

Position paper:

Areas of action for high-quality education, care and nurturing in day care centres

Currently, around 2.6 million children under the age of six are cared for in childcare centres and in day care in Germany. The number of children attending a childcare facility is rising constantly, especially among the under-threes. On average, every third child in this age group is cared for in a childcare centre or in day care, just as almost for all of the three- to six-year-olds. The majority of parents choose external childcare for their children.¹ The legal entitlement to a childcare place from the age of one, which has been in force since 1 August 2013, has accelerated this trend, while also revealing the extent of the demand for places.

At the same time, families remain the primary places for the upbringing and education of children. Parents bear the responsibility for the education and personal development of their children but they increasingly exercise this responsibility in cooperation with childcare facilities. Policymakers have reacted to the growing demand for childcare places and have specifically promoted the expansion of childcare centres and day care. However, there has been little talk in public discussion or in politics about the further enhancement of quality. Despite the principle that every child has a right to continuous development and to education to become personally independent and socially competent, good quality continues to be regarded as rather less of a priority politically.

However, the quality of care has a great influence on children's development. Quality differences in pre-school care can account for developmental differences of up to one year. Children from families with low levels of stimulation or stress in particular can benefit considerably from good childcare. Inadequate quality of care, on the other hand, has a negative impact on all children, including children from stimulation-rich families. Various national and international studies have repeatedly shown that investment in early support for children pays off. Good early childhood education and care can compensate for difficult conditions and promote future opportunities more effectively than they can later in school, adolescence or adulthood.² Similarly, they contribute to reducing educational disadvantages, overcoming poverty and stabilising lives courses, both economically and socially. In so doing, they benefit not only the children but also society.

In Germany, the publication of the NUBBEK study in 2012³ raised public awareness of the issue of quality and exposed a distinct need for action. The educational quality of childcare was rated as mediocre, and in every tenth facility it was deemed to be completely inadequate. Nevertheless, there is still no systematic recording of the quality of education and care in Germany and also no uniform procedure for quality development and assurance.

Improvement in the quality of childcare is therefore urgently needed. This demands at least as much political will as does the increase in the number of childcare places. In addition, this requires considerable additional expenditure in the area of early education. The federal government, the Länder and the local authorities share responsibility for finding viable ways of financing such a strategy. In view of the tight budgets of the municipalities and the introduction (2009) of the debt brake, it seems inevitable that the federal government, in

¹ Statistical Offices of the Federation and the Länder, Kindertagesbetreuung regional 2014.

² Cf. e.g. Cunha & Heckman, 2007 and 2008, OECD, Investing in high-quality early childhood education and care, 2011; on Germany: Pfeiffer & Reuß (ZEW), 2008 and 2013.

³ Tietze et al.: NUBBEK, Nationale Untersuchung zur Bildung, Betreuung und Erziehung in der frühen Kindheit, 2012.



addition to the Länder, will be permanently involved in the funding of public childcare. Raising quality is costly – but an important investment in the future.

The goal of high-quality care must not be put on the back burner. If it is, the losers will be the children, especially those who have had a difficult start in life. The needs of the children, based on their respective life situations, must be at the centre of the quality campaign. This also includes consideration of children's rights, from which arise a claim to the highest possible quality of care facilities and which set an initial framework in terms of content, for example through the right of every child to education, play, participation and self-development.

In order to ensure a consistent quality of care everywhere in Germany, binding, uniform, scientifically based nationwide standards for childcare centres, as well as in day care must be introduced. If, in the following, the AGF deals exclusively with quality improvement in childcare centres, this is not because this form of care is of greater value than any other but because of the massive expansion of childcare centres and the fact that parents predominantly choose this type of care.⁴ From the point of view of the family associations united in the AGF, the following quality aspects must be taken into account: general access to childcare, including opening hours, the qualification and further training of professionals, the professional:child ratio and the maximum group size, the development of guidelines for educational and care work, the nurturing and educational partnership and long-term quality assurance.⁵

Access and opening hours

For children to benefit from good quality care, they self-evidently must have access to it. However, as many as 16 percent of parents state in surveys that they have not been able to get a place for their child.⁶ Despite all the efforts to provide more places, the supply falls short of the actual needs of families in many areas. This is especially true in the west of Germany and in rural areas, but even in the big cities there is often a shortage of places. Moreover, many facilities are designed as half-day facilities or have opening hours that are not compatible with a full-time job.⁷ For one third of the parents, extra-familial care fails because of high costs.⁸ Yet for most parents, good public childcare is an essential prerequisite for a proper reconciliation of family and work - and often also a decisive factor in the realisation of children's wishes.

