



Photo: Katja He

Between work and getting supper: Working from home and home schooling have meant additional challenges for parents in everyday life.

The family system: little room for manoeuvre

Sabine Andresen on the particular burdens on families during the pandemic

Ms Andresen, you're a child and youth researcher. I would, however, first of all like to discuss another age group with you – the "middle-aged". How are above all mothers and fathers getting through the pandemic?

In the spring of 2020, we conducted our first "KiCo" study ("Children, Parents and their Experiences during the Coronavirus Pandemic", see box) just as the lockdown was being very carefully eased.

25,000 people, mostly middle-aged mothers and fathers, answered the online questionnaire within a very short time and set aside a lot of time to do so because, among others, they had to answer questions for each individual child. That alone was an impressive signal: There is a tremendous need to be heard and seen, especially among adults with responsibility for children and adolescents. Parents who have to organise and manage so many things at the

moment are evidently asking themselves: Who is actually thinking about us? We must, however, restrict this statement and say that this large group is by no means representative of all parents in Germany because we mainly reached well-educated working women and men.

What particularly concerns this age group at such a busy time in their lives?

There is no one answer to that question. At present, it seems to be the case that parents feel unsettled because they're worried that they will hardly be protected against an infection if they aren't vaccinated. After all, they weren't in one of the priority groups initially. The surveys available, including international ones, also reveal that mothers with children of an age where they require a lot of time and attention, i.e. nursery school children, are particularly stressed if they have to manage their

ABOUT SABINE ANDRESEN



Professor Sabine Andresen, born in 1966, is professor of educational sciences at Goethe University, with a focus on social education. She studied German, history and music in the framework of a teaching degree as well as education. In 1997, she earned her doctoral degree in educational sciences at the University of Heidelberg and in 2003 her post-doctoral degree (Habilitation) at the University of Zurich on the topic “Socialist Concepts of Childhood. Political Influences on Education”. Sabine Andresen held her first professorship at the University of Bielefeld before moving to Goethe University in the summer semester of 2011 – initially to a research professorship in family

studies. Sabine Andresen is a member of the scientific advisory board of the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence and a member of the Academy of Sciences and Literature. She has been chairperson of the Independent Inquiry into Sexual Child Abuse in Germany since 2016. She is currently examining the situation of young people during the coronavirus pandemic within a joint project with the University of Hildesheim. The basic conclusion of the two studies JuCo I and II: Children and adolescents are severely affected by the crisis and should be involved and heard more.

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jobs alongside caring for and raising children during the pandemic. Those working from home are faced with the task of how to manage their work and have shifted their working hours to the early morning and late evening. Those who cannot work from home agonise over the question: How is my child doing in emergency daycare? In the first lockdown, for example, no lunch was provided. In addition, it's precisely people in such occupations who cannot work from home that often have a low income.

But isn't this group always particularly affected? Doesn't the pandemic simply act like a magnifying glass here?

We know from family research that the entire family system with the tasks that the family has – above all when young children are involved, and even more so when it comes to caring for older relatives – has little room for manoeuvre. Various studies show this, such as those by family sociologist Karin Jurczyk of the German Youth Institute on the blurred boundaries between gainful employment and family work and the associated stresses and strains, and on feeling inadequate on all fronts. I can remember one mother saying in an interview: “When nothing fits together anymore.” Mothers and fathers report that they feel like they're chasing their own tails trying to reconcile everything. They have to juggle a lot of balls in this

phase of their lives and accomplish an enormous amount. But we need to look very closely at socially conditioned differences. The stress of facilitating as many leisure activities as possible for your child alongside your job and helping with their schooling tends rather to be a lifestyle and parenting style of the middle classes. Families in precarious socio-economic circumstances face completely different issues. In such cases, parents are busy explaining to their children why they can't have things and about going without as well as being confronted at school with expectations of “parental involvement”, meaning that they soon reach their limits there too as far as time and other issues are concerned. This means that this phase is characterised overall by a lot of real effort. Although we've been talking about shared responsibility for child-raising and caring for the elderly for at least 20 years, this still depends very much on family commitment. I'm not so sure – coming back to the magnifying glass – whether the burdens on families during the pandemic have lastingly raised the awareness of those responsible for family, labour and social policy.

