disabilities to enhance their chances of

social integration. This service is provided on the basis of yet another contract, signed between the resident and FortSchrift Association. If an individual is entitled to this support, the costs of conductive education are paid by the Administrative District of Upper Bavaria to FortSchrift Association. Those with an independent income have to pay for the service themselves.

The Administrative District of Upper Bavaria decides on this support, its extent and content, on the basis of a personal consultation with the patient. The condition of the financial support is a contract between the Administrative District of Upper Bavaria and the service-provider, and an extensive documentation of the planned personalized conductive-educational content.

The content of the conductive-educational service, in accordance with the requirements of the District, covers five major areas. Within these areas a system of individual goals and activities must be defined, based on the personal capacities of the resident in question.

1. living with disability, the impacts of the disability on the personality of the individual;
2. the dimensions and functioning of the personal and social relations of the individual;
3. self-sufficiency, the capacity for self-managed living, cohabitation with others;
4. working, activities related to work, initial and further training;
5. daily schedules, leisure time, participation in social life

Conductive education can provide complex help based on the individual needs of young adults, at the time and in the way they need it most.

### **Off-site care service**

Our residents usually need almost constant help during much of the day, since they are seriously impaired in taking care of themselves and undertaking household duties. To receive help in these areas they conclude a third contract with a community care service recognized by the German health insurers.

The Starnberg group-members made the sensible decision to contract the same service. As a result, by adding up the financial support granted to the individual inhabitants, a 24-hour care service can be financed, which is a huge advantage. Originally we thought that ambulant care service would be sufficient. However, in practice this proved incompatible with the different daily schedules and weekend programmes of the inhabitants, moreover unexpected situations, for instance sudden illness, were also very difficult to handle.

The care services are financed through health insurers. In addition, the insurer also provides a so-called "residential group supplement", since supporting smaller residential communities/groups is far more cost-effective for them than supporting a person with disabilities living all alone. In case the amount provided by the health insurance proves insufficient, disabled individuals may, with a sound reason, apply for further financial assistance from the Administrative District of Upper Bavaria.

### **Independent, but not without support!**

The residential group must be a safe and comfortable home for its residents, where they can live as independently as possible. They can decide whether they want to organize joint programs with the others, they must assume responsibility for their own decisions, but they are always aware of not being alone, knowing that they can get help whenever they need it.

The conductive assistance in the residential community aims at providing complex solutions to the difficulties that young adults living with disability face when starting their independent life. These solutions are based on the trinity of body, soul and spirit.

**Body.** The relevant regulations of the Social Code provide financial security to the members of the community; their permanent care is assured by services financed through health insurance.

**Soul.** For young adults socialized in conductive institutions, the positive and constructive attitude focused on problem solving of the complex conductive assistance offered by the residential community guarantees the feeling of continuity. This safe and “homey” environment lays the foundation for personal development and for successful transition into adulthood.

**Spirit.** The atmosphere of the residential community is based on mutual trust and respect, inhabitants and employees are also offered support by an ecumenical religious crisis service.

### **The content of the off-site conductive service**

In this new form of institution the task of the conductor is no longer to create developing exercises, but to help the inhabitants of the community generally to find practical solutions to the day-to-day problems of independent living. Conductors of course continue to teach motor-function development to the residents whom they help by selecting the most suitable equipment/tools (e.g. special kitchen utensils) and using them properly. This means that even the conductive objectives are defined by the clients themselves, based on their own needs.

The primary role of conductors in the residential group is to help the residents to identify and realise their personal objectives. These are generally very tangible, everyday objectives, the emphasis being on problem- solving. Motor function development therapy as an end in itself has been completed within the formal education system. Now the emphasis is on the applicability of acquired skills and competencies.

A few examples of these objectives:

how to manage time; how much time does it require to get prepared for the day ahead alone;

how to create a daily and weekly schedule which facilitates accomplishing obligatory tasks but also leaves time for leisure activities and physical exercise;

how to accomplish simple tasks such as preparing a sandwich alone, or do simple shopping.

