

Focusing on the child:
Creating a child-centered family policy that
ensures education and participation for all

Positions from the project
Family and Education: Creating Child-Centered Policies



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This paper was written in cooperation with the project's expert advisory panel which focuses on family policy and its impact on children's living conditions in Germany. It summarizes the findings and issues we will continue to collaborate on in the future. The panel's members are:

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The family is the primary environment children grow up in – regardless of the many forms that family might take. Together with high-quality educational facilities and social and living environments, the family plays a key role in providing all children with learning opportunities and the chance to participate in society and in life. As the place that provides children with their first social encounters and interactions, the family makes a valuable contribution to society as a whole. Family is where people live and learn from each other, all day long, regardless of the activity involved. At the same time, children, mothers and fathers today face new and greater challenges. Their daily activities and their lives together have changed in recent years – a situation for which policymakers have yet to develop appropriate responses. Policymakers have to incorporate the growing diversity that characterizes families today into their policies. Instead, it seems they have lost sight of the children themselves, their wellbeing and their opportunities for social participation.

When it comes to family policy, a paradigm shift is needed: Family policy must acknowledge the realities families now face; to that end, it must be fundamentally reconsidered – and always from the perspective of the children themselves. Such a family policy cannot be based on preconceived ideas of family life, but must put the focus on the child, checking each policymaking measure in terms of how it impacts children and their needs. It is therefore educational and social policy as well. It must provide the freedom that allows families a self-determined life; it must also support and strengthen families based on their individual needs. Family policy must establish the political and legal framework needed to effectively combat child and family poverty. Creating a child-centered family policy necessarily means continuing to increase the number of high-quality educational institutions; it also means taking responsibility, together with parents, for how children grow up. After all, families require need-based infrastructure and support that can help them tackle the challenges they face in everyday life.

Creating a child-centered family policy of this sort requires research and evidence. It demands clear (normative) foundations that ensure society's future will be supportive of children and families. Moreover, it is imperative that the goals – and the methods used for achieving these goals – are critically reassessed on an ongoing basis. A family policy that is evidence-informed and self-reflective incorporates findings from a range of disciplines and research areas; it also recognizes proven results in order to evaluate the steps taken and, if necessary, head in new directions.



Putting the focus on the rights and needs of children

1. Acknowledge that children have their own rights. Children are not “little adults.” They are independent individuals whose rights and need for protection must be recognized and upheld by our legal systems. As a rule, children are treated within tax and social welfare systems, and within social legislation, as “appendages” of their parents (who might be gainfully employed or themselves in need), and any subsidy they receive is therefore usually dependent on their parents’ status. They themselves are not addressed within the relevant laws as independent persons. The need that children have for quality educational opportunities and for participating in society is thus insufficiently acknowledged and met. Creating a child-centered family policy therefore means developing social legislation meant specifically for children, legislation that clearly consolidates all social welfare benefits for children by revising existing measures and replacing them where necessary. Social legislation of this sort recognizes children as having their own rights and adequately takes their age-related needs into account.

2. Take children seriously as the ones who set the pace. In recent years, family policy in Germany has focused first and foremost on achieving a better work-life balance, i.e. making it easier for parents to reconcile professional and personal responsibilities. This is an important issue for families, since the employment situation of both mothers and fathers has a considerable impact on everyday family life, as do the structures and cultures present in business organizations and on the job market. At the same time, family policy measures tend to reflect the interests and (financial) responsibilities of adults – mothers, fathers, employers, etc. – and only to a lesser extent what children need and want. It is important for children to have regularly scheduled time with their mothers and fathers, as well as unstructured time they can spontaneously spend by themselves or with family and friends. A child-centered family policy must recognize these needs and interests and consider them when establishing the

background conditions that affect families. This necessarily leads to tension between the time schedules that parents “bring home” with them from work and those required by children. A contemporary family policy sheds light on these conflicts and develops solutions that can reconcile what children require and want with the needs and desires of adults. As more high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) facilities and all-day schools are established in Germany, consideration must be given to the need children have for determining how they spend their time and possibilities created for accommodating it. In the working world, it must be possible for both mothers and fathers to take time off or reduce the number of hours they work without compromising their future careers. To that end, more must be done to develop “family work schedules” and options for flexibly adjusting working times to meet individual needs. After all, raising children, caring for them and being together as a family all require time and are of critical importance to society.

