



# COVID-19: Effects of the Shutdown on Children and Families in Child and Youth Care Services in Germany

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## COVID-19: Effects of the Shutdown on Children and Families in Child and Youth Care Services in Germany

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Aside from the general effects of the restrictions that everybody experiences to a different degree, including the need to find ways to bring structures into daily life and to balance the parents' job demands with care and homeschooling, children living in child and youth care services find themselves in special circumstances. This is evident in both the short and long term ramifications of the pandemic for children and youth living in our residential programs under the auspices of municipal child and youth services.

The children of residential groups are not allowed to have any face-to-face contact with their parents. This is especially difficult for children who have just been transferred into long-term residential services and for those who have a strong emotional bond to their parents. This aspect is also challenging for the staff on various levels: the administration has to balance safety issues against the legal rights of parents and their children to see each other regularly. And the staff in residential programs have to explain these decisions and to respond to the frustrations, anger and grief that they bring for the children.

In these emotionally challenging situations, structures and routines are crucial for children, as they provide orientation and stability – particularly for children with deficits in their emotional regulation. With the loss of the normal daily life structures and routines, many of our children have lost their outer (or external) navigational system, which usually is a means for inner orientation and self-regulation. This is evidenced by an overall sensitivity and a tendency to be irritated more easily. In the future, this could solidify as a general anxiousness in some children, making them either emotionally dependent on external structures or refusing the scaffold of outer norms altogether. Both scenarios may impede the development toward a healthy and functioning member of society. The fact that there is

no transparent exit (or discharge) strategy and that the programs can only plan and act on a week-to-week basis increases the feelings of insecurity for all parties involved, including management, staff, children and parents.

Another ramification especially for the children in our care is that they are only allowed to leave the group homes under adult supervision. As a consequence, they are constantly together with the other young people of their group but they have no chance of meeting their individual friends. This could have a long-term impact on their friendships and networks outside of child and youth services. It also runs counter to what residential services have been proactively addressing for some time now by promoting decentralized structures and signing up young people living in residential care for mainstream recreational activities and sports clubs. Furthermore, the constant adult supervision, together with the avoidance of public transportation, is undermining efforts of increasing the independence of the children. In some cases, this may lead to a general cautiousness or even a regressing of a previously achieved autonomy.

Homeschooling creates a particular challenge for residential groups. Groups with eight children of different ages are usually staffed with one caregiver, who obviously cannot help all children simultaneously. This is especially difficult as all the children work on different tasks and many of the children have learning difficulties and/or problems with motivation and concentration. Furthermore a technical problem makes home schooling more difficult: there is no Wi-Fi in the residential groups and limited computers. Even the quickly distributed tablets (one for each group) can only be used under supervision. Therefore, all worksheets have to be printed even if they could be completed online and finished tasks can only be sent to the teachers on paper. This leads to a rather delayed feedback from the teachers whereas these young people need a direct and quick response to their efforts. All of this tends to harden the stereotype that children from residential groups are slow learners and are not looked after and supported enough. A long-term consequence could be that the gap between our and 'problem free' young people gets bigger, leading to an even higher need of supportive systems.

In spite of the many negative effects listed above, we experience a lot of solidarity in different forms and at various levels:

- People from inside and outside our services sewed and donated hundreds of masks for children and staff alike;
- The management provided tablets and portable Wifi-cubes for home schooling to all groups, as well as vouchers for a weekly pizza-delivery;
- Coworkers from other departments of child and youth care services are helping to compensate for the increased demands of care;

- In the groups, we see a higher identification with the group itself together with a stronger positive dynamic among the children;
- The staff have more time and open space to interact more intimately with the children and youth: things like cooking, playing games and reading together can be done more often and in a more relaxed manner.

In summary, all the challenges associated with the pandemic lead to higher levels of stress for everybody and we can see that conflicts, both amongst young people and between young people and adults, escalate more quickly. In the short-term, all parties involved try to manage within their capabilities. The long-term effects remain to be seen. While we hope that some of the positive developments and experiences during this pandemic will contribute to resilience and long-term growth for the young people, and perhaps even to the well being of our organization, the reality is that some things may have lasting impacts that are less positive. We don't really know what the consequences of family separation will be; we don't know how the limited opportunities to exercise autonomy will impact young people beyond the short-term; and we also don't know the extent to which some of the challenges associated with the young people's schooling may create gaps and greater challenges in the months and years ahead. For right now, everybody endeavors to make the best of the situation and to stick it out together.