Strengths and problems of families in contact with child protective services during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Objective: The study investigates the dynamics within families in contact with child protective services in reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic as perceived by social workers. Based on the Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response (FAAR) model, strengths and problems are outlined.

Background: Following the first lockdown of public life in March 2020, concerns about children's well-being have been raised. Practitioners and scientists alike worried that particularly children in families with multiple problems would suffer severe abuse and neglect. However, it remains unclear how these families have actually been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and the measures to reduce transmission of SARS-CoV-2.

Method: Child protection caseworkers from 40 child and youth welfare authorities across Germany were interviewed twice via telephone. The first interview was conducted during summer 2020, and the second interview two months later. Caseworkers were questioned about their professional experience in their daily work since March 2020. Moreover, they provided information on the perceived effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on families in contact with child protective services.

Results: The interviews were analyzed using content analyses. Six overall challenges for families were identified. Families reacted differently to these. The caseworkers reported problems in families like increased parental conflict, media use, and alcohol consumption during the first lockdown. Nevertheless in some families, the caseworkers also perceived there to be less stress and tension during the lockdown in March 2020 due to fewer school requirements. Furthermore, some families were able to establish routines, activate resources, and find solutions for problems on their own. At the time of the second interview, some families' problems had increased, particularly regarding children's difficulties at school due to insufficient homeschooling.

Conclusion: The results show that the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on child protection families are positive and negative. Some are resourceful in the face of adversities, and others show an aggravation of problems. The results are discussed in light of findings on family dynamics during the Covid-19 pandemic in other countries.

Key words: child protection, family dynamics, Covid-19 pandemic

1. Introduction

Children have the right to grow up with their families and it is the parents' right as well as their obligation to raise their children and care for their well-being. However, children also have the right to an upbringing without violence and neglect. Balancing these rights is challenging, and thus all European countries have established systems to ensure that concerns for child maltreatment are investigated, and children are protected from abuse and neglect in their families (Gilbert 2012; Gilbert, Parton & Skivenes 2011; Merkel-Holguin, Fluke & Krugman 2019). Although the need for placing children outside families in certain circumstances is widely accepted, this measure is considered only the ultima ratio. First of all, a range of support services help parents at risk of maltreating their children to develop capabilities and activate resources, in order to enable them to bring up their children safely in their families (Witte, Miehlbradt, van Santen & Kindler 2019).

In Germany, local child and youth welfare authorities (Jugendämter) are the key institutions for assessing child endangerment and providing help and support for families at risk of maltreating children. In 2019, they investigated 173,029 cases of suspected child abuse and neglect (Statistisches Bundesamt 2020) and provided support and help to an even larger number of families as support measures might continue over a prolonged period of time. If necessary, the child and youth welfare authorities apply to the family court to restrict parental rights. Families in contact with child protective services face many challenges and rely on support measures from different providers (e.g., child and youth welfare services, schools, health care providers) to uphold family functioning.

As contact restrictions were introduced, most sorts of support measures for families in contact with child protective services were reduced (Jentsch & Schnock 2020) while demands on families rose. Although there were concerns about maladaptive processes within all families, this applied in particular to families with prior risk factors in Germany (Fegert, Clemens, Berthold et al. 2020), but also in other countries (Katz & Cohen 2020). German survey data indicates that family stress has increased and family well-being decreased (Andresen et al. 2020a, 2020b; Huebener, Waights, Spiess et al. 2021), which has led to concerns about an increase of violence in families. However, these findings are based on population-wide samples, which likely include only very few families in contact with child protective services, because less than one percent of all children are reported to child and youth welfare authorities in a given year (Witte et al. 2019). The number might even be lower than by chance as families in contact with child protective services are less likely to participate in research due to their lower socioeconomic background, lack of German language abilities, and lower expectations of benefits from research participation. Thus, it remains unknown whether families in contact with child protective services have responded to the Covid-19 pandemic in a maladaptive way or if there are specific family processes within these families, which help them to respond in an adaptive way and even foster a positive change of family processes.

