



# **Prevent and Combat Child Abuse**

The Perspective of Parents and Professionals

**National Report Germany**

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Wissenschaftliche Texte

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The German Youth Institute (Deutsches Jugendinstitut e.V.) is Germany's largest non-university research institute devoted to the study of children, youth, and families. The Institute is mainly funded by the Federal Government and Germany's Laender. Additional funds come from the European Commission and national and international foundations. The German Youth Institute employs a wide range of quantitative and qualitative research strategies and methods such as continuous social monitoring of changing living conditions and studies on specific socio-political questions. Based on its research results, the Institute provides expertise and data bases for policy makers and practitioners at the European, federal, regional, and local level.

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Projekt: Prevent and Combat Child Abuse: What works? An overview of regional approaches, exchange and research

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## Table of Contents

<b>1 Background Information</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1 Background of the research	7
1.2 Online survey and interviews with clients	7
1.3 Focus Group Meetings	11
<b>2 Results of Parents' Interviews and Focus Groups with Professionals</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1 Significance of professionals in the support process	13
2.3 Framework conditions, organization of help, networking and evaluation	19
2.4 Aspects of the support and social welfare system	24
2.5 Governmental and societal aspects	27
<b>3 Conclusions</b>	<b>30</b>
3.1 Significance of family counselors in the support process	30
3.2 Topics and methods applied in the support process	30
3.3 Framework conditions, organization of the support, networking and evaluation	31
3.4 Aspects of the support and social welfare system	32
3.5 Governmental and societal aspects	33
<b>Vignette A – Physical Abuse</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Vignette B – Neglect</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Vignette C – Sexual Abuse</b>	<b>38</b>



# 1 Background Information

## 1.1 Background of the research

To capture the perspective of parents and professionals on the assistance services and the child protection system, different methodological approaches were used.

## 1.2 Online survey and interviews with clients

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were applied to explore parents' experiences with a specific assistance service.

### 1.2.1 Online-Survey

A standardized questionnaire for an online survey was developed in cooperation with all project partners. It was based on the questionnaire "Sater" by the Verwey Jonker Instituut in the Netherlands designed to measure clients' experiences with social work interventions (Melief 2002). For this project the questionnaire was tailored to cover specifically child abuse and neglect. Additionally the questions and answer categories were reformulated to take into account the different conditions of the child protection systems of the participating countries. This necessarily means that not every question and answer category is equally applicable and relevant for every country.

The questionnaire contains 40 questions on the following topics:

- Socio-demographic data
- First contact with assistance provider
- Reasons for assistance service
- Assistance service and professional providing it
- Results

The questionnaire for parents is complemented/matched by a questionnaire for professionals to allow comparisons of both perspectives and to gain further information from the professional. The professionals' questionnaire additionally contains specific questions e.g. about the focus of the assistance, the form of assistance and its setting. It took the respondents approximately 20 minutes to fill out the questionnaire.

As a general rule participants had to answer every question to be able to proceed with the questionnaire. In the parents' questionnaire however follow-up questions were optional, to keep the number of drop outs low. Also wherever it made sense, the answers included the options "I don't know"; "I don't remember"; "No opinion"; "not applicable".

The questionnaires were translated from English into German.

In a two week trial period the providers participating in the survey had the opportunity to report technical problems, suggestions and criticism concerning content and phrasing to the researchers. As a result, the questions addressing abuse and neglect were rephrased to respond to concerns that these questions could be difficult to understand for parents, deter them or have negative effects on the relationship between professional and client.

According to the survey design parents filled in the questionnaire on their own either at the institution or at home. An employee of the institution other than the professional involved in the case was available to answer questions if necessary.

Out of 15 providers of Child and Youth Services based in Munich as well as one provider in the city of Mannheim invited to take part in the study twelve decided to participate. Two declared that they could not take part due to lack of suitable cases or capacities. One provider used its own questionnaire for self-evaluation and therefore did not want to burden their clients with filling in two questionnaires. The providers received written and oral information about the study including a privacy statement as well as information sheets for parents and professionals.

The parents were recruited by the providers. These were requested to address families that had received an assistance service to prevent or avert child abuse or neglect. Cases included could involve light forms of violence up to heavy forms of psychological, physical and/or sexual abuse respectively smaller shortcomings in the care for the child up to serious neglect.

Families whose assistance service ended within the three month data collection period or were near the end were eligible for the study. On request of some providers, a few families were included whose assistance service had not ended but had been going on for such a long time that an interim assessment seemed to make sense, be possible and enlightening.

At the end of the questionnaire parents were asked if they were willing to deepen the topics addressed in an interview that would be financially rewarded. Six parents chose that option.

The online questionnaire imposed relatively high requirements on the parents concerning reading skills, ability to concentrate and command of the German language and therefore was not suited for all families meeting the sample criteria. To reduce such a sampling bias and to give parents the possibility to choose the form to share their experiences most appropriate for them, interviews were also conducted with parents that did not fill in a questionnaire. Also in these cases the professional was asked to fill in a questionnaire. This way a broader sample regarding level of education and migration background could be reached.

Altogether 19 families were recruited by five providers. Information on these cases was collected with the following combinations of survey instruments:

- Questionnaire parents + questionnaire professionals = 16 cases  
(including both questionnaires + interview) = 6 cases)
- Interview + questionnaire professionals = 2 cases
- Questionnaire parents only = 1 case

### **1.2.2 Interviews with parents**

Topical, guided interviews were conducted to explore the parents' perspective on the assistance they received.

#### **Sample and interviewing process**

Nine interviews were conducted with parents. Six mothers had consented to an interview within the online questionnaire, two parents and one mother were directly recruited by the provider without filling in a questionnaire. The sample is heterogeneous regarding social, cultural and family background as well as level of education.

In one case both parents were interviewed together, in another case the interview was mainly conducted with the mother but the father was present and partly joined the conversation. In all other cases it was the mothers who were interviewed. The participants could choose where they wanted the interview to take place. Seven of them invited the researchers into their homes, two mothers preferred to be interviewed at the German Youth Institute.

The duration of the interviews was between 25 and 80 minutes (around 50 minutes on average). Most parents showed great interest in the interviews. Due to their different backgrounds they individually focussed on different aspects and had different levels of differentiation and abstraction in their narratives.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Six of the nine interviews were analysed. The analysis was done using the software MAXQDA for qualitative text analysis and content analysis.

#### **Interview topics / content**

The aim of the interviews was to deepen the aspects addressed in the questionnaire. Open questions gave parents the possibility to word their perspective freely and to put their own emphases.

In the interviews a line was drawn from the beginning of the assistance up to its end. The following subjects were addressed:

- Family background
- Assistance setting
- Access paths to assistance
- Reasons behind the need for assistance
- Expectations towards the assistance
- Assistance approach, design, setting and topics
- Developments and results of the assistance process
- Factors experienced as successful
- Advice for other families and assistance providers

#### **Forms of assistance included in the study**

The parents were interviewed on their experience with three legally mandated standard assistance forms. They are often offered if parents need parenting support in general but also in cases of child neglect and abuse or partnership violence.

*Education and Family Service Offices (Erziehungs- und Familienberatungsstellen)* offer counselling. They help children, juveniles, parents, and other guardians in overcoming their problems.

One of the institutions that participated in the research (questionnaires / interviews) specializes in child protection issues.

In the context of *social pedagogical family help (Ambulante Erziehungshilfe or Sozialpädagogische Familienhilfe)*, the social worker visits the family regularly at home and supports the parent(s) in raising and taking care of the children as well as in day-to-day practical matters e.g. taking care of the household.

Three of the institutions that have participated in the research offer social pedagogical family help.

*Orthopaedagogic daycare centers (Heilpädagogische Tagesstätten, a type of partial inpatient assistance)* provide care for children in small groups and individual attention to every child. In addition, the professionals work closely with the parents.

One of the participating institutions specializes in orthopaedagogic support.

### **Description of the families – Sample**

The following section describes the family background as well as the assistance context of the parents, whose interviews have been analyzed.