How does the particular and permanent stress during the pandemic impact on the family situation?

That depends on a family's respective resources. How high is the income, how

many mouths does it have to feed, what are working conditions like, are there any health issues. In everyday life, it quickly became clear that living conditions are important: How much space is available for people to live together and get along? Everything that previously took place in different locations now comes together at home. Individual family members often have nowhere to withdraw to. For their well-being, adolescents need a place where they can learn in peace, but also as a retreat, that is, their own private space. But mothers and fathers need this too. However, if living space is limited, they let their own needs come second. The neighbourhood and surroundings also play an important role: Is there a park, a garden? And a third factor is future prospects: Are there job worries? Is the family affected by short-time work, by unemployment? These are, of course, considerable stress factors. A study from the USA shows that job loss can be an indicator for the potential for violence in families to increase – both regarding violence towards the partner as well as towards children. And as yet we know far too little about this and are still far too insufficiently prepared for it. It will be necessary to provide some good support here.

At the beginning, it was said that violence within the family had not increased during the pandemic. Do you have a different inside view?

At the beginning, the number of reports even decreased, for example reports of child welfare being at risk. However, this was due to the fact that school teachers and nursery staff were not there to report cases. It is much harder for a child to call a helpline when everyone is at home. Nonetheless, it was important that helplines were opened for longer, for example “Nummer gegen Kummer”. In addition, a lot of children were not taken to the doctor over a long period of time, so that this group too was unable to help a child if violence was suspected. Data have recently been published which show that the “Gewalt gegen Frauen” helpline for women threatened by violence has seen a significant increase in counselling. There is clearly an urgent need for research on this.

Some parents are aware of the danger that they might use violence. How could they be helped in good time before something happens?

The approach in Germany, which is also anchored in the Federal Child Protection Act, is to help parents and empower them to bring up their children without violence. It's about offering support so that such situations do not arise in the first place. Child protection and empowering parents to bring up their children without violence are reliant on local networks. Frankfurt has such a strong network. Child protection and protection against violence require a very good infrastructure during a pandemic too.

Are there also families that will emerge from the pandemic stronger than before?

In our KiCo survey in the first lockdown – we really need a new one now – there were two types that contrasted with each other. On the one hand, there were the mothers at the end of their tether, exhausted and in despair, with major worries and fears for the future, also concerning what their children will miss out on. And on the other hand, we had lots of parents who were happy that so many things were off the agenda; this constant stress of optimising all family members' lives, for example through various leisure activities. But I would venture the hypothesis that this group has meanwhile shrunk considerably because it has all already been going on

for so long and the psychosocial consequences are now coming to the fore so much more clearly. The emotional strain, lack of exercise, children's health problems. After all, mothers and fathers are the first to notice. In this respect, I think that has changed again a lot now.

Would you agree with the Federal President when he said that the COVID generation will develop very special future skills?

Yes, I would. But we would have to ask the adolescents and young adults themselves what they've learned, what positive things they've extracted for themselves. Talking now about the crisis as an opportunity, also as a formative element, is something I can understand as far as politics is concerned. The purpose of that is also to foster hope and draw attention to the fact that young people and students are not just learners at

experience different types of support, creativity without cutting costs, and the well-being of the young generation is prioritised. Young people have shouldered a lot, and they've done so with great readiness and solidarity. But existing studies show that they're worried about their own and society's future. I have the impression that they've so far not been given good answers to the questions related to this – which also include topics such as climate protection and social justice or democracy.

We've talked a lot now about families. In your opinion, where else do we need to take a closer look?

An area that preoccupied me a lot especially around Christmas, when it became particularly apparent how suddenly everyone was reduced to relationships in the family nucleus, completely ignoring the fact that many people do not



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Stress test: How are you supposed to concentrate on a phone call when family life is going on in the background? And especially younger children need encouragement and support when learning at home.

their place of education but also learn a lot in other places and in other circumstances – that is an important message. But this will presumably only be an opportunity if children and adolescents

want to celebrate Christmas with their family of origin for good reasons. The regulations regarding whom you were allowed to meet were based on a very traditional image of the family, which does not correlate at all with many people's lives. I ask myself why it is that friendships or an elective affinity are treated in a subordinate way. Family research should take a closer look at this.

The interview was conducted by Anke Sauter.