

# FAMILY SUPPORT AND FAMILY EDUCATION IN GERMANY AND EUROPE

## Diversity of families - diversity of support

Prof. Dr. Ute Straub

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This article briefly outlines the situation of families in Europe and how family values have been discussed in Germany over the past years. Due to a growing insecurity among parents about education, a number of approaches, mainly in the field of family-education has been developed, some of which are sketched below. The focus lays on Family Group Conference, a programme that gives the responsibility for children back to the family.

### **Situation of families in Europe**

The following figures just show the mean situation in the 25 states that currently belong to the extended European Union (EU25 ). Of course there are differences according to family policy, working and living conditions, social welfare, traditions etc. between such countries as Spain and Poland, Sweden and Italy. But there are comprehensive tendencies that show a general change in post modern Europe especially concerning demographic changes: fewer children, more old people ("aging society"), an increasing number of single parents, divorces and patchwork families and many fewer extended families. This of course affects the ways of the upbringing and education of children. In 2005 according to eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, 67% of the EU25-households were childless. In 16% there is one child living, two children can be found in 13% of the households and three and more in just 4%. One third of the children are born out of marriage and single parent households amount to 13%. Extended households, where relatives (usually older) live together with a couple and children form a small group of only 3%. The rate of divorces varies between over 30% in some countries (among those Germany) and around only one percent (eurostat 2006).

In Germany as probably elsewhere, the attention given to families varies according to the societal situation and the *Zeitgeist*. Currently families are held in high esteem after various pro- and anti-family-cycles. You will no longer notice the traces of the discussion about the failures of bourgeois families in the context of the students' and feminists' movement, nor about the predicted "death of the family" or at least about its loss of function in the 1970s (Meyer 1993, p. 213-21). Partly due to the above mentioned demographic changes "family"

has got a new splendour. In contrast to former attitudes no one denies that a "standard family" has never existed and that the "postfamilial family" (Beck-Gernsheim 1994) can be looked at only as "a diversity of families". At the same time it becomes obvious that many parents do not or no longer know how to implement or maintain a "successful family life". Traditional patriarchal and mother-focussed education has given way to "families of negotiation" where roles between the generations often become diffuse. Mutual education in peer group outdoes family values. A lack of role models for the sensitive balance between partnership and authority between parents and children further contributes to a widespread helplessness. Among middleclass families the phenomenon of materially spoiled but emotionally neglected children increases. The TV-show Super-Nanny is a comparatively harmless example of how this problem is taken up in the media. More distressing are the many reports about neglected, mistreated or even murdered children often with context of (lone) mothers being asked too much. Social policy and social work have resulted consequences as expressed for example in the subtitle of the 7<sup>th</sup> German National Family Report : "Perspectives for a life time oriented Family Policy" (BMFSJ 2006). An important paradigm change is that the dimension of "*Bildung*"<sup>i</sup> is ascribed to the tasks of families according to the 12<sup>th</sup> National Report on Children and Youth: "Families have to be acknowledged as a fundamental and meaningful place to implement the willingness and capacity for lifelong learning in children, but they are also the place where differences in *Bildung* come into being that will have a lifelong effect" (BMFSFJ 2005, p. 28).

## **2. Do parents need education?**

The dictum of Adorno on the "education of the educators" (Adorno 1971, p. 25) might often be misused, but relating it to the current discussion about the competence in education of parents it becomes again highly up-to-date. The education of parents, although only recently brought back into public view, has a long tradition in Germany (on which country I will focus in this section). The approach of Friedrich Fröbel (1782-1852), the founder of the Kindergarden, understood those as institutions to educate also the parents, and this is exemplary again for the redesign of the Kindergarden-system in Germany nowadays. In the beginning of industrialisation in Germany around 1840, the first approaches to influence family life started with "*Bildung* for Mothers" in order to teach them correct diet, hygiene, und education-skills to fight neglect and high mortality rates among children. In 1969 a new term, "Family-*Bildung*" was chosen according to the insight that family life is designed by all family members (vgl. Familienwissenschaftliche Forschungsstelle 2003, pp. 22/ 23). In the frame of

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<sup>i</sup> A definition of a "normal" family had been consensus in the 1950s and 1960s in Germany, that is why the families after that period are called "postfamilial families".