The parents interviewed have one to three children. The majority of families are headed by single mothers. In two cases the children live with both parents. The age of the children involved in support varies widely: The youngest child was three years old, the oldest was already grown-up when the respective assistance ended.

Most parents have a low level of formal education; they attended general secondary school or special school. The children visit all forms of schools from special school to grammar school or serve an apprenticeship.

Regarding their employment situation most parents work. However not all of them can live on their wages and receive additional financial support by the state.

The cultural background is heterogeneous: Three families are of German origin, two have a migration background and one belongs to the Sinti community.

At the time of the interviews four families had completed the respective assistance. In two cases the assistance was still ongoing but had been running for a long time. Moreover all families had received or were receiving other forms of assistance. In two families children had been previously placed outside their families (fulltime foster care or institutional placement). All families received the respective assistance on a voluntary basis. Without accepting this assistance for the majority of families more far-reaching interventions by the child and youth welfare authority or the family court would have been likely.

Regarding the focus of the study on child abuse and neglect the problems of the families mainly lie in restrictions of parental care, in exercising physical and psychological child abuse and in partner violence. Furthermore all families experience additional burdens.

### **How did it go? Problems / Obstacles**

The providers the researchers approached for the study expressed great interest, also showing in the willingness to participate (12 out of 15 providers). Serious commitment was also noticeable in the communication with the providers. However, only five of the twelve providers eventually delivered cases.

Explanations for the low number of cases given by the providers were:

- Few cases that they regarded as suitable that ended within the data collection period, due to the long duration of the assistance services.
- Parents could not be contacted anymore.
- Parents and also professionals refused to take part. One reason given was the sensitive issue.
- High workload of the professionals.

One provider that was particularly successful in recruiting parents used the questionnaire as an evaluation tool and an occasion to talk to parents about the assistance process. A strong commitment of the provider's management for the study also seemed to be an important factor.

### **1.3 Focus Group Meetings**

Two focus group meetings were held with professionals experienced in case work. All were employees of the providers participating in the online survey except for one professional representing a child and youth welfare authority.

Aims of the focus group meetings were:

- Validation of the results of the questionnaires and interviews with parents
- Discussion of some important aspects, that emerged all studies of the participating countries
- Discussion of case vignettes to outline typical assistance processes and possible shortcomings/weaknesses of the child protection system

The duration of the meetings was 2,5 hours. The discussions were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using the software MAXQDA. Six case workers out of eight providers participated in each meeting, some of them also being part of the management. In one meeting a representative of the public child and youth welfare authorities took part as well.

## 2 Results of Parents' Interviews and Focus Groups with Professionals<sup>1</sup>

The parents' interviews suggest that the majority of the surveyed parents were satisfied with the assistance service, in particular with the professionals and with the support success. They rather criticized assistance services by other providers which the family receive or did receive in addition to the surveyed program. In addition, parents state primarily problems on the structural or superordinate level with the focus on the support and social welfare system or societal aspects.

The results of the parents' survey do not really surprise the professionals who participate in these focus groups. However, one participant says in regards to the high degree of satisfaction with the professionals, the support process and success which the families experience: *"I believe we are getting away really well"*. The professionals believe that the high satisfaction of parents described in the results was due to the design of the survey and assume that this led to a positive bias of the sample. In this context, they explain various reasons: Professionals rather ask those parents to participate in such a study with whom they have a good relationship, *"especially when dealing with such highly explosive topic as violence"* - a subject matter which may cause one to experience the survey as insult. In addition, parents who have a good contact with the professionals are more likely to participate in such a survey. Moreover, it is not easy to reach families after the assistance has ended if there were difficulties along the course of the support.

At the same time, one professional regrets that barely any parents have participated in the study who would judge the surveyed assistances as negative, *"who see it as totally negative that this stupid 'auntie' shows up repeatedly. (...) These are not really included"*. She believes families that are difficult to involve in sustainable cooperation are not included in the study. Their point of view would have been of great interest.

Another professional says about the parents' statements in the interviews: *"I like best how the people did not beat around the bush in their feedback. It all seems that they did not mince words"*. It is emphasized that parents have found allegoric images in their own language for what is described in theory by professionals.

<sup>1</sup> Results of the online survey with parents and professionals to be included - The results of the questionnaire with parents basically mirror the results of the interviews: high degree of satisfaction with the professional, the support received and its result etc.

## 2.1 Significance of professionals in the support process

In all parents' interviews, the support relationship of professionals and parents within the assistance program take a key position. The participants in the focus groups confirm this result. One professional phrases it as follows: *"The support is the relationship"*. The parents' interviews make this particularly clear in forms of support which focus on the cooperation with parents (family counseling, social pedagogical family help); but also in support that centers rather on the child (e.g. orthopaedagogic daycare centers) the person of the social worker plays a significant role for parents. Several parents -- illustrated by the following example -- emphasize explicitly that the person of the professional is decisive for the success of the support. One mother believes that she gained a lot through the assistance *"but only it was this woman. (...) yes, with her it was just perfectly right. And I believe it is really important whether you have one with whom you are at the same page or not"*.

On the one hand, this demonstrates that there are individual differences in who of the professionals is experienced as the right one in an individual case. As one mother explains: *"The others (professionals) (...) I only met later (during a holiday event). And they are all really great. (...) but with each one there was a moment when I thought: 'My God I am happy, we have ours.' (...) I have also talked about it with other mothers who were (there). They said they would never want to change. They also found the right person"*.

On the other hand, parents illustrate particularly in light of the competence profile an image of professionals who they have experienced as positive that is mostly in agreement.

### 2.1.1 Competence profile

Reflections of parents on the competencies of professionals, with whom the family work mainly, take a lot of space in the interviews.

In summary, parents experience professionals as competent, who are **trustworthy, empathetic, appreciative, dedicated, mediating, just, interested (in living conditions, living world, culture), open, honest, clear, transparent, strong, present, dependable, supportive, consequent, able to deal with conflicts, need-oriented, flexible, analytically-minded, methodically well-versed, goal-oriented, and experienced.**

Some excerpts from parent interviews serve as exemplary clarification:

*"But here is a person who understands you, who knows what's up. He knows what you want and supports you for months, if it's needed he goes with you to government offices or (...) where ever. (...) The trust (...) what (...) he has in us, we have in him, the trust is really super great."*

*"Yes, I have always truly felt safe. And I think they had simply a lot of experience."*

*"He is open, he is honest, he says what's up."*

*"She has scrutinized us. This woman got x-ray vision. (...) But then I knew where you can accomplish it."*

*"He does not forget anyone and (...) how he deals with things, yes? With so many families, different problems. Yes? But he accomplishes a lot."*

*"It is always a hundred percent sure thing. And when he makes a promise or when he does something then he does it, then he finishes it. Yes? I have never heard him saying: 'I don't have any more solutions for you' or 'I can't help you anymore because (...) this is not my responsibility' or anything like it. (...) Somehow, he always finds a way and (...) a solution."*

At the same time, there are no fundamentally different appraisals. Parents who report negative experiences describe the opposite: For example, they feel misunderstood by the professional and experience them as unconcerned. However, the majority of parents were very satisfied with the professionals with whom they worked in the surveyed support. Examples of professionals who were seen as less competent refer often to other supports which are or were experienced as exceeding the requested help.

When asked about the parents' statements, **the participants in the focus groups see themselves confirmed in their work and appraisal.** One professional says that *"I would sign it. (...) And they have a clear picture the people who answered. (...) I find that is a quite nice feedback"*. At the same time, this participant sees the high demand made on professionals, which is hidden in the competence profile. *"Of course, it is the one suitable for all occasions"*.

Focusing on the surveyed assistance, parents but also professionals expose the problems of various aspects in this support relationship or take different perspectives.

Some parents for example talk about the problem that they would want **partiality** and that it is difficult for them if the same professional works with several family members. One mother finds, *"This is somewhere a breach of trust. Yes? If he (partner) is also present;"* another one says, *"if she is now on the side of the children then I have felt offended."* Dealing with them reflects at the same time, however an important part of the support process.