The family associations of the AGF consider the following further developments to be urgently necessary:

- **The range of childcare options must be accessible to all children and must be geared to the actual needs of local children and parents.**

Equal participation of all children must be ensured in childcare centres, as in all areas of society. Childcare centres must be open to all children and their families, irrespective of their social situation, their origin, a disability, their residence status, their place of residence and other characteristics of their personal and life situation. Childcare centre services and structures must be geared to the different individual needs of children and their families. These include the well-being of the children, care and support, upbringing and education,

⁴ In this respect, the explanations concentrate on childcare centres, but in principle they also apply to childcare and after-school care, insofar as conclusions can be transferred.

⁵ For some of the aspects mentioned, there are already guidelines at the various political levels.

⁶ Cf. 14th Children and Youth Report.

⁷ This is also a consequence of tightly calculated staffing ratios. In order to be able, at least partly, to meet the time requirements of the families, the scarce staff would have to be stretched over the length of the opening hours. However, this would considerably reduce the number of staff available for activities with the children, usually with noticeable effects on the quality of care and relationships.

⁸ Cf. 14th Children and Youth Report.

as well as the individual support and development of the children's personalities. Meeting needs also means taking into account parents' wishes for good accessibility and for opening hours that coordinate with their working hours.

- **Every child is entitled to a full-day place in a childcare centre.**

A general offer of all-day places grants families a high degree of flexibility and facilitates the reconciliation of family and professional work, especially for those in full-time employment. Children, especially young children, benefit from less switching between different forms of care and continuity with caregivers. A full-day offer requires an opening time of about ten hours a day.

The length of stay of each child should be agreed between the childcare centre and the legal guardians according to the child's individual needs and situation, taking into account also the needs of the family.

- **Childcare costs must take into account families' ability to pay.**

No child should be prevented from attending a childcare centre for lack of funds. Accessibility for all children requires that families, especially those on low incomes, are relieved of the burden of costs and pay only what they can afford. In the long term, the aim should be to provide free public childcare.

- **During longer closure periods, e.g. holidays, familiar childcare services must be available.**

Children need reliable caregivers and familiar structures. Closures over several consecutive days pose considerable difficulties for working parents, so longer closures, e.g. during holidays should be questioned. If those closures prove as being necessary, at least emergency care should be provided within the usual facility and with familiar staff.

- **Viable solutions must be developed for off-peak hours and night care.**

Parents who regularly have to go to work very early, return home late from work or work night shifts often need special support in caring for their children. This is especially true for single parents. In exceptional situations, overnight accommodation outside the family may be necessary. When designing these services, it is essential to ensure that children have a reliable bond with the staff or carers, recognisable structures and individual educational opportunities, even during off-peak hours, although the offer of off-peak and night care should not be used as an excuse for parents to work longer hours or do shift work. Rather, parents need a fundamental say in the timing and duration of their working hours.

Qualification of professionals

Well-trained, motivated and sensitive professionals form the basis of high-quality educational work in a childcare centre. Currently, students achieve qualification in a two- to four-year course at a technical college or, for the last few years, within the framework of a university of applied sciences degree course. The training of professionals is the responsibility of the public sector and of the Länder, which independently determine specific training paths.⁹ However, with the increasing importance of early childhood education and upbringing, educational professionals are subject to greater expectations, both from parents and from funding agencies. New developments, such as the increase in the number of young children under three years of age and a wider range of children's abilities and resources, notably in the context of multilingualism and inclusion, have an impact on

⁹ The basis of common standards for specialist training can be found in the framework agreement of the KMK of 2002.

the type and range of tasks educators need to perform. However, the current training barely takes these increased challenges into account.