Youth Welfare little attention was paid to programmes of *Family-Bildung* although collaborative approaches and the “principle of participation” of families are crucial to the German Children and Youth Welfare Act of 1972 and could have been easily implemented in this field. Things changed in November 2000 when a new law was issued that bans a “degrading and violent” education of children. This amendment was accompanied by a nationwide information campaign with titles like “More Respect for Children” or “My Child is Unbeatable”. In this context an abundance of courses and programmes for “*Family-Bildung*” were started meeting the needs of an increasing number of help-seeking parents. The consequence is a really dense jungle of services and programmes, which often rather confuse than help. Problems are that these courses often are difficult to distinguish, that they are not interlinked but isolated, that they are not based on one another and are not offered continuously following the phases of the family’s biography. Besides they often take place in a setting far from the everyday life of families. Another difficulty is the access to the target group, the key word being “prevention dilemma”. This means that those who are the most in need of support, are those who can least be reached. Often the programmes are oriented on conversation-oriented und thus rather more accessible to well educated middle class families accustomed to expressing themselves than socially deprived ones. Another target group which is hardly reached are fathers (see Landesstiftung Baden-Württemberg 2006, p.12; Tschöpe-Scheffler 2005, p. 13).

According to the experts of the latest National Report on Children and Youth the consequence would be that - if “*Family-Bildung*” is to become something “given” in Germany - there have to be low threshold programmes, that allow parents not to be taught by experts of education but to be accepted as experts on their children themselves and to open possibilities where parents can counsel each other. To especially reach disadvantaged parents it is advantageous to approach them in their own everyday life situation and relationships instead of expecting them to become active by themselves and to attend programmes in settings they are not accustomed to (BMFSFJ 2005, p.173).

Therefore those programmes are highly effective that coordinate several forms of support programmes, in Germany usually on the level of the community.

There is for example a “*Family-Bildung-construction-set*” in some communities (vgl. Dokumentation ElternLernwelt Essen 2005, pp. 15-18). The goal is to get sufficient transparency of information for the parents but also to provide those services locally near by. A made-to-measure support programme for the individual family and their special needs also includes an unbureaucratic transition between those programmes to guarantee the

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<sup>ii</sup> *Bildung* is a German term mostly translated by education. But while education focuses on purposeful influences from outside, *Bildung* means a concept of selfeducation, of the processes and results of an individual acquisition of culture

continuous support for a family over several phases of the family biography and ages of the children.

### **3. Approaches**

Part of the new “*Family-Bildung*” programmes are courses for parents or parents and children. Their theoretical basis varies from developmental psychology, communication theory and behavioural theory but all of them mainly concentrate on strengthening the parental competence and focus on prevention. The aim is to support those attitudes and behaviours that tend to stimulate the development of children. A trained perception of their own behavioural patterns is thought to lead to self-reflection, helping parents to recognize conflict potential areas of conflict or to cope with already critical situations. Success in de-escalating critical situations may lead to an increase of self-confidence and self-control (see Tschöpe-Scheffler 2003, p. 11).

#### **3.1. Marte Meo and VHT (Video Home Training)**

Both programmes are video supported. The foundation for the intervention of the Video-Home-Trainers, who do home visits once a week taking sequences of daily situations (e.g. children come home from school - what interaction is going on?) is “reality testing”, that means that counselling the parents is based on what can be “proved” by the video. One week later the sequence will be analysed together with the parents. The video sequence works as a “behavioural microscope”, being analysed in all details. It is crucial that only those parts are chosen which show a successful interaction. Reinforcing positive communication is more encouraging than talking about problems. Thus the credo is: Gaining strength through own success and creating an upward movement in the parent-children-interaction. This programme runs for six to ten units.