**The parents describe differently and depending on a case-by-case situation how a harmonious relationship of closeness and distance is created between them and the professionals. One mother reports that the professional is important as contact person also because he or she is perceptible with her own problems and does not exclude them. However, another mother emphasizes as positive that "this outside person (...) does not involve her own problems. What a friend, acquaintance always does." In contrast, another mother is suffering by the distance of the professional who does not show his human side and is insensitive.**

The interviews suggest that additional support criteria play a significant role in how parents experience the degree of closeness or distance of the professional. Overall it shows that parents wish for professionals who are especially empathetic, dedicated, trustworthy and supportive. If parents

largely miss these characteristics then they do not describe a harmonious relationship of closeness and distance. In contrast, parents who voice a positive opinion in this regard appraise the professionals as overall competent and report of a good, helpful cooperation.

Also participants in the focus groups talk about the equilibrium between closeness and distance. One professional explains how demanding this balancing act is specifically for professionals who work intensively with and reach out to families highly burdened also with difficult relationship dynamics. She says: *"It is really always a key topic in supervision: 'Now I am in again.' 'Now I am too close.' 'Now they get me again.' 'Now I don't sleep night-after-night because I am too close to this family' and 'now I am too distanced.' 'Now they ignore me' etc. (...) And this is what I find extremely difficult for professionals - this desire of the parents to have a friend. (...). This is extremely difficult to bear. And to have to draw the line over-and-over again yourself. (...) I do see that it is extremely important to have a good relationship in order to achieve something. But I believe this is also a great risk for professionals"*.

In this regard, other professionals describe the model of co-work during which two professionals are responsible for the family. This approach is not only experienced as relief but it also ensures support continuity: *"It prevents any interruptions or just any representation in the event of illness or vacation"*.

The case is similarly complex described in regards to **perseverance** of professionals in the cooperation with families. One participant illustrates the sensitive, long term process not to give up even in difficult to reach and often highly burdened families, *"because after one has visited them for a few months, one can see, 'Okay, it is finally moving on, now they accept me, now it will happen somehow'"*. Despite her perseverance, this professional knows these kinds of families *"where there is no response, there are such"*.

In the interviews, the stories of the parents indicate that the persistence of a professional is not successful, if it is not possible to build additionally a sustainable support relationship. Then, for example, parents experience the persistent demand of appointments only as uncomfortable, controlling pressure. One mother is angry: *"We were always forced to go there. (...) There was a psychologist (...) who always kept on pressuring. And I hate when someone pressures me."*

However, if these parents report of an overall sustainable support relationship then they describe the persistence of a professional also as nagging and exhausting at times. However, they reflect this as a necessary effort to develop staying power and make progress: *"And this is exactly what has helped me. Because I was not always such a person who has enough staying power. And I have seen I have stayed with it. (...) And through this I have made progress."* Perseverance was demonstrated in several interviews as a significant criterion for the success of the support (cp. Chapter 2.2.2).

### **2.1.2 Age, gender**

Beyond the competences, parents describe additional characteristics of the professional, which are important for a successful support process. **Age**

plays a role in the interaction with the personality of the professional. Parents see the cooperation with very young professionals as problematic; in particular if the age difference is great. In this context, one mother for example is missing the life experience necessary for her: *"OK, I was already a bit older and had a lot more experienced than this young lady. (...) I can tell her something and help her; (...) I can enlighten her before she explains something to me in one way or another."*

With the view on the **gender perspective**, one mother describes that for her it is better to work with a man or with a woman depending on the key topic and the time of her long term support process: *"Because Mr. X was absolutely the perfect contact person for this issue; particularly because he was a male figure for me. Because I also have a problem with my father, (...) in principle with the father figure, male figure. And for me it was good so. Because now I have for example a female therapist. I have clearly decided on a female one."*

## 2.2 Topics and methods applied in the support process

In terms of the contents of the support and the methodological approaches, the interviews make it clear that general requirements must be met for the families in order for them to participate in the support process with their specific problems.

### 2.2.1 Trust as basis for constructive participation

The interviews suggest that all parents view a sustainable support relationship also as significant aspect in the support process because otherwise the basis for acceptance of help, for constructive cooperation and therefore for positive development processes would be missing. Parents state trust as significant criterion of a sustainable support relationship. Based on a narration of a mother, the interaction of a trustworthy professional, her actions and the developmental processes of the mother become understandable: *"The help of the professional, the opportunity to get this, many things have changed in my life, so many positive things. Of course not everything that was a problem was gone, (...) these aggressions, the violence were naturally not gone from one day to the next. But the stability which I feel now, this basic level of stability which originated from my doing this thing. (...) Through the opportunity to be able to talk about it. Through the opportunity to have someone supportive at your side. A person who I can trust."*

One mother states explicitly the fundamental value of trust as condition for her honesty in this cooperation: *"But once I could trust him, then it was a really honest thing."*

The level of trust is also a discussion topic in regards to the cooperation with professionals as well as in terms of a higher sense in regards to the institution.

In this context, parents put into words how important it is for them to deal with the topic "control" in a transparent, trustworthy manner. In regards to it, the fundamental feeling that a professional wants only "*something good*" and the institution is trustworthy plays a role. The following dialog between a mother (M) and the interviewer (I) exemplifies which significance the majority of the surveyed parents assign to the **situation of tension "help and control"**:

M: *"Take away the fear that such help will take something from you away from the people. Of course: (...) When a certain limitation is transgressed, when it is truly in the best interest of the child, when the child's life is in danger, of course then someone needs to intervene. But up to this point, such institution is not in place to take away a child but rather to help dealing with the child better. (...) This family help did not come to me and wanted something bad for me. She only wanted something good for me. (...)"*

I: *"In other words you mean parents should be informed about it to take away their fear: 'What does happen here? Are you taking my child away?'"*

M: *"Exactly. Exactly. (...) For a while, this was a very big issue for me and (the professional)."*

I: *"That you were also afraid, what can you tell?"*

M: *"Exactly. How far can I trust this institution?"*

The participants in the focus groups confirm the necessity to discuss the tension with the parents; however, they report at the same time that many professionals are too timid to make their monitoring assignment transparent. One participant has good experience in the cooperation with families with little motivation to be supported, if she first thinks together with her clients, *"What do we have to do so you can get rid of us again? And how can we work together so that the Youth Welfare Department says: 'Okay, you no longer need family help'"*.

### 2.2.2 Case-specific topics and methods

In regard to what parents expect from the help, they have the general desire that they can work through their **individual problems** and explain this on precise problems and needs on a case-by-case basis (concerning the objective see also Chapter 2.3.2). The majority of parents experience the surveyed help as important and effective support in terms of problem solutions and developments. If they report that their personal or family problems could not be satisfactory solved by the requested or any other help, then they talk about the deficits in the support process on a differentiated level on part of the professionals (cp. Chapter 2.1) rather than on the methodological level. In terms of methodology, parents make rather general statements saying that the approach to the support was insufficiently oriented on them or on the need of the family. One mother said that *"it was related to our situation. (...) that we were not at the right place there. (...) they are not geared for this situation."* One father complains that *"everything"* in the institution which his child has previously visited (was) *"standardized. It is always the same. (...) And, like I said in (the current institution) everything is done what they wish for (...) at that age."*

Parents who experience contents and methods of the support as oriented on their need or on the need of their family describe these experiences as positive.

In this context, nearly all parents state explicitly as helpful and a relief the **practical support in every day requirements and precise instructions for raising children**. This implies in most programs that the help takes place at least in part proactively. One mother, whose professional visits her regularly at home, finds it for example helpful "*that she helps me with paperwork and such things. (...) We went also to yard sales and (...) papers and also kindergarten. (...) Or what should she eat, what should she not eat. (...) We then bought these chairs for the old kitchen so we could all eat together in one room. (...) Or we have such a list (...) that mother plays with the child daily for at least ten, yes ten minutes.*" On various examples, another mother describes in detail how she practiced positive parenting behavior and how she internalized it in the meantime.