1.1 Scope of the article

This article investigates the processes within families in contact with child protective services in Germany. As this is an extremely hard to reach group, perceptions by child protection unit leaders at child and youth welfare authorities, are used as source of information. The focus lies on the demands posed on family life in the course of the Covid-19 pandemic and the broad range of responses of families towards these. The analysis is guided by the Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response (FAAR) model (McCubbin & Patterson 1983; Patterson 2002), which highlights family processes in relation to demands, capabilities, and beliefs. Within this model, we also integrate the concept of family resilience (Patterson 2002; Walsh 1996).

The problems and strengths in families are derived from the narratives of senior social workers in child protection units, supervising a range of colleagues, so that the level of analysis lies on the content of the narration about the families' situations by social workers. By nature, the study is exploratory, examining a broad range of processes in different families.

Before the empirical findings are presented, the article briefly outlines the FAAR model in relation to families in contact with child protective services and the Covid-19 pandemic. We will thereby focus on the aspects of demands, capabilities, believes as well as adjustment and adaptation processes. For a more extensive description we refer to McCubbin and Patterson (1983) as well as Patterson (2002).

1.2 Covid-19 pandemic as a Family Demand

Based on the Double ABCX Model, a stressor or demand is the starting point of the FAAR model (McCubbin & Patterson 1983). Demands are either considered the daily challenges which families face or concrete events, which are often classified into normative and non-normative stressors (Patterson 2002). Within this model the appraisal of the situation, i.e., the awareness and the shared belief that an event can be considered a demand for the family, is influencing the family's response to the event. Some scholars assume that a demand can only be considered as such when the family assumes it as such, whereas others, particularly empirical researchers, argue that demands should be classified based on the shared consensus of the society (Reiss & Oliveri 1983). When a family is confronted with a stressor, there arise demands on different levels: 1) the stressor itself, 2) the hardships or consequences of this stressors, and 3) prior strains within the family system (McCubbin & Patterson 1983).

The Covid-19 pandemic as the spread of an infectious, air-borne disease can be considered an acute stressor to the life of families. The sudden, largely unexpected and unprecedented event with a possible threat to one's physical well-being constitutes a non-normative crisis in itself. Moreover, with the measures to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV-2, additional stressors and hardships have been imposed on families. Profound effects have been noticeable all aspects of family life, including loss of lives and livelihoods, loss of feelings of safety and shattered assumptions about a stable health system (Walsh 2020).

In comparison to other societal and environmental crises, like hurricanes and terrorist attacks, the Covid-19 pandemic is long lasting and not confined to one specific region (Walsh 2020). Additionally, the duration of the pandemic as well as the effectiveness of different measures to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV-2 are uncertain and heatedly debated. News of the spread of the virus throughout the world was communicated rapidly due to modern technology, extensive news coverage, and social media. Although it has to be acknowledged that families differ in what they perceive as a crisis, it is a plausible assumption that the Covid-19 pandemic poses demands and hardships on families, according to the FAAR model (McCubbin & Patterson 1983).

Families in contact with child protective services can be considered to have had many strains in their life prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. These include a higher likelihood of family disruption and abuse experience of parents during their own childhood (Stith et al. 2009). In addition, they are more likely to have a lower socioeconomic status and more often belong to an ethnic minority group, which has been noted to be a continued stressor (Walsh 1996). As these families rely on more support services from school (e.g., remedial classes), health care (e.g., child psychotherapy), and child and youth welfare authorities (e.g., home visits from social workers), it is likely that they have experienced more disruptions of family routines since March 2020. Some of the services (temporarily) ceased their operation or were provided in different settings due to measures to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV-2 (Jentsch & Schnock 2020).

1.3 The Covid-19 Pandemic, Family Capabilities, Adjustment, and Adaptation

The effects on families depend on relation between demands and family capabilities. (McCubbin & Patterson 1983; Patterson 2002). Family capabilities comprise all resources and coping behaviors available to a particular family. Like demands, family capabilities can stem from different factors: 1) individual family members, 2) the family unit, and 3) various community contexts (Patterson 2002).