The importance that policy actually attaches to the upbringing, education and care of children can also be seen in the degree of professionalisation of childcare centre staff. Overcoming the impending shortage of skilled workers by putting in place inadequately trained support staff is unacceptable. Instead, the profession must become more attractive and allow for career advancement and reorientation.

The family associations of the AGF consider the following further developments to be urgently needed:

- **Training to become an educator must be regulated on a nationwide basis.**
- **The professionalisation of professionals for the education, care and upbringing of children must be continued.**

High-quality educational work can only be provided by appropriately trained professionals. In view of the increased demands, childcare requires more scientifically based training that builds on the basic requirements of personal aptitude and the acquisition of social and intercultural skills. Therefore, at least some of the educational staff and in any case the management must have a university education, at least to bachelor degree level. Alternatively, further training for educators should be completed at universities. In the medium term, the aim should be that about 25 percent of the staff working directly with children have university degrees.

- **The professional training must be updated and more closely linked with childcare centre practice.**

The training content must be adapted to the current requirements of education. The increasing cross-professional cooperation, e.g. in family centres or with family education centres, the growing cultural and linguistic diversity of families, including different forms of the family, and the necessary frameworks for successful inclusion must be taken into account.

However, the training must also consider the experiences and everyday challenges of childcare centres, which means it must be designed jointly with the centres to a greater extent than hitherto. Building on practical experience in all phases of training supports the transfer of knowledge, professional behaviour and reflection on existing competences and thus facilitates entry into the education profession. Childcare facilities should therefore be firmly integrated into the training system as places of practical learning. In addition, specially trained professionals are required in the childcare centres to provide appropriate support during the practical learning phase.

- **Professionals must have the opportunity to undergo regular further training on the basis of current scientific findings and should take advantage of such an opportunity.**

Further training for childcare professionals and management, who are an integral part of the business of working in day care, should be promoted nationwide in line with everyday requirements and scientific findings. Knowledge of educational, developmental, psychological, legal and conceptual questions should be imparted and professionals should be encouraged to reflect on their skills, knowledge and roles. Both a positive perception of further training and the transfer of knowledge gained from further training into everyday work are essential. A separate curriculum must be created for day care centre managers.

The work of the managers is clearly different from the work of other educational professionals. Therefore, a separate curriculum and independent training and qualification programmes must be developed for childcare centre managers, directed towards ultimately obtaining a bachelor's degree. For staff with educational



agogical experience, certified in-service training and further education measures must be developed that are directly geared to the tasks of the childcare centre director.

Skilled worker:child ratio and group size

The number of educators looking after a group of children is a key quality feature that also has an impact on the well-being of the children.¹⁰ However, there are sometimes considerable differences in the staffing ratios applied between the federal states. For example, the number of children cared for per specialist across all age groups is significantly higher in the east of Germany than in the west.¹¹ However, individual and intensive education, care and upbringing become more difficult with increasing numbers of children.

Moreover, the professionals are not in direct contact with the children during their entire working time, needing also to allocate time to other educational tasks, e.g. preparation and follow-up or conducting parent meetings. Absences due to holidays or illness, for example, also impact the overall number of staff. Whereas the usual staffing ratio measures the required number of specialist staff on the basis of contractual times only, the specialist:child ratio is based on the number of specialist staff actually available.¹² Nationwide specifications for the specialist:child ratio are needed, the consequence of which will be a demand for a larger number of specialists.

The family associations of the AGF consider the following further developments to be urgently needed:

- **The specialist:child ratio is to be applied exclusively to qualified education specialists.**

Professionals do not include interns, employees in their year of voluntary social service or in the federal voluntary service, other volunteers and trainees.