With the perspective on the day-to-day practical support, several parents state explicitly one component of help that is significant for them: **the mediation between various social and cultural worlds**. Parents broach the necessity of the mediating authority in terms of cooperation with government offices and schools (cp. Chapters 2.4 and 2.5). For example, one mother reported of mutual barriers in the communication between clients and government offices. She believes a mediating professional is necessary because of the disinterest of government offices to clarify uncertainties and misunderstandings and describes the following situation: "*If you have to go to a government office. Or this officialese, for example you get letters and you just don't know what to call this word or what is the meaning of this word? Yes, there are many things which we (...) don't know? Or where we feel misunderstood when talking with the authorities or so. (...) Yes, we don't really know what they mean or so. And sometimes they talk their officialese and sometimes they really don't care whether you understood what they said or not. (...) Mr. X (...) has helped many families and also helped me a lot personally by coming with me to appointments or made the phone call to explain the conversation, to inform because (...) someone did not understand it properly.*"

In addition, several professionals complain that the officialese which is already difficult for them to understand is even more problematic for clients who have an insufficient command of German. They justify the necessity to accompany clients to institutions at the hierarchical level: According to their experience, government employees are more apt to provide information to professionals and are friendlier toward their clients if these are accompanied by a professional. Moreover, professionals take on the role of mediator in conflicts between clients and government employees (cp. Chapter 2.5).

In terms of dealing with conflicts and challenges in the cooperation with government offices, parents experience it as helpful if the professional supports them and they become gradually more able to overcome difficult situations as much as possible on their own. One mother states, "*He worked also with me. (...) And I have learned a lot from him about how to behave in various situations.*"

In many ways, the interviews demonstrate that for parents it is of great importance to experience the support as effective help for self-help: whether it is dealing with institutions, running a household, taking care and parenting children or in the **development of interests and the implementation of future perspectives and participation in society**. In this context, several interviews show the significance of persistent creation of incentives and the demand made by the professional on clients on the basis of a sustainable support relationship (cp. Chapter 2.1.1). This stable foundation is necessary for clients to get involved with something new. One professional explains that even the basic sense of clients *"that at least in this life nothing goes right"*, is still experienced as some sort of security. *"And once I take some risk (try something new) then I leave this safe playing field"*. This description of the participant illustrates the difficult task of the professional to deal with the attempt of clients who come from instable relationships to resist and to open perspectives.

One mother who explains her path to independence and self-reliance summarizes her developmental process as follows: *"If someone comes and keeps holding it like a sausage in front of your nose and dangling it. Because there comes a time you take a bite out of it. (...) First, it was the apprenticeship, then directly thereafter (...) I started on my driver's license. Now, when I got my driver's license, I will start as field service representative. Because if I do a good job, I no longer need the welfare department."*

Another mother, who is a Sinti, reports impressively how she deals with her **cultural identity**, develops pride during the support process and in the meantime holds lectures about her culture; in addition, due to her background, she establishes herself more and more professionally because she is respected as mediator between the cultures (cp. Chapter 2.5).

In this just like in many other contexts, the interaction between the development of self-efficiency, the development of self-esteem, and the experience of independence and self-reliance is demonstrated. **In summary, parents describe help as successful if it is need-oriented, if the families can deal with their problems accordingly and if they experience the support in a sense of empowerment as help for self-help.**

## 2.3 Framework conditions, organization of help, networking and evaluation

### 2.3.1 Access to help

Parents, for whom the requested help is already a direct follow-up measure, tell about an uncomplicated initial access to help and they feel well informed at the beginning of the support: *"What has to be done, I really knew this (...) already."*

In contrast, parents who themselves were looking for help describe the way to get suitable help as difficult and tedious. In the interviews, a lack of **information about suitable assistance** is mentioned multiple times and

one mother tells about her shyness to ask the youth welfare department: *'I believe it should be made more public where you can get help. (...) Now, I would have never gone directly to the youth welfare authority and said, 'I have a problem with my kids.' That would have been the last on my mind.'*

In particular, one mother who was looking for a suitable counseling program was able to find swiftly an initial contact to the institutions; however, she complains about the long **waiting times** until she could get appointments with the professional who subsequently worked with her: *"A few weeks later, I got an appointment. (...) So, it was like the first four weeks, five or six weeks were very, very hard on me, without any help."*

In the interview the continuation and increase of the problem can be seen if the family does not get along with the professional or only gets along to a certain degree after a longer time of waiting.

To minimize any possible obstacles from the start, another mother names criteria, which have played a role in deciding on an institution: the **reputation of the institution and the professionals** as well as its **closeness in terms of physical proximity and good access**.

In addition, this mother feels it is positive that **the employees were friendly during the phone contact**.

### **2.3.2 Objective of the support**

The interviewed parents explain **in regard to the problem**, what goals they are trying to accomplish in light of the precise difficulties, conflicts, and needs of the family.

By contrast, professionals explain **about the process** and focus on families the support of which must be approved by the Child and Youth Welfare Authority and the service itself must be connected with an official support plan procedure. By focusing on **transparency and participation**, it is seen as positive that the families must be involved in the goal agreements in these procedures that are based on the law.

The participants in the focus groups were critical in regard to the trend to involve clients insufficiently. One professional says that *"If clients have a limited intellect then the trend among professionals goes toward retaining information a bit because (they think): 'They anyway do not understand it'"*. This professional emphasizes the necessity for professionals to explain the corresponding information to the clients in an understandable manner, regardless whether the clients seem to be interested in it or not.

In addition, participants criticize that within the framework of planning the assistance, there are often **unrealistic goals** which are rather desired by society than appropriate under the actual conditions and clients' desires. One participant states: *"I must do a lot in life but whether I have to complete school is not really relevant. McDonalds needs people, too, and if these people are happy then my hamburger tastes twice as good"*. The employees of the Child and Youth Welfare Authority often lack time in order to develop individual, achievable

goals of the help together with their clients. This makes it even more important to involve the institution that provides the help into the development of the relevant goals and to "*truly check this readiness*" together with the family: "*What goals are reasonable? Which ones are unreasonable?*"

### 2.3.3 Organization of help and networking

In light of the organization of the help and the help arrangement as interaction of several assistance programs, the parents in the interviews focus on **accuracy of fit and need orientation**.

#### Professionals

The professional plays a significant part for all parents during the organization of assistance (cp. Chapter 2.1). With regard to the **personal fit** between clients and professionals, the parents mention as important aspect the **freedom to choose** in terms of the professionals with whom they work. The significance of a **continuous cooperation** is emphasized by both, the interviewed parents and the professionals. One father criticizes that the educators in one of the daycare center where his son was taken care of changed frequently "*Because five, six educators have changed.*"

Parents emphasized often how important it is **to get easily in touch** with professionals. One mother puts it in words as follows: "*A mobile phone number is needed. You need a mobile phone number of the (professional). The first one did not give me her mobile phone number. If I had an emergency, I would not have known what to do.*" In this regard, one participant in the focus groups voices her concerns: "*This is too much for me: to be always reachable. (The desire for) great availability of the social pedagogical family counselor*" and she talks about the necessity to keep drawing the lines (to the professional degree of closeness and distance, see Chapter 2.1.1).

#### Type and arrangement of assistance

Parents wish that the help arrangement **is oriented on their living environment and their family situation** (cp. Chapter 2.2.2). In this context, they often describe positive experiences. However, one mother who is in counseling finds it a problem that her small son is not sufficiently supervised during her counseling sessions. She envisions an assistance concept that considers this need and would like to have a professional "*who deals with the children so mothers have some time to breathe. Can have their session, can get into it.*"

Beyond the surveyed form of assistance, all parents have gained experience with other support beforehand. In addition, most families utilize several types of help at the same time. In this context, parents saw the surveyed type of assistance and help arrangement as positive, if these **are oriented on their need concerning concept, multiplicity, and intensity**. One father states precisely about the care facility of his child: "*They often take trips. They go to the movies, (...) now; they are hiking in the mountains. (...) Various things are done. (...) In the (care facility) everything is done (...) what the [children]*

want to do at that age. (...) The other one, it was not so dedicated like the (care facility) over there."

With the view on networking of the facilities and institutions that participated in the respective case, parents would like to have a **good, constructive and transparent cooperation**. For example, one mother answers to the interviewer's question about the cooperation of the participating facilities: "There was a help conference once a month. All professionals met and discussed for example the situation in the families. Which I found was OK. This is the only way to exchange information, the only way to learn." Another mother emphasizes the positive, transparent cooperation of the professionals with the school.