#### **3.2. Triple P (Positive Parenting Programme) and STEP (Systematic training for Effective Parenting)**

These are training programmes constructed as step-by-step courses for parents only. In difference to the above mentioned programmes they take place outside the homes and are conceived as a group activity to promote the exchange of experiences. Inputs by the course leader, which are oriented on special material, are supplemented by practice trainings, sometimes in role plays. The goal is to help parents develop “education strategies” that can be repeatedly used in situations with critical potentials such as doing homework, turning off TV or going to bed. The programmes are oriented on behavioural trainings and work with rewards (credit points) and punishment (time-out). The number of meetings differs between four plus phone contacts (Triple P), and nine (STEP).

### 3.3 Obstapje (in Dutch: small steps) an HIPPY (Home instruction Programme for Preschool Youngsters):

These are integration programmes mainly for migrant families in order to diminish disadvantages in education (school readiness programmes). The target groups are mothers (and if possible fathers) and their children. Trained lay helpers who come from the same cultural background as the families, are provided with special material to show the mothers how to play and teach their children at the same time. The setting is the home of the family and the mothers become the teachers of their children. One positive side effect is that the mothers improve their language skills. Besides the home visits there are group meetings with other mothers and support for integration into activities in the communities, usually for two years.

### 3.5. Family Group Conference (FGC)

This approach has found its way from New Zealand to Europe and is now slowly but surely being implemented in many European countries like Sweden, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Wales, Scotland, England, Bulgaria and Germany. It is the most consistent programme in terms of giving parents the chance to be their own experts and to let families solve their own problems. "Fundamentally, the approach attempts to change relationships between families and professionals, moving families from passive receivers of 'professional wisdom' to front-line decision makers for their children" (Nixon 2003, p. 1). Moreover it takes advantage of the unique knowledge families have about themselves. For this reason I will present it in more detail.

Originally introduced in the Children, Young Persons and their Families Act of 1989, FGC has been an answer to the Maoris' (indigenous people) complaints that social work was structurally racist because mainly oriented in white middleclass values and standards. With this new law an improvement in the participation of Maori and their community and a higher consideration of traditional tribal structures in the delivery of services could be achieved (Doolan 2003, p. 2). This form of providing culturally appropriate services has now been transplanted to a variety of different cultural contexts, always keeping empowerment strategies in focus. Another goal was to reduce the number of children in state care as well as the involvement of children, young persons and their families with courts.

#### 3.5.1 The procedure

A FGC is divided in three parts: preparation, the family conference itself and the presentation of a plan of how to solve outstanding problems. In New Zealand a FGC occurs whenever a significant decision has to be taken about a child with whom the statutory child welfare

authority is engaged. In Europe it is still not legally fixed, and thus the precondition for a FGC is that the Youth Welfare Agency decides that this programme might be helpful. The way in which the FGC is facilitated is one key to achieving a successful outcome. The crucial position for that is taken by the “Coordinator”, a trained voluntary, independent and neutral member of the cultural community who does not have an interest in influencing outcomes. His task is to organise the meeting (time and place, food, children’s toys...) and to help to assemble the participants who can either belong to the extended family or be neighbours, teachers or other persons trusted by the family. He or she is vital in setting the style of the conference. The second condition sine qua non is the family-only time, the time in which no outside influence disturbs the solution finding commitment of the extended family.

First phase: The Meeting is opened ritually or ceremonially according to the family tradition (prayers, dances, speeches, songs). The social worker informs the family about the possibilities of administrative support and as an orientation will put up questions about the future well-being of the child to which the family has to find an answer, e.g. “What can be done by whom to help the child to live a more structured life?” (see van Beek 2004, p18).

Second phase: The task of the (extended) family now is to find agreements about formal and informal strategies to solve the problems. This happens in the “Family-only-time” during which neither the coordinator nor the social worker are present. The family now develops a plan which ties down the contributions of all participants for the support of the child according to the following questions:

- Which support is necessary?
- Who can give assistance?
- When will the assistance be started?
- Who is responsible for the implementation?