3. Support children through policies that are intergenerationally just. Putting the focus on children means making sure they are heard here and now as an autonomous group within society. Including children in efforts to shape society, getting them involved, taking them seriously, giving them responsibility – that is what lays the foundation for a vibrant democracy. In an ageing society, it also ensures policies that are intergenerationally just. A family policy that is intergenerationally just and child-centered invests sufficiently and effectively in children. It also includes a “sustainability check” for every planned reform and law, so that burdens and debts are not thoughtlessly passed along to the next generation.

4. Eliminate disadvantages for children and families – anchor sustainability and justice for families in social welfare systems.

Germany's pay-as-you-go social insurance systems have a fundamental design flaw: Without children there will be no one in the future to pay for the pensions and growing healthcare costs, among other expenditures, of today's adults. In addition to contributing to these systems today, parents play the key role in ensuring the systems' future viability by investing time, money and energy in raising their children. Yet this contribution is insufficiently acknowledged. Anyone who raises children should be subject to fewer financial obligations, not more; after all, not only must their income suffice for their own needs, it must cover the needs of their children as well. At the same time, the system cannot place even greater future burdens on today's children. A reform that remedies this structural flaw would also increase sustainability and the level of intergenerational justice while making things fairer for families. Possible solutions include contributions to social welfare systems that are determined with the needs of families in mind, and the introduction of a "child pension". This would allow more families to live from the money they earn and children would be less at risk of growing up in poverty.

5. Ensure a socially inclusive minimum standard of living for all children.

Children have the right to a humane, minimum standard of living that makes it possible for them to participate in society. As research has shown, poverty is the factor that places children at greatest risk when it comes to being deprived of educational opportunities and the chance for social participation. Nonetheless, one child in four in Germany grows up in poverty. The measures designed to prevent child poverty or to ensure a minimum level of support for children are inadequate or do not reach those children who need help most. The current method used in Germany's social legislation and child-support laws for calculating the minimum standard of living looks first and foremost at the relevant adults or the entire household, thereby insufficiently considering children's needs.

A child-centered family policy must develop a new approach to providing children with a socially inclusive minimum standard of living. Such an approach must be based on studies of when social participation is possible in all its forms, and what childhood today entails, i.e. which financial resources are necessary and what kinds of access children require to education, healthcare, leisure-time activities and their peers, not to mention the need children have for determining how their time is spent and for receiving attention from others. Based on this framework, a transparent policymaking objective must then be defined stating which living conditions should be made available to all children in society. This minimum standard of living must be ensured for each and every child. If this is to happen, tax and child-support laws must be revised. In addition, social legislation for children must be created (see point 1 above) that addresses children's needs first and foremost and that pools and reforms all child-related benefits.

Other family-policy measures must be discontinued and used to fund the relevant changes. This would mean doing away with the confusing method used in Germany to combine the financial allowance parents receive on behalf of their children and the tax reductions granted for dependent minors; with the highly bureaucratic educational and social benefits children in need are entitled to; and with the supplemental child allowance given to families in need. Germany's method of combining the income of both spouses for tax purposes must also be reexamined. The allowance given to parents who do not send their child to a public ECEC facility must also be discontinued. In addition, the allowance provided to parents who leave work to care for a newborn child, which tends to be higher for people who earn more, must be reexamined and restructured in a more socially just manner. This would make it possible to reduce the currently confusing number of family policy benefits, which have, in sum, not been effective in eliminating child poverty. Ensuring all children have a socially inclusive minimum standard of living will require redistributing

financial resources. From the point of view of the children themselves and their chance to take part in society, this would be an effective investment in society's future.

6. Guarantee rapid, targeted support for families at risk of poverty.

In Germany, children in single-parent households are five times more likely to depend on base-level social welfare benefits than children being raised by two parents. Half of all children living in families receiving social welfare benefits are being raised by a single parent. The country's current family policy is strongly oriented toward traditional definitions of the family, instead of considering the situation from the child's perspective and offering all children, regardless of the form their family takes, financial security as well as high-quality educational opportunities and a real chance to participate. To provide targeted services to single-parent families as quickly as possible, the country's social legislation should be written in a way that ensures children entitled to child maintenance actually receive it. The current age limit of 12 years must be abolished for children entitled to receive advance payment of child maintenance, as must the time limit of six years. In terms of tax law, the needs of single parents must be given greater consideration by increasing the amount they are allowed to exclude from their yearly tax income. The supplemental allowance for children in need or a new policy instrument – such as the socially inclusive minimum standard of living described above – must be designed in a way that makes it easier for single parents to receive the allowance, and more often than is currently the case. In contrast, the much discussed increases in the child allowance are ineffective, since they are added entirely to social welfare benefits and therefore do not reach precisely those children who need them most. Finally, employment agencies should be discouraged from placing single parents primarily in low paying part-time jobs, but should assist them in making the transition to long-term gainful employment instead.