### 2.3.4 End of the support process

Many interviews clarify the sensitive process of the final phase; in particular with parents who experienced an intensive and positive support process. It is important for them, that the **support process winds down; in particular, the support relationship**. It should offer the opportunity to stay in touch with the professional in case he or she is needed in an urgent matter. As an example, the following statement of one mother is used: "I know (...) that I have even afterwards the opportunity to (...) call anytime and say: "(...) nothing works; I have to see you again." (...) Then I could do it. He mentioned that I can come by three times each year so he can see how I am doing, how (the child) is doing and I can just tell him everything. If I so desire. If I need it. (...) he is there for me. And this is what really matters to me."

For parents who take advantage of several support programs at the same time, at the end of the assistance surveyed in the interview, a **stable connection to other measures** is important: "And then I am just happy that I now have my psychologist."

If at the end of the requested support there is a transition into a new support program, then on the one hand a **smooth transition** plays a role and on the other hand the **orientation of the follow-up measure based on the actual need and conditions of the family**. In this context, one mother complains that the suggested subsequent assistance does neither meet her family needs in terms of time nor in terms of content.

### 2.3.5 Evaluation of the support process

In general, the participants in the focus group regard an evaluation of the help as meaningful. One professional says that positive experiences have contributed to this attitude and summarizes it as follows: "At first, I did not believe it but in the meantime, I like it". All participants agree that their institutions use instruments for quality assurance.

One participant reports about a treatment program that his institution carries out for men or juveniles who have sexually abused children; this program is connected with a detailed **internal and external evaluation**, which

includes the risk of recidivism. The other professionals explain internal evaluation process to which they have various comments.

In regard to the **time of evaluation**, all participants do not only believe it helpful if the result is assessed at the end of the help process but also in the interim. This allows the clients and the professionals to become aware of what has been achieved already and they can state the further goal more precisely.

None of the institutions which participate in this study carries out an evaluation some time after the assistance was completed even though they feel it is desirable. One professional phrases it as follows: *"What bothers me, is the (lack) of sustainability after the completion of the support program. In addition, when the clients are finished with our program, they are gone. (...) We do not have a thing about sustainability in terms of how is the situation five or ten years from now. And this is sad because that's where it becomes interesting"*. One of the reasons for this is the time resources according to the professionals. In addition, they believe it needs an external scientific evaluation in order to analyze whether the result is truly a consequence of the support.

To find out more about the further development of their clients, some institutions try to stay in touch with them, e.g. by inviting the clients to parties or through Facebook. However, the participants regret that they only reach the satisfied clients that way and that this is not a systematic evaluation.

In regard to the **client perspective**, one professional describes the mostly positive responses of clients - regardless of their social and cultural background - as gain of the evaluation: *"that they are interviewed, that it is taken seriously. (...) Families experience this very well"*. At another position, this participant continues by saying that families feel they are taking an active part and in addition it shows, *"what they have already accomplished"*.

The **judgement of the participants of the evaluation process practiced by their institution** depends strongly on the satisfaction with the survey instrument utilized in terms of **practicability and expressiveness**. One participant reports of a high satisfaction with a brief procedure that only includes few key questions and is used during the meetings to plan the support. Another participant describes the bad experiences she made and she believes that little scientific knowledge was incorporated in the development of the instrument.

As reservation toward an **internal evaluation, the positive and negative bias of the results** is stated if clients either would like to be nice or are angry about the institution. In this context, one participant in the focus group says this: *"from sweet talk to damnation and the truth is somewhere in between"*. In addition, questions only about satisfaction are seen as problematic: For example, the support may be good from the institution's perspective even if the parents are dissatisfied because their children are for example placed in institutional care.

## 2.4 Aspects of the support and social welfare system

### 2.4.1 Services of the support and social welfare system

In terms of a general but more important view of the support and social welfare system, one mother answers in a grateful manner that she truly values highly the **broad support programs and basic security** in Germany. *"So that I feel the state is there for me."*

The participants in the focus groups confirm that there is a refined individual support environment in Germany and in particular, in major cities. In addition, they believe it is positive that prevention was strengthened by the **expansion of Early Childhood Prevention and Intervention** over the past years.

The extent of the resources made available depends however largely on the financial strength of individual municipalities. For example, one professional explains this in regard to Munich: *"I often tell parents the following: 'You should be happy to live in a well-to-do city'"*.

It is often discussed that resources are not always used in a meaningful manner: Professionals experience that the support is only insufficiently oriented on the need of the clients. Difficult working conditions of professionals (cp. Chapter 2.4.2) and the pressure to save costs, may lead to the initiation of **cost-efficient but inadequate support**. One participant says: *"We were to provide long term support and then a part of it was taken away from us and we had to do a short term crisis intervention instead. And they stand here and say: 'You got three months.' (...) Establish a good relationship and then we can say, 'Ciao'".* She sums it up as follows: the need for long term, continuous support is repeatedly discussed, *"but the reality shows a different picture"*.

However, several parents explained how difficult it is to obtain adequate information not only in terms of their own support process (cp. Chapter 2.3) but also in general: They complain about the **insufficient information** about **respective support methods and programs** which are tailored to the need of the clients.

In this context, one mother generalizes also the problem of **waiting times** and finally the **tedious access to suitable support**: *"Yes it is a difficult road you take until you find the right one. The right place. Then to be lucky not to have so long times of waiting."*

The participants in the focus group examined from their perspective also the problem of how to find respective help not only within a timely manner but to find it at all. A professional describes it based on a family for whom the institution is looking to find follow-up support measures: *"We also do not find any follow-up support. If an early support professional is there and says: 'we have done a great job in cooperating' and mother says, 'I am also ready to accept help' and the (follow-up support) has a waiting list of six months"*. This risks a support process that thus far was successful.

The **difficulty in reaching** relevant support institutions "**outside office hours**", at a time when parents have time, is seen as a general problem: *"I find that there are (...) very little programs where you can reach somebody during the night or in the evening after I bring the children to bed. (...) There is this suicide hotline, etc. but I did not want to kill myself."*

Moreover, parents state the problem of **insufficient and incomprehensible information about governmental social benefits**. One mother describes in detail what is revealed in several parents' and professionals' statements, in particular in reference to the cooperation between parents and government offices (cp. Chapter 2.2.2): She finds the **social system as extremely complex and partially counterproductive**.

Based on her experiences, she explains with how many difficulties she has to cope in getting back to work and with what bureaucratic obstacles she has to deal. Finally, it remains unanswered whether she would not be better if she would quit her work - a responsibility she carries out with great dedication.

#### **2.4.2 Protective mandate of child and youth welfare services**

The participants in the focus groups approve that compared to some other countries, Germany does not **have an "excessive reporting system"**. It is seen as positive that on the one hand there is *"government supervision"* and control; on the other hand, there is sufficient time for a precise cooperation with the clients and in general, there is *"still discretion and mindfulness and such a variety"*.

In legal terms, the participants discuss primarily **§ 8a of the German Social Code (SGB) VIII**, which was implemented in 2005 to substantiate the protective mandate of the child and youth welfare and to regulate procedural steps in the event of suspected child endangerment. Various participants report of good experiences with the legal regulation, which provides structure and a clear framework, which can be followed in practice. It provides support in paying attention to child endangerment and to work with the parents toward accepting support.

Other participants, however, are aware of a lot of uncertainty in practice as well as an increased fear of: *"Do I do something wrong?"* This uncertainty may be rather counterproductive in establishing a helpful contact with the affected families if *"reporting spooks in their heads and in reality it is to ask for cooperation and see, 'what kind of support does this family need and what kind of help'"*.

One participant observes: *"Despite the fact that they have government mandates and are structurally very powerful"*, the employees of the Child and Youth Welfare Authority feel powerless in light of the complex evaluation questions and decisions, which they make, and the procedures, with which they must comply. It begs the question whether these procedures actually provide employees with more clarity and security as intended or whether they just generate another sense of powerlessness on part of the professionals, which

in turn is transferred onto the families. In particular, if a family needs support for several children then alone the great number of necessary meetings for the support plan and the participating professionals may generate a sense of helplessness on part of the parents.