- **The specialist:child ratio must be based on current scientific findings and meet the needs of the children depending on their age and stage of development.**

Empirical studies show that below certain threshold values of the professional:child ratio, the education and the well-being of the children suffer.¹³ Since children have different prerequisites and needs for bonding and interaction according to their age and stage of development, a nationwide professional:child ratio of 1:4 for children from one to three years and 1:9 for children from three years to school entry is recommended.¹⁴

- **The required specialist:child ratio must always be guaranteed.**

Downtimes, e.g. owing to holidays, further education and training, illness or indirect educational work such as parent meetings, must be taken into account when calculating the actual number of specialist staff required on site. The minimum specialist:child ratio of 1:4 for the younger children and 1:9 for the older children must be guaranteed throughout the entire day.

¹⁰ Cf. 14th Children and Youth Report.

¹¹ Federal Statistical Office: Der Personalschlüssel in Kindertageseinrichtungen, 2014.

¹² Differences in the prescribed specialist:child ratio are necessary depending on the age of the children and the different needs of the children. Different amounts of leave for the leadership according to the size of the facility also influence the specialist:child ratio.

¹³ Cf. Viernickel et al., Keys to Good Education, Upbringing and Care, 2013.

¹⁴ Viernickel et al, Quality for All, 2015.

- **The staffing level must take into account the different needs of the children.**

The children in childcare facilities reflect the diversity of society and the families they come from and thus have different needs for support and guidance, for example children who come from a precarious family situation, have a disability or have just started to learn German as a second language. The ratio of specialist to child must be appropriate and, if necessary, staff with appropriate additional qualifications must be employed. In principle, more professionals with a migration background should be employed.

- **Leaders should be released for their specific tasks.**

Childcare centre managers must be released from their educational duties with appropriate time quotas. The tasks of the managers include, above all, the organisation, supervision and support of the teaching staff, the networking of the centre in the social space, the counselling of parents and the further development of the facility. In addition, managers often fulfil administrative and management tasks, for which adequate free time must be planned. Therefore, when calculating the specialist:child ratio, managers should only enter the equation according to their quota of time off. A realistic time quota should take into account aspects such as the number of children and staff, as well as special support needs of the children.

- **The maximum group size should be set according to the needs and ages of the children.**

Children have different needs for interaction and bonding depending on their age and other personal characteristics. A maximum group size of no more than eight children is recommended nationwide for children under three years of age and no more than 18 children in groups with children aged from three years to school entry. The group size should be adjusted according to the children's actual needs for support and guidance. In mixed-age groups (0 to school entry), there should be no more than 15 children in a group. Facilities in which children are not allocated to fixed groups should ensure that sufficient staff in total are present to attend to the number of children and their ages.

Educational guidelines

The quality of childcare depends largely on the day-to-day design of the education scheme. Children now spend several hours a day for several years in a childcare centre, often from a very young age. Educators must respond by meeting the individual needs of the children. The caregiver–child interaction is the focus, but additionally cooperation with the parents, within the team, with the provider and with other institutions will determine whether the children's development is supported in the best possible way.¹⁵

Studies such as NUBBEK have shown that the education and support of children in everyday life currently falls short of the ideal in many cases. Thus, childcare centres need to do their best to compensate for children's unfavourable starting conditions. Every child must receive the best possible individual guidance and support. This requires professionals who are suitably qualified, an appropriate professional:child ratio and good cooperation with the parents. Education in the childcare centre not only imparts usable knowledge but also supports the comprehensive development of each individual child's personality. Educational transitions in early childhood, especially between day care and school, should be more secure and better organized, in cooperation with day care professionals. At the same time, it is important to maintain children's natural curiosity and joy of learning. Finally, supporting the healthy development of children is also part of the responsibility of childcare centres, for

¹⁵ See: Tietze et al.: NUBBEK, Nationale Untersuchung zur Bildung, Betreuung und Erziehung in der frühen Kindheit, 2012.

example through the design of indoor and outdoor spaces, the promotion of movement and free play and the provision of nutritious meals.

The family associations of the AGF consider the following further developments to be urgently needed:

- **Every institution must have and regularly update an educational model.**

The education, care and upbringing of children requires a pedagogical model. This includes a concept in which the principles of the work in the childcare centre are written down and can be shared with parents. The concept must be revised regularly on the basis of current scientific findings, changes in the law, local experiences and life situations.