The general objective of the assistance is to develop skills and competencies enabling residents to tackle the above and similar tasks – to find and create together individualised conductive solutions to their specific practical problems, based on the specific bio-psycho-social characteristics of this young adult generation. This role also requires a new attitude: instead of rehabilitation targeted on reducing physical symptoms, which is usual in the care of adults, clients should be taught to differentiate between activities that they can do themselves, activities they need a little assistance for, and activities that they will never be able to do alone, and therefore must be able to organise help for.

Young adults living in the residential group also receive assistance in tackling common problems related to independent living, such as management of time and financial resources, setting priorities, solving general household tasks, etc. In addition to these they also receive up-to-date information on relevant laws and regulations, and help in understanding them. Keeping contact with relevant institutions and being informed on their services is also an important aspect of adult life. Since the system of regulations and organisations concerning the disabled are very complicated, it is vital to help residents to be aware of opportunities, and to apply for social support as guaranteed by the system. It is also very important for them to learn how to represent their interests in different situations and platforms, e.g. before parents, institutions, decision- makers and among cohabitants and peers in general, therefore the assistance provided covers these areas as well. Finally, conductors must assist developing and maintaining residents’ motivation, by helping them to persistently pursue their goals and fight the depression and demotivation often resulting from their situation.

It has always been an important characteristic of the attitude of conductive pedagogy to involve parents in the process of development. This way the family, as a complex unit, also receives assistance in bringing up a child with disabilities. In the phase of children’s transition into adulthood this help is even more significant. It is not only the young adults who have to separate from the family but the parents also have to let them go, which is, in the case of a disabled child, understandably more difficult. The conductive team of the residential group monitors this process closely. This requires

continuous consultation with the families involved, which is far from being an easy or tension-free process.

The parents of children with disabilities generally have very strong ideas about how their children should live in the residential group and what kind of assistance they should get from the conductive educators. Many think of the residential group as a second home, following exactly the patterns of the family home, with some extra services, well defined by themselves. The consultation with the parents is carried out through family visits, individual exchanges and teacher-parent meetings. Its main goal is to make them understand that the essence of independent and self-managed life away from home is to enable young adults to decide autonomously about both minor and major aspects of their own lives, and that conductors are there to encourage and help them to identify and realise their personal objectives. One of the most important tasks of the professional team is to win the parents' trust both in their children and in the team's work, since the support of families is an essential condition for the young adults' successful transition into independent adulthood.

In the conductive residential community the role of conductors is considerably extended, with the emphasis shifted to new areas and activities compared to formal education. They must act simultaneously as coach, facilitator, motivator, mediator and, obviously, pedagogue. The main objective of this extremely complex assistance is, in the long term, to enable inhabitants to live an independent adult life and to successfully integrate into society.

## VI. Conclusion

Without the above described financial framework this residential group could not have been created at its present form. The German social system makes it possible for people living with disabilities to live as independently as possible, to make their own adult decisions, while supporting them through the conductive educational service to receive adequate help in this process when needed. This system has therefore an important effect on their personal development, on their healthy transition into adulthood, and thus improves their self-confidence and self-managed living.

This is very well complemented by the complex approach of conductive education, which also puts the emphasis at every level to achieving as much independence as possible. This attitude of conductive pedagogy is exceptionally suited to follow and assist disabled clients also in their adult life, providing assistance when they require it, and in the ways that they require it.

The success of the Conductive Off-site Residential Group in Starnberg has so far demonstrated that the Bavarian social system, the residential community as an institutional form and the complex approach of conductive education applied together in young adulthood proves a harmonious and effective solution to the difficulties faced by young adults living with disabilities at the beginning of their independent life.

*I would like to thank Andrew Sutton, Judit David, Claudia Wagner and Christian Strohmeier for all their support and valuable proposals they have submitted to me while writing this article.*