The FAAR model is a process model of family response to stressors consisting of two phases. The first phase is the adjustment phase. In this phase, family demands exceed family capabilities, leading to family stress and ideally to the activation of resources. Families face many stressors which they deal with by relying on the already established routines and resources within the family, thus there is a first order change (McCubbin & Patterson 1983). However, when family capabilities are not sufficient to meet the family demands, the family moves to a state of crisis, which challenges the familial patterns of organizations. This state is characterized by disorganization, but also by the possibility for adaptation, including a second order change (McCubbin & Patterson 1983).

The crisis is the starting point for the adaptation phase – the second phase of the FAAR model – in which the family adapts to the new situation by restructuring, followed by consolidation (McCubbin & Patterson 1983). In resilient families, following this phase, demands and capabilities balance each other again (Patterson 2002). When the family is not able to adjust and adapt to the demands, or has to undergo the adjustment and adaptation phase repeatedly, this can result in exhaustion, including maladaptive family processes (McCubbin & Patterson 1983; Patterson 2002). However, it should be noted that also following a successful adaptation process, maladaptation can still occur in families

which—according to the model—manifests itself through either poor family-to-member-fit or poor family-to-community-fit (McCubbin & Patterson 1983).

Concerning the capabilities families can draw on to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, some scholars have highlighted that non-normative demands are challenging family capabilities the most, as there is no community framework or blueprint for an adequate reaction to these demands (Reiss & Oliveri 1983). By contrast, others have noted that non-normative demands have the greatest potential for fostering the development of new family processes (Hetherington 1984).

With regard to families in contact with child protective services, they are considered to have many ongoing family strains on the demand side, but very few capabilities of their own, so that they rely on community capabilities, i.e., social services, to uphold family functioning and children's well-being. They are considered less resilient to types of stressors and more easily prone to family disorganization in response to adversities. These families also face social stigmatization, being outside the norm of what is expected from families in terms of functioning (poor family-to-community-fit).

Families in contact with child protective services are often viewed from a deficit-oriented perspective. This comes with the notion that resilience is an inborn quality or is acquired through a person's own initiative, not a process in which different challenges require different responses (Walsh 1996). This similarly applies to the discussion about families in contact with child protective services during the Covid-19 pandemic. Often, it is assumed that if otherwise highly functioning families report family stress, then disadvantaged families may be affected even worse. However, Walsh (1996) argues that 'processes that are highly effective in dealing with one set of challenges might differ for another.'

1.4 The Role of Child Protective Services in Family Processes

The FAAR model only briefly touches on the aspects of community resources and demands in family processes. In particular, there is a lack of integration of the role of social services in family processes. Therefore, we briefly outline the role of child protective services in family process by focusing on the German child protective services. On the one hand, social workers have to assess whether children's well-being is endangered, so that they assess whether there is maladaptation within the family leading to significant harm for the child. If parents are unwilling or unable to avoid further child endangerment, they call upon the family court to restrict parental authority. On the other hand, mandated by law, social workers, have the obligation to establish a cooperative relationship with families, particularly parents, to prevent further child endangerment and strengthen family capabilities through the acceptance of specific support measures. The support measures aim to foster adaptation processes within families leading to lasting family capabilities (German: 'Hilfe zur Selbsthilfe').

The role of child protective services involves many ambiguities and comprises the demanding task to balance different objectives—ensuring children's safety, as well as working cooperatively with parents. Information is not always easily available as parents might disguise facts due to fear of losing the custody of their children (Arbeiter & Toros 2017a, 2017b) and possible previous negative experiences with social services (Hughes,

Chau & Poff 2011). Additionally, social workers in child protection units have received severe public criticism following cases with adverse outcomes, such as the death of a child (Biesel, Masson, Parton et al. 2020). At the same time, there is also criticism when social workers are alleged to have intervened prematurely, without a proper assessment of family life. The heated debate about social workers' performance is accompanied by a relatively low status of social work in society and a lack of acknowledgment of its importance. Thus, also with the beginning of the lockdown it was not clear whether social workers at child protection units are considered 'system-relevant.' This has led even more to a sense of marginalization among social work professionals (Meyer, Franz, Alsago et al. 2021).