In addition to single-parent families, special attention must be given to other types of families in which children face an above-average risk of growing up in poverty. In particular, these include families with three or more children and families of non-native heritage. In sum, child-centered policies should begin by focusing on the diverse lives of children today and should make it possible for all children to develop and grow to their full potential, regardless of their family environment.



7. Proactively increase the number of high-quality educational institutions. Quality ECEC facilities and (all-day) schools are indispensable for providing all children and adolescents with equitable educational opportunities and the chance to participate, as is access to vocational training, higher education and professional development. More must therefore be done to increase the number of high-quality educational institutions throughout Germany. At-risk children in particular need better, reliable access to excellent educational offerings. After all, current research shows they face greater disadvantages compared to children from families that have more resources at their disposal, a situation that results, in turn, in even greater social inequality. Solutions must therefore be developed on the social-environment level so that precisely those institutions receive support that serve greater numbers of at-risk children. Finally, as more high-quality educational institutions are established, taking the child's perspective also means planning for and supporting the freedom children need to periodically determine the activities they engage in.

8. Acknowledge and honor families, empower them to act and design solutions for the long term. Numerous studies have shown that almost all parents strive to provide their children with the things they need to grow and develop as they should. Yet the public frequently views at-risk children and their mothers and fathers as being deficient – as do teachers, practitioners and other actors working in educational institutions and local-level support systems. The reason for this is often the image many people have of what it means to be a “good parent” or have a “good childhood,” an image based on middle-class life and one that at-risk families often do not immediately reflect. By adopting a more considered attitude and being aware of their own prejudices, teachers and practitioners can play a significant role in ensuring that parents are more often appreciated and respected as experts on the subject of their own children, as well as their specific life circumstances and their life choices.

This attitude should be emphasized during training, both initial training and ongoing (team) training; it also means sufficient work time must be set aside to reflect on the relevant issues. This is a key step toward giving families the counseling and support they need in light of the multifaceted problems they often have. After all, what matters most is providing parents and children with effective support, helping them to help themselves and offering them viable prospects for the future, so that they experience themselves as empowered and able to take effective action.

Moreover, any supporting measures should be sustainable and designed for the long term; if possible, they should be based on proven practices. This is the only way to provide families with reliable structures that allow them to gain confidence and trust. Local-level support systems must be tailored to meet the needs of families in each social environment and must offer targeted assistance: They must be integrated and networked, while making effective use of – and increasing – the potential offered by civil society, i.e. neighborhood organizations and other community groups (see the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s Civil Society program).

9. Strike a better balance between public and private responsibilities in children’s lives – do more to integrate family life and ECEC/school.

Educational institutions play a greater role in children’s lives as they are growing up than was the case in the past. Children begin attending ECEC facilities at an earlier age than they once did and spend more time there and at school. This exposes them to important new experiences in terms of their learning and development. At the same time, it is most often the parents – mothers, in particular – who are seen as responsible for their children’s success in school and educational biographies. Parents are now confronted with more demanding challenges, for example in terms of selecting educational institutions and communicating with teachers and practitioners. Within institutions, moreover, there has been an increase

in the types of tasks that must be addressed (language promotion, documentation, interacting with parents, etc.), which puts even greater pressure on the professionals working there.

In light of these changes, there must be better integration of family life and ECEC/school if educational barriers are to be overcome and educational disadvantages reduced, especially for at-risk children. Schools and ECEC facilities must become social venues for all children – and for their mothers and fathers as well. That means they must be welcome there regardless of their individual resources and family background, and they must be heard, informed and included. For this to happen, the different attitudes, positions and interests of educators, parents and, above all, children must be acknowledged and considered.

Simply calling for parents and educators to “cooperate as equals” is insufficient, since it does not account for existing structures, roles and levels of empowerment. It also turns children into the “objects” of this cooperation, instead of focusing on what they want and their wellbeing. It is therefore necessary to first take a closer look at the roles and perspectives of children, educators, mothers and fathers, before subsequently creating the policymaking, legal and structural conditions that are needed to better integrate all the environments children experience as they develop and grow.



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