The risk is seen that sight is lost of the actual goal namely to help as much as possible by overrating the procedural logic.

#### **2.4.3 Qualification and working conditions of professionals in the support system**

Concerning the professional education and continuing education, one participant in the focus groups reports that the professionals in her institution are well qualified by respective university degrees and additional degrees. *"At our place, I would say that 99.9 percent are all Social Pedagogues or Pedagogues with University-degree and with additional education etc. and that this helps us deal with the issues especially with our burdened clients"*.

Several participants also describe framework conditions that have done well in their institutions. For example, a sufficiently staffed place relieves the professionals of some burden, in particular in their work with high burdened families and allows continuity in cooperation with the clients if a staff member is absent.

Moreover, the participants explain that **it depends on the respective working conditions in the institutions to what extent well-educated and experienced professionals can be hired and retained in the long term**: it is easier in the outpatient area than in the inpatient area with unattractive weekend and shift work. But the participants feel that there is the greatest need for competent professionals because these children and parents are often especially burdened. One participant calls it paradoxical *"that in principle, the most difficult cases are coupled to working conditions that in turn are less attractive for professionals"*.

The participants in the focus groups that work largely at private institutions are particularly aware of **difficult working conditions in the Child and youth welfare authorities**. *"Despite all of this, there is an infinite number of highly dedicated professionals"*, finds one professional and another agrees and adds: *"I do believe so. Therefore, I highly respect them"*. However, it is also observed, that there are *"many young colleagues who are totally overburdened"*.

In this context as well, the paradoxical situation is stated that often young professionals at the entry level take on such a *"demanding job"*. One participant says, *"And such a responsibility for this kind of pay, yes?"* - for this reason, the work is little attractive for experienced, older professionals.

The participants explain that the problem with overexertion due to sick leaves; vacant positions and vacation substitutes finally lead to burnout syndrome and to the frequent change in personnel.

In particular, the overexertion of some entry-level professionals and the high fluctuation in personnel is also viewed negatively by parents. One participant tells about a mother who refused further cooperation with the Child and youth welfare authority for the following reason: *"In two years, I*

have the fifth district social worker. I am an open book. Everyone can read it and I have had it". In light of these facts, the participant states the problem that no "relationship of trust is established" and parents are frustrated.

The professionals discuss also the high administrative effort in the Child and youth welfare authorities. One participant finds that "this is incredible. This has nothing to do with social work anymore. It is nothing but administrative work", and he continues to say that public child and youth welfare "is not only crisis intervention but also preventive work". However, often there is not enough time for it. According to several participants, this lack of resources may lead to hastily hiring unsuitable aids which in turn creates unnecessary expenses (cp. Chapter 2.4.1).

Several participants emphasize however the good cooperation with the public child and youth welfare and one participant states: "My experiences with them were nearly all good and we really worked together well. There are exceptions but most of the people working at the Child and youth welfare authority are really competent. And it is always fun".

In regard to the **improvement of working conditions**, the participants wish to earn more and therefore, their profession is being appreciated (cp. Chapter 2.5.2). One participant believes that adequate pay is the condition for more professionals working together in this demanding job with highly burdened clients over a longer period of time.

In addition, the participants believe there are more financial resources necessary for continuing education and supervision. This would contribute to promoting flexibility and multiplicity by qualifying the personnel: "An ideal team is a mixture of young people, older people, men, women, and also people with various advanced training and yes, as I said, also people who are longer at one place should be a part of it. There should always be new ideas".

## 2.5 Governmental and societal aspects

At the governmental and societal level, the interviewed families are little appreciated just like the professionals who work with them.

### 2.5.1 Discrimination and stigmatization of families

In this regard, parents describe different experiences and fears. For example, one mother explains that her children felt ashamed **because of the acceptance of support**, "because this (support) has something about socially disadvantaged family and the children did not want to be seen as such."

Another mother reports that **due to her family, social and cultural background** she was insulted and disadvantaged. When looking for an apartment as a single parent without work, she was rejected again and again. Compounding the situation was the cultural background of the family which belongs to the group of Sinti and Roma.

Also professionals complain about the hostile atmosphere to which clients are exposed in some government offices for example. One professional says that *"Yes, it is the worst at the office for foreigners whenever I go there with unaccompanied refugees who are minors. If I am with them, then they are pleasant and when I sit there and observe (...), then you have to be afraid they have a baton on their back. Such is the atmosphere there."*

Another topic is the lack of service orientation at some government offices and the necessity to change the attitude toward the clients. The professionals see the partially excessive demands on part of government employees or schools but also of the parents as another cause of conflict. One participant says, *"And I would wish for this from both sides that the school or the government office would say: 'Okay, these parents come from there, so I must meet them half way.' And some parents must say at times: 'My God, the school director does not only have to deal with us but he has maybe a thousand students. We are one family. Now I must get a hold of myself a bit.' Often both get so immoderate in their expectations and demands"*.

Concerning **approaching opportunities, challenges, and conflicts constructively**, professionals deem more personnel resources in various governmental departments necessary because they see the work load of employees as one reason for the difficult communication between clients and government offices.

In addition, professionals would like good interpreters who accompany clients to offices and help them in completing forms. As example of good practice, an office in an underprivileged part of a city is described where volunteers of various nationalities provide support in completing forms.

It would be also helpful to offer workshops that teach government employees to deal with customers who are dissatisfied and who complain. Continuing education should be offered which explain problems of clients and their effects. This could improve the relationship between government offices and clients.

Chapter 2.2.2 explains as important aspect in the support process, the role of the professional as mediator between clients and government offices or schools. For the professionals to be able to assume this role successfully, they must have sufficient time for this task. On the other hand, participants in the focus groups believe that mutual respect before the respective profession is imperative. According to their experience, a good cooperation during the framework of which personal contacts can be managed contributes to increase the mutual understanding for the respective field of work.

On part of the interviewed parents, one mother reports of positive experiences, which she made in particular due to her **active effort to bridge cultures**. As described in Chapter 2.2.2, she deals intensively with her cultural identity during the support process. She develops pride and in the meantime, she holds lectures about her culture and she talks about the beginning: *"I was really surprised how many people were interested to hear our story. Yes? (...) To me it was all (...) new, wasn't it? I have never done anything like it before. I have never talked with other so in-depth about our customs, our culture and so on."*

### 2.5.2 Little recognition and a distorted image of the professional practice

The participants in the focus groups explain the paradoxical situation that especially professionals who have a particularly demanding and responsible work receive relatively low financial and little societal recognition. One participant explains: *"I believe that if more money could be earned then more people would be truly apt to work in this profession for a long time. And it would not be just a transitional position. For example, the Social Pedagogic Family Help which is really very demanding and you go to the people who no one wants to have, with whom no one wants to talk and we construct a relationship with them and I really would like to be paid for it adequately for doing what no other person in society will do. And this is what makes me mad"*. With this subject, she not only touches on the entire societal problem. She also illustrates that even within her professional group and hierarchy of the practical field, especially those who work with extremely burdened families cannot acquire respect and earn particularly little. The result is that many professionals quickly look for less stressful jobs with better pay (cp. Chapter 2.4.3).

The participants experience as additional stress and cause for offense **that the work of the social workers in child protection is portrayed wrong in the media, in particular, in TV**. One professional phrases it as follows: *"Social work should be represented in public more seriously and in a different manner"*. It requires a realistic dealing and illustration of *"what social work is like in the field"*.

### 2.5.3 Societal causes of problems

The participants point out that an individualized viewpoint of the clients alone is insufficient. Fundamental problems of families such as bad living conditions, poverty, precarious working conditions, or unemployment are also caused by society. They not only generate a sense of powerlessness in clients as one professional says, *"I believe that one issue is very important which we deal with for example in Early Childhood Prevention and Intervention, where I can say: 'Well integrated, well accepted. We can do something about the topic relationship but you have to stay at your one-room apartment that is infested with mold. That's it!' Therefore, the topic of helplessness is often reflected at the societal level. And this is just normal, if I focus the entire problem situation only on the failure of this family and not also as this societal problem lurking in the background"*. In terms of some problem situations of the families, there is a lack of further organizational leeways in the actual cooperation with them and social work reaches quickly its limits. The professionals explain that particularly societal problems require political solutions.