- **Education and development must aim to support each individual child.**

Building on the nationwide, scientifically recognised standards for early childhood education, care and upbringing that are to be introduced, an individual plan for guidance and support must be drawn up jointly by educators and parents for each child, based among other things on the evaluation of targeted observations. The aim of the plan must be to develop the personality, talents and abilities of each individual child and to support the child in becoming a self-reliant and self-determining member of society. The plan should be constantly updated.

- **The childcare centre should pursue a holistic educational mission.**

The services offered in the childcare centre are intended to complement and support the nurturing and educational work of families, with the aim of attaining the comprehensive social, emotional, physical and mental development of the child. Education should be oriented not only towards the individual experiences and subjective experience of each child but also works towards broadening perspectives and a sense of solidarity in communities, as well as encouraging the child to help shape the world.

- **The institutions must work towards creating equal opportunities and minimising social differences.**

Education in the childcare centre must specifically aim to counteract social exclusion and gender stereotyping. This requires professionals to reflect on and question their own prejudices, attitudes and values. Every child has the right to education and to the development of his or her individual potential, irrespective of the social and economic living conditions of the parents, cultural or ethnic origin, religion, gender or other characteristics of the child and his or her parents.

- **Education and nurture must promote and reflect diversity.**

Different abilities, talents and experiences, including cultural ones, must be equally showcased and experienced in the day-to-day life of the childcare centre. This can be done, for example, by holding intercultural events at the centre and by individual guidance and support for the children that value their diversity. This diversity among the children and in society can be reflected in thoughtful room design, respect for customs relating to food and eating, appreciation of multilingualism and play and learning materials. Diversity must be embedded within the educational concept of the facility.

In order to gain a variety of sensory experiences, children need a stimulating, attractive and barrier-free environment. Both indoors and outdoors, there must be sufficient open spaces for playing, enjoyable activity, trying things out and discovering, as well as opportunities for retreat and quiet areas.

- **Children are to be involved appropriately in the day-to-day life of the childcare centre.**

Children want to participate. They must be able to express their concerns and wishes without fear and be heard, even and especially if their ideas differ from those of the professionals. The children should be involved equally in procedures and decisions that are important for them and the community. This also includes setting up a system for managing complaints from the children. By participating in the everyday life of the centre, for example in negotiating rules or selecting projects, children can experience self-efficacy, while also learning to understand and respect collaboration and compromise.

Education and training partnership

The quality of the relationships in the triangular partnership between child, professional and parents is enormously important for the success of the education, care and nurturing of the child. The professionals and the parents share responsibility, albeit in different ways, always placing the well-being of the child at the centre of their duties and taking into account his or her individual life situation.

Families are the primary places for raising and educating children. According to studies, the influence of parents on the education and personal development of their children is about two to four times greater than the influence of a childcare centre. They are the experts with regard to their children. A good educational partnership between parents and the centre can increase understanding of the child's current situation and promote his or her well-being in the centre.¹⁶ However, where different expectations, values and educational understandings collide, the cooperation between parents and professionals is not always tension-free, but solutions must be found by negotiation, in the interests of the child.

The family associations of the AGF consider the following further developments to be urgently needed:

- **The educational partnership must focus on the best interests of the child.**
- **Parents must be recognised as experts on their children.**

Parents' experiences with their children, for example relating to their interests, behaviour or special characteristics, must be recognised and taken into account by the professionals. Mutual respect between parents and professionals is a prerequisite for a trusting cooperation.

- **All parents must be involved, regardless of family background.**

The diversity of families and their life situations are to be respected. All parents and families must be included in the educational partnership, regardless of their origin, family makeup, social or religious affiliation, disability or other characteristics. Parents must have the opportunity to contribute their experience and skills to the childcare centre and to help shape the educational work. Parents should be allowed to visit the childcare centre on request.