2. Method

2.1 Study design

Focused, semi-structured interviews were conducted with child protection unit leaders from child and welfare authorities (middle-management level). They were heading units that investigate reports of suspected child maltreatment and establish support to safeguard children within these families. Child and youth welfare authorities were contacted first during June 2020 and asked to participate in the research project. The research project, called KiZCo (Kinderschutz in Zeiten von Corona, English: Child Protection during Times of Corona), was carried out in cooperation between the German Youth Institute, the International Centre for Socio-Legal Studies (SOCLES), and the National Centre for Early Prevention (NZFH). The aspired sample size of 40 was acquired through purposeful sampling in terms of distribution over states in Germany. For each of the 16 states, at least one child and youth welfare authority was required. The remaining 24 interviews were distributed based on the population size of each state. In addition to informed consent to study participation, local child and youth welfare authorities were only included in the sample if they had a proven track record in quality development in child protection.

Data collection for the first wave of interviews took place between July and September 2020. The second wave of interviews was conducted between October and December 2020. Overall, 40 local child and youth welfare authorities participated in the research project. Due to recording difficulties, one interview was lost for analysis in the first wave of data collection (n = 39). In the second wave of data collection, three local child and youth welfare offices could not participate due to various reasons (n = 37). In four local child and youth welfare authorities, the responsibilities within child protection were divided between different organizational units. In these cases, both team leaders were interviewed conjointly.

The interviews were semi-structured and focused on child protection during the Covid-19 pandemic. Thereby, the interviewers asked about a wide range of topics such as the handling of reports of suspected child maltreatment, the safeguarding of children that had already been in contact with child protective services before March 2020, and the challenges within the work environment. One major part of the interviews inquired about

family dynamics during the Covid-19 pandemic. The duration of the interviews in the first wave was approximately 90 minutes. The interviews in the second wave were shorter and, in most cases, lasted for less than one hour. Interviews were conducted via phone or Webex software and transcribed and anonymized subsequently.

Of all the 44 interview partners, 61% were female (n = 27) and 39% male (n = 17). The age at the time of the first interview was in average 48.6 years (SD = 8.7). Their overall work experience in social work ranged between 5 to 36 years (M = 23.0 years; SD = 8.2; n = 42) and their work experience within child protection between 3 to 34 years (M = 19.0 years; SD = 7.6; n = 42).

2.2 Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted using MAXQDA. For the first wave of data collection, the first nine interviews were analyzed and codes were derived, in order to structure the material in relation to different research questions. The remaining interviews were analyzed using these codes as a framework. For the second wave of data collection, the same framework for codes was used and then adapted based on the coding of the first 12 interviews of the second wave. For this article, all codings summarized under 'situation in families' were reviewed. The rules of summarizing content analysis according to Mayring (2012) were employed in order to condense the information. Main themes in relation to family dynamics in light of the Covid-19 pandemic were derived, and organized in terms of responses to specific demands. In the next step, all codings regarding the 'situation of families' from the second wave of data collection were reviewed and the model was adapted further. Next, all codings were re-examined to check the consistency of the themes and probe for possible contradictions (cf., step 7 for content analysis according to Mayring 2012). Finally, the model was discussed with the research team and further refined based on their feedback. The analyses are embedded within the FAAR model. However, due to the source of information it is not possible to follow specific families through all possible steps of the adjustment and adaptation process. Moreover, we refer to the identified family processes in terms of 'strengths' and 'problems' rather than 'bonadjustment and bonadaptation' or 'maladjustment and maladaptation' as we rely on narratives of social workers and not on information collected directly from the families.

3. Results

Overall, six major demands for families as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic were identified in the interviews. In light of these demands, different themes in family dynamics emerged (cf., Table 1).