### 3 Conclusions

The majority of the interviewed parents are very happy with the support they received. Professionals who participated in the focus groups believe the result is caused by the positive bias of the sample: They state as possible reasons that on the one hand professionals rather ask parents to take part in a study about the sensitive topic "violence" with whom they have a good working relation; on the other hand, parents who have a good relationship with the professionals are rather apt to participate in such a study. Moreover, it is not easy to reach families after the assistance has ended if there were difficulties along the course of the support. The professionals would have found it interesting if more dissatisfied parents or parents hard to reach would have participated in the survey.

#### 3.1 Significance of professionals in the support process

In all interviews, the **support relationship of professionals and parents take a key position**. The parents render positive descriptions about the cooperation with professionals who they experience as competent and moreover, e.g. as fitting in regard to age and gender. The professionals agree with the parents' statements. In addition, they point out how demanding a helpful cooperation is specifically with extremely burdened families which are affected by difficult relationship dynamics.

#### 3.2 Topics and methods applied in the support process

The interviews suggest that the parents view a sustainable support relationship also as a significant aspect in the support process because otherwise the basis for acceptance of help, for constructive cooperation and therefore for positive development processes would be missing. In this context, parents say **that they should experience professionals and the institution in a superordinated sense as trustworthy in order for them to engage in the support process**. In this context, several parents and professionals talk about the importance of a trustworthy, transparent dealing with the opposing forces of help and control.

In terms of what parents expect from the support, they generally desire to be able to **process their own individual problems** and they report of positive experiences if the contents and methods of the **support are oriented on their need or the need of the family**. In this context, nearly all parents

state as helpful and a relief the **practical support in every day requirements and precise instructions for raising children**. With the perspective on the day-to-day practical support, several parents state explicitly one component of help that is significant for them: the mediation between various social and cultural worlds. In the focus groups, the professionals confirm that an important task is their mediating role at government offices and at school because of language barriers, uncertainties, misunderstandings and power relations. Parents say the support was successful, if they experience it in the sense of **empowerment** as help for self-help: it does not matter, whether it is dealing with institutions, taking care of the household, taking care and raising children or developing interests and implementing future perspectives and the participation in society if they e.g. could establish themselves professionally.

### 3.3 Framework conditions, organization of the support, networking and evaluation

➤ **Support access:** Parents who were looking for support describe **the path to suitable support as tedious**. A lack of relevant information and long waiting lists are seen as hindrances. In addition, working parents complain that the institutions can barely be reached outside office hours. Criteria which were important to parents when getting support where the reputation of the institution and the professionals, the spatial proximity and the friendliness of employees.

➤ **Goals of support:** The parents explain in regard to the problem, what goals they are trying to accomplish in light of the precise difficulties, conflicts, and needs of the family. By contrast, professionals explain about the process and focus on families the support of which must be approved by the Child and Youth Welfare Authority and the service itself must be connected with an official support plan procedure. When focusing on **transparency and participation**, it is seen as positive that the families must be involved in the goal agreements in these procedures that are based on the law. Professionals were critical in regard to the trend to involve clients insufficiently. In addition, they criticize that within the framework of planning the assistance, there are often **unrealistic goals** which are rather desired by society than appropriate under the actual conditions and clients' desires.

➤ **Organization of the support and support arrangement** as interaction of several support programs: In terms of organization, variety, and intensity, the parents focus on the **perfect fit and orientation on the need** of their family situation, living environment and their individual needs. It is particularly important for them to have professionals that are suitable for them or their family and with whom they can work continuously.

➤ **Networking:** Parents experience as positive a **constructive and transparent** relationship with the facilities and institutions that are involved with the case.

➤ **Completion of support:** Particularly after an intensive support process, parents believe it is important that the **support ends gradually** and in particular, the support relationship. In the event that they take advantage of several support programs at the same time, they receive support after the surveyed program has ended **by connecting them with other measures**. If at the end of the support there is a transition into a new support program, then on the one hand a **smooth transition** plays a role and on the other hand the orientation of the follow-up measure based on the actual need and requirements of the family.

➤ **Evaluation of the support process:** The participants in the focus groups believe that it generally makes sense to evaluate the support programs and they describe the positive response of their clients who feel they are taken seriously by it. All agree that their institutions use instruments for quality assurance. This is mostly an **internal evaluation at the end or also during the support process** to realize what all has been accomplished by the support program and to specify the further goal. The professionals miss an evaluation sometime after the completion of the support but it is not possible because of insufficient resources.

How professionals assess the evaluation processes in their institution depends primarily on how satisfied they are with the survey instrument in terms of **practicability and the significance of the statements**. They fear that the results are not sufficiently objective in an internal evaluation.

### 3.4 Aspects of the support and social welfare system

➤ **Services of the support and social system:** Parents and professionals value the **broad, differentiated** offer of support and the basic security in Germany. However, professionals criticize that the **adequate support measures for burdened families are rare** and oftentimes, there is a lack of funding.

Parents miss comprehensible information in the support and social system. Dealing with social services is often found as **complex and partially contra-productive**, if the road to employment is connected with bureaucratic hurdles and disadvantages.

➤ **Protective mandate of Child and Youth Welfare Services:** The professionals discuss primarily **§ 8a of the German Social Code (SGB) Book VIII**, which was implemented in 2005 to substantiate the protective mandate of the child and youth welfare and to regulate procedural steps in the event of suspected child endangerment. They judge the legal innovations as

positive because they set a **clear framework** which can be fulfilled in the practice. In the implementation, however, they see on the one hand increasingly the fear of professionals to make procedural mistakes which can hamper the supportive relationship with clients. On the other hand, they also see the risk to lose sight of the primary goal to help as best possible through **overrating of the procedural logic**.

➤ **Qualification and working conditions of professionals in the support system:** The professionals explain that it depends on the **respective working conditions in the institutions** to what extent trained and experienced professionals can be hired and maintained in the long term. They find **paradoxical** that especially professionals, who fulfill demanding, responsible, and burdensome work, receive relatively little financial and societal recognition. This concerns e.g. inpatient institutions with unattractive weekend and shift work or Child and Youth Welfare Authorities.

### 3.5 Governmental and societal aspects

➤ The low societal valuation is shown moreover in light of the clients. Several parents report of discrimination and stigmatization in schools and government offices due to their family, social, and cultural background. The professionals confirm the problem and wish for more **personnel resources** e.g. in form of interpreters but also a more **respectful attitude** of all involved and a **better cooperation** between professions.

➤ **Societal causes of problems:** The professionals point out that an individualized viewpoint of the clients alone is insufficient. Fundamental problems of families such as bad living conditions, poverty, precarious working conditions, or unemployment are also caused by society. In this regard, social work arrives at its limits.

## Vignette A – Physical Abuse

Composition: middle-class family: 2 parents with a 4-year-old daughter and an 8-year-old son.

There is a lot of stress because the father has a high risk of losing his job as an engineer caused by the current crisis. The mother (nurse) is getting depressed of the situation. The sport coach sees injuries and remarks that the 8-year-old son is withdrawn. The boy tells him for the second time that there are episodes of violence within the family towards him. His sister is treated as a princess. His mother is the offender.

The participants agree that in the case described it is absolutely necessary to assess the need for assistance no matter if the boy's statements are true.

### Possible reactions of the people involved

They describe several scenarios of how the soccer coach acts upon the boy's report:

He immediately reports to the child and youth welfare authority or contacts a counseling service specialized in child protection. A special youth police officer could also be someone to turn to. These police officers are present in the social environment of youngsters e.g. at school, in sports clubs and discos.

Alternatively the coach could recommend the boy to turn to the social worker at school. Moreover the participants consider it also as likely that the mother contacts a counseling service herself because the situation troubles her and she finds it "terrible" that she hits her son.