- **Regular discussions about the child's development must take place between professionals and parents.**

Regular informal exchanges as well as annual discussions about the child's developmental progress are necessary. Professionals and parents should meet in mutual trust and on an equal footing and jointly consider how further support should be organised. The professionals should advise parents about the education that they deliver and, if necessary, support parents in their search for information or help them to contact

¹⁶ On the different expectations of the educational partnership, see Bertelsmann Foundation, Das Ideal der Bildungs- und Erziehungspartnerschaft, 2015.

counselling centres. Tensions between parents and professionals should be minimised by openness and transparency, and mediation should be offered in the case of conflict.

- **A system should be set up to manage complaints from parents.**

Parents are to be encouraged to contribute their feedback, wishes, questions and criticism and their concerns must be seriously considered. Parent councils should be set up to enable parents to decide on or contribute to fundamental developments. In addition, every childcare centre must develop a designated system for managing complaints and inform all parents and professionals of its existence.

- **The settling-in phase is to be geared to the needs of the child in cooperation with the parents.**

The familiarisation process must follow recognised scientific findings and ideally be oriented towards both a caregiver and the structure of the group. An in-person meeting with the parents should be held to inform them in good time about the plans for settling in. The participation of the parents is indispensable for the well-being of the child and his or her positive development.

- **Contact and exchange between parents should be supported.**

Spaces where parents can meet informally, such as a parents' café, should be provided and promoted.¹⁷

Quality assurance and further development

Good quality in childcare needs continuous development. However, at this point, there is neither a consistent definition of good education and care quality nor binding quality control or regular systematic surveys of quality in day care facilities. It would be the duty of municipalities and Länder to record the quality of care services regularly and to act according to their findings. The fact that this has hardly happened to date shows how much the importance of early childhood education, care and nurture for the further life of children and for the future of society is currently underestimated. Good examples of ways to ensure quality already exist. Within the framework of the National Quality Initiative of the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) in 1999, for example, a national schedule of criteria for best professional practice was developed and methods of systematic quality development in childcare facilities were tested and have already been applied many times. In this respect, sound methods and empirical knowledge are available.¹⁸

The family associations of the AGF consider the following further developments to be urgently needed:

- **In order to ensure a comparable quality of care, binding, uniform, nationwide standards based on scientific findings are required.**

These standards must define the underlying understanding of education, the goals of education and the most suitable framework for this. Ensuring equal living conditions for children in childcare is possible only if there are binding common standards. The existing education and nurturing programmes of the Länder should be consulted in the development of the standards.

¹⁷ When supporting parental contact, data protection must of course be observed.

¹⁸ The Federal Ministry for Family Affairs launched the "National Quality Initiative in the System of Day Care Facilities for Children" in 1999. In addition, ten Länder and some municipal and independent providers were involved. The aim was to develop instruments to determine quality in day care facilities for children. Within the framework of the quality initiative, instruments and procedures for internal and external evaluation were also tested.

- **The quality of the care facilities should be evaluated at regular intervals.**

The quality standards that are developed must provide for regular internal and external evaluation of the education delivered. This must also ensure the scientifically appropriate involvement of children and parents. The responsibility for this quality assessment should lie with the municipalities; it can be carried out in cooperation with recognised scientific institutes. It would be desirable to have a review of the facilities every two to three years with the aim of supporting quality assurance in the teams and permanently improving the quality of care. If deficiencies are found, targets should be agreed between the facility, the provider and the public sector. If the targets are not met, sanctions should follow as a last resort, up to and including withdrawal of authorisation for the continued operation of the facility.

- **The quality of childcare must be continuously improved.**

It is the task of policy-makers, providers and individual childcare centres to continually redefine quality and to embed it in common standards. Current social developments, new scientific findings and changes in the law have to be taken into account, as well as working conditions in the day-to-day life of the childcare centre and the evolving circumstances of children and parents.

- **Educational professionals must be supported and advised in the implementation of the nationwide standards and in the further development of quality in individual facilities.**

Team and case supervision must be established as standards in childcare centres to support and advise the professionals. These must aim to promote quality development through reflection and the testing of new professional methods. In addition, the professionals can be supported in their quality development by appropriate further training, team coaching and increased cooperation with the existing specialist counselling services of the child and youth welfare organisations.