It might be the aunt who once a week invites the child for dinner, the grandfather who provides some pocket money, the neighbour who helps with mathematics homework, the father who accompanies the child to the weekly speech therapy, several others who may take care that the child does not hang around in the evenings.... Moreover the services previously offered by the social welfare department are included if necessary. Third phase: The full conference re-convenes to hear from the family about their plan and to negotiate the sorts of support, resources and monitoring that may be required, including how and when the plan will be reviewed. The social worker will approve it and the statutory agency is bound to support it if the safety of the child is not in question - which is mostly the case. A written plan which will be given to all participants finishes the conference. Follow-up contacts evaluate whether the plan is working or if the contingency plan, which most families work out as well, has to be deployed.

### 3.5.2 Evaluation

That FCG works effectively can be shown by evaluation. I will refer to the Netherlands' evaluation because this has been done continuously since 2000 and includes items like the contendedness of adults and children with various categories of FCG.

The latest data show that a FGC was started within 3 months in 88% of the cases, which means a comparatively short waiting time in comparison with other services. The number of participants varied between 5 and 32, on average 13. Two thirds of the conferences required between one and five hours, for the family-only time one to three hours were mostly enough. 97% of the conferences ended up with a plan that turned out to be acceptable for everybody, in the rest of the cases parts of the plan were used. 77% of the families developed a contingency plan. An innovation in 2005 was that families could go through a conference on their own initiative, which three families made use of.

Concerning sustainability data show that after three months in 25% of the families the plans were realized. Remarkably often persons who did not belong to the core family took over responsibilities. An amazingly high percentage of the agreements, namely 80%, was regulated within the family network, only for the rest professional help was necessary (see Beek 2004, p. 54). Another interesting fact is that the successful implementation of agreements by family network members was relatively and absolutely higher than by the professional support, which shows that families are able to react much faster than the social administration (see Doolan 2003, p. 102; van Beek 2004, p. 56).

Two groups get special support by FGC: children and mothers. Children's participation is very important in FGC practice. There is concern that the child has a clear voice within the family group. In preparing the conferences children can draw or write the invitations, identify a support person, decide on arrangements like the place or the food, using the informality of the family setting and the context they are familiar with. "Traditional" intervention in family support mostly focuses on the mother in questions about raising and educating children. With core families and even more with single mothers the main responsibility is put on their shoulders as if the burden were not yet heavy enough. In a bigger group like in the FGC they are one out of many responsible persons who contribute to the child's wellbeing.

As interviews show these networks function as a buffer to reduce stress and thus to create a more relaxed interaction between children and mothers (see Nixon 2003, p. 75).

### 3.5.3 Role of the social worker

From a professional point of view this approach demands a radical change. "FGC decisions are likely to reflect the culture, traditions and needs of each individual family and therefore will be more effective. This assumption however appears to conflict with usual decision

making approaches where professional interventions are based on a culture of professional expertise" (Nixon 3003, p. 13). So far social work models of assessment rely on professional or agency preconceptions of need. Rather than empowerment family pathology and agency procedures are decisive for working with families. The FGC approach recognises that informal systems have knowledge and strengths that are unavailable to the state and professional systems. On the one hand social workers are confronted with a genuinely challenging practice but on the other hand there is a real opportunity for changing the profession and the attitude towards child protection. As can be seen in European countries, this is a difficult process and social workers will need time to adjust. Important though is that the approach is not just used mechanically or technically secretly being dominated by formal state and professional systems. For FGCs and maybe for the future of social work in general it means that the social worker is responsible for the organisation of the process of finding solutions to a problem but not for the solution itself.

### Conclusion

The current situation of family support and family education in Europe and especially in Germany is marked by a boom of internationally implemented programmes. The problem still is that they are set into practice not as a congruent concept accompanying the family through different phases, but often isolated if not in competition with each other. To make those innovative approaches really helpful networks of service institutions and service users should be built up to cooperate. As in New Zealand FGCs should be legally introduced as the first step of support. This would open the way to an equal and empowering communication between the informal system of family networks and the formal system of state and professional support.

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[straub@fb4.fh-frankfurt.de](mailto:straub@fb4.fh-frankfurt.de)

University of Applied Sciences, Frankfurt a. M.

Department of Social Work

Germany