### Possible further developments of the case

If the coach informs the child and youth welfare authority directly, they contact the parents, assess the endangerment of the child and offer an appropriate assistance service if necessary e.g. family counseling or social pedagogical family help. In this process they could involve the clearing institution of a private provider.

Some participants however think that the coach would be reluctant to inform the child and youth welfare authority.

If he turns to a counseling service specialized in child protection, the professional discusses with the coach if he is able to encourage the parents to contact the counseling service. In this case he is guided by the professional how to address the topic with the parents. Possibly the coach has ambivalent feelings at first: *"I am worried about the boy."* versus *"Will I offend the family by addressing the topic?"*

It is also likely that the coach refuses to talk to the parents himself and only wants to report the case to the counseling service. In this instance the professional writes a letter to the parents inviting them to a counseling session/confidential talk.

If the parents accept this offer, it is important to address their burdens and build on their capabilities to convince them to accept assistance. In the focus group it was not specifically mentioned that in significant indications of child endangerment, the risk of endangerment must be evaluated and in case of an endangerment attempts should be made that necessary assistance is accepted. If an institution finds out about a child endangerment and there are no sufficient aids available or the parents refuse the necessary help, then the child and youth welfare authority must be called upon.

In case the parents do not accept the invitation of the counseling service, which is a voluntary offer, the professional will continue to observe and assess the situation. If the parents are not willing to cooperate even if there are signs of child endangerment, the professional informs the child and youth welfare authority, who can ultimately also intervene against the parents' will.

If the coach contacts a special youth police officer he or she could talk to the boy and cautiously ask him if he needs help.

### **Obstacles and improvement**

The participants point out that the coach probably does not know that there are institutions like specialist counseling services and consults his wife. Thereupon he tells the parents his observation that their son does not play soccer as well as he used to and seems withdrawn. The coach would probably not dare to address the parents about the abuse. If he did, what some participants consider realistic, they would be likely to deny and not allow their son to attend the training anymore. Then the question would be whether the coach resigns or reports to the child and youth welfare authority.

The fact that the victim is a boy and comes from a middle class family makes it more likely in the participants' view that this case will not reach the child protection system at all.

When a middle class family is concerned the coach would ignore the problem for a longer period of time, being afraid that the family would hire a lawyer and sue him for false allegations.

After the local child and youth welfare authority has been informed, nothing happens in some districts due to lack of staff because of vacancies, the participants report. If some employees are ill additionally, the remaining ones are close to burn-out. Under such conditions the child and youth welfare authority would only act after several reports on this family.

An important precondition to improve the protection of children is that the soccer coach is informed about who he can turn to when he notices signs of child endangerment. For sports clubs it is especially important to have the possibility to report or get advice anonymously (i.e. without giving their name). Moreover it is important that there are institutions a coach can turn to easily and that do not start a process of interventions before he had time to figure out whether and how he can speak to the parents himself.

## **Vignette B – Neglect**

Composition: single-parent family. The mother is divorced. She has two girls of 8 and 4 year old and there's also a dog. The mother had a low IQ, a low income and lacks a social network.

The neighbour detects that the mother leaves the two children unsupervised for longer periods on long working days. She observed that the 8-year-old girl takes a lot of responsibility: she's making dinner at home and brings her younger sister to school.

With regard to vignette B possible reactions of the neighbour and the nursery school are discussed.

### **Possible reactions of the people involved**

As a reaction that is both likely and considered positive the focus group participants describe a solution beyond professional assistance: The neighbour offers the mother her support and helps her e.g. by looking after the children and preparing dinner for them.

The neighbour contacting the child and youth welfare authority is also described as a probable reaction. The latter get in touch with the mother and assess the need for support possibly also making a home visit.

Participants also assume that this could be a family already known to the child and youth welfare authorities.

The reaction of the nursery school depends on how well the staff is in touch with the mother and whether she has informed them that the girl will be brought in by her older sister the participants think. In any case the nursery school is obliged to talk to the mother to assess if the situation is problematic for the children.

### **Possible further developments of the case**

Provided that the neighbour knows any assistance services probably out of her own experience she brings the mother in contact with a service provider. The staff of this provider assess the need for support and offer suitable assistance. Examples of assistance services mentioned are counseling, checking if the neighbour is able to help, finding sports and leisure activities for the girls, offering a volunteer family helper up to providing social pedagogical family help.

### **Obstacles and improvement**

In one focus group the assumption is made that in the family context described in the vignette the child and youth welfare authorities would treat the mother with a lot more suspicion and scepticism than the middle class family of vignette A. At the extreme this could mean that professionals of the child and youth welfare authorities would think it best to appoint a

guardian for the mother and take the children out of the family.

One professional points out that such a case might not attract any attention in a socially deprived neighbourhood.

How well nursery school teachers are trained in talking to parents and assessing child endangerment varies from nursery school to nursery school according to the participants experiences. It is important that nursery schools have a child protection concept and the teachers work in close collaboration with a child protection expert. They need assurance on how to react to signs of child endangerment and how to address these towards parents. If this is not the case experience shows they rather leave the assessment of the situation to the child and youth welfare authority.

## **Vignette C – Sexual Abuse**

Composition: middle class mother and stepfather having 1 daughter (15 years old) and 1 son out of a former relationship and together they have 1 daughter (11 years old). The teacher of the oldest daughter suspects sexual abuse by the stepfather. The girl told this to a friend and the friend told it to the teacher. It maybe explains her low school achievement and the changing of her behaviour.

### **Possible reactions of the people involved**

The focus group participants agree that due to the information he has, the teacher is definitely obliged to act. As a first step he could turn to the school social worker/ psychologist or the headmaster. He could also ask an external counseling service specialized in the topic of sexual abuse for advice. Another option would be to talk to the friend of the abused girl to find out whether she could persuade the girl to go to the school psychologist or a shelter. The teacher could also speak to the girl himself. It is also likely that the teacher or the headmaster immediately informs the child and youth welfare authority.

In the experience of the participants especially teenage girls look for assistance services themselves. They search the internet, use online chat counseling, call a telephone hotline for children and adolescents, go to a shelter or confide in a doctor.

A likely reaction would also be that the friend takes the abused girl home with her, tells her mother about her distress, who then calls a counseling service.

### **Possible further developments of the case**

A possible positive handling of the case would be that the professional slowly builds up a relationship of trust with the girl, asking her about her wishes and developing a further course of action that seems promising. It is important that in this process the professional respects the girl's pace without making false promises. This means that the professional might have to pass on information against the girl's will to ensure her protection.

A negative development of the case that the participants describe as common would be that in spite of the sexual abuse the suspicion of child endangerment cannot be proven. Sometimes all professionals involved suspect that there is sexual abuse but the child will not talk about it. The participants point out that in this event it is important to clearly signal the child that it can always turn to the professional also accompanied by a person it trusts. Cases like these leave the professionals with a "bad feeling". Another negative development would be that the teacher informs the child and youth welfare authority that in turn speak immediately to the suspected perpetrator. Upon that the girl denies the sexual abuse and the professionals do not see any further possibilities to act.

## **Obstacles and improvement**

The participants agree that the problem of child sexual abuse causes much fear and uncertainty and each professional has a different personal relation to this topic.

This is one reason why the child and youth welfare authorities' handling of child sexual abuse cases strongly differs between their employees even though there is a specialized sexual abuse unit. The participants describe a range of reactions from a very cautious proceeding up to an immediate massive intervention. One participant words the impression that suspicions of sexual abuse are taken less seriously in rural areas and that they are downplayed in general if the victim is a boy.

The consequences of the professionals' actions can be extreme for the people involved. In this context it is discussed that solely by expressing a false suspicion of sexual abuse a family can be destroyed. On the other hand it happens that the abused child is taken out of the family while the rest of the family goes on living as before. One participant describes a case illustrating that some schools are not fully aware of their legal obligations to protect children. Furthermore there is a great fear of being sued for libel.

To improve the handling of such cases the participants suggest more training and more easily accessible counseling services for school teachers. In the wake of the new federal child protection law the participants hope for an increased willingness of schools to cooperate with child and youth welfare services beyond the collaboration in individual cases.



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