Table 1: Demands and themes within the interviews

Demand 1: Interruption of daily routines in the interaction between families and institutions
Theme 1A: Loss of daily structure
Theme 1B: Difficulties in returning to strict daily routines
Theme 1C: Reduced stress due to decreased number of responsibilities
Theme 1D: Increase of self-responsibility
Demand 2: Expansion of parental responsibilities in caregiving and educational training
Theme 2A: Excessive demands on parents due to home schooling
Theme 2B: Insufficient educational support of children
Theme 2C: Relief of performance pressure
Theme 2D: Benefits from new types of schooling and caretaking
Demand 3: Increase in family time
Theme 3A: Conflicts due to reduced possibilities to retreat
Theme 3B: Discovering shared family activities
Demand 4: Navigating contacts with non-household-members
Theme 4A: Reduction of face-to-face contacts and social activities
Theme 4B: Reduced developmental opportunities for adolescents
Theme 4C: Arranging contact for children with separated high-conflict parents
Demand 5: Financial and economic consequences
Theme 5A: Financial problems
Theme 5B: Fear of negative financial consequences
Theme 5C: No changes in financial situation
Demand 6: Protection against SARS-CoV-2 infection
Theme 6A: Fear of infection and subsequent severe course of disease
Theme 6B: Dealing with measures to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV-2
Theme 6C: Social solidarity

3.1 Demand 1: Interruption of daily routines in the interaction between families and institutions

In March 2020, schools and daycares were closed in Germany to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV-2 infections. Moreover, all institutions providing leisure activities for children (e.g., sports clubs, music schools, youth centers) were also closed. Additionally, some parents were on short-time work as many shops and factories had closed. This led to a change in family routines. The family routines changed again when schools and daycares reopened for all children during the summer of 2020. Thus, this demand is not only characterized by the disruption of family routines due to the loss of institutions which routinely provide care and education for children, but also by the return to previous routines being accompanied by uncertainty about the stability of arrangements as a rise of SARS-CoV-2 cases was anticipated for the fall and winter.

Social workers provided information about the impact of the interruption of daily routines on family processes which summarized in four themes. The first two were

considered as problems by the social workers, the latter two can be seen as positive developments within the families.

3.1.1 Theme 1A: Loss of daily structure

Following the closure of schools, daycares, and other institutions providing activities for children, some families experienced a loss of daily structures. Parents allowed their children to stay awake past their usual bedtime hour, with the result that they got up late in the morning. Moreover, parents allowed for more screen time.

> *I would say the loss of structure [is a problem]. Many parents who struggle to keep their daily structure anyway are now totally lost. The children sleep until noon and have nothing regular to do the whole day. Everything just ceased. Then naturally, there is something else we observe: total addiction to video games. We had two cases now. One of them even ended up in the child and adolescent psychiatry: The mother wanted to take away the console, and then he freaked out completely. (Jugendamt 21, first interview)*

Similarly, parents themselves did not structure their life in a strict manner. Social workers reported an increased alcohol consumption by some parents, likely because parents did not need to get to work in the morning. The latter was attributed to working from home, short-time work, or parents' job loss.

The loss of structure as an effect of job loss has been noted from the pioneering Marienthal Study (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld & Zeisel 2009) onward. It is unclear whether this loss of structure can be seen as a sign of resistance to change family routines in light of demands in terms of a second order change or a sign of crisis according to the FAAR model. Besides this, it is obvious that from the social workers' perspective this family process is considered problematic in terms of the children's wellbeing. However, families might perceive this dynamic as a solution to the demands they face.

3.1.2 Theme 1B: Difficulties in returning to strict daily routines

Social workers reported problems in families when schools and daycares re-opened in summer 2020, and stricter daily routines were re-introduced in family life. Challenges occurred in particular in families, which had shown a laissez-fair-style of handling the first lockdown. In some families, children refused to cooperate in the morning when they were to go to school, which in turn led to inappropriate child-rearing practices by the parents.

> *Well, one thing is that they spent their time exclusively on computers, tablets, play stations, and Wiis. And, well, through this, I would say, they somewhat unlearned that they have other, well, actually other tasks besides. The other thing is that parents were very lenient during this time, and now they start to realize 'Well, you should cut back [on video games], it does not work out if you sit in front of it for eight hours straight.' And now the children are fiercely revolting against this because they simply do not understand why they were allowed to do this for weeks, and now it is forbidden. In fact, we had two cases of emergency placements because children started to attack their parents. Really, physically attack their parents to get what they wanted. But, actually, you find this problem in all social classes. The middle class is affected as well... Or we had a case recently, involving a physician's family. They locked up the phone and PlayStation in a safe, and the boy then cracked the safe at*

night. Well, you can really say 'This problem runs through all social classes.' Well, obviously it is extremely difficult now to return to everyday life in which the fun-side—playing video games the whole time, like, I don't know, for seven levels in a row—is not an option anymore. (Jugendamt 21, second interview)

Some social workers reported that children had difficulties in maintaining attention during class and following the rules at school. However, one social worker also saw this development in the broader context of changing regulations at school (cf., Theme 6B).

Then somehow, everything at school goes totally haywire. It is constantly new regulations 'with masks, without masks' and 'partly homeschooling and then not'... and, of course, the lockdown's aftermath, right? Children started after the summer holiday without any structure at all. They were not used to paying attention for six school hours straight because they were placed [...] in front of the telly during the lockdown [...]. Or... this is really, really quite obvious. We also get the feedback from schools quite often that children, especially during the first couple of weeks after the summer holidays [this year]... that must have been a catastrophe, right? They were not able to focus, to learn anything, nothing at all, right? (Jugendamt 11, second interview)

Theme 1B is strongly linked to Theme 1A. It seems that this problem was only found in families which developed a laissez-fair style of family organization as response to Demand 1. It is also a good example for solutions to demands becoming a problem later on, as circumstances change (Walsh 1996).

3.1.3 Theme 1C: Reduced stress due to decreased number of responsibilities

To the surprise of most social workers, many families in contact with child protective services did very well, particularly during the first lockdown. According to the social workers, these families experienced lower stress levels due to a decreased number of responsibilities, such as bringing children to school, monitoring homework assignments, or organizing their schedules with therapies and other support measures.

We thought that due to the loss of school and daycare, there was a long-term loss of structure and regulations of everyday life for most of our families, but also a relief of otherwise tremendous stress. The children don't have to get up at a certain time anymore, parents don't have to get their children ready at a certain time, they don't have to cross roads with a crying child, who does not want to put on their shoes, no homework needs to be done, or any other demands of everyday life ceased. (Jugendamt 34, first interview)

In addition, tensions caused by stress that arose in the course of contacts with different institutions ceased. Families faced fewer expectations from professionals providing other support measures, and negative feedback from teachers was reduced to a minimum.

Foremost, these are families for whom school-related topics were a huge burden. Like, for example, those who refuse to go to school, where you have been working on this for years and

struggled to achieve anything. Now, there is a rather relaxed phase because that topic of 'I don't want to go to school' is not an issue anymore. (Jugendamt 17, second interview)

This reduction of everyday responsibilities was also perceived as a positive development for the children, who had now more time to play on their own. The benefit from this stress relief was particularly pronounced in children with learning disorders or other health issues that lead to a high number of extra responsibilities.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic came with many hardships, it also decreased some family demands for some families, namely the daily hassles to organize all family activities. This theme is particularly linked to the time use of families in relation to the organization of family activities. The effect of reduced expectations is described in Theme 2C.

3.1.4 Theme 1D: Increase of self-responsibility

Social workers reported that in some families, parents showed an increased responsibility for themselves and their child-rearing practices. Social workers attributed this to the reduction of demands made on the parents by the authorities. In some cases, social workers reported that the families discovered new activities for themselves together as a family.

Yeah, I am thinking about a family that a member of my team went to the other day, and she came back to me and said: 'You won't believe it, but they were sitting and doing craft work together.' And that was a family we used to worry about a lot, also because of their [lack of] attention to the children and we always had an eye on them, like 'Do they see their needs? Can they fulfill those needs, the parents?,' because there are a lot of children. And my co-worker was very impressed when she saw the mother sitting with them, there were apple slices and they were doing crafts. The place was a complete mess, but there was nothing moldy or anything, but it was pretty chaotic. But there they were, four children and their mom at the table. She [the social worker] said while she was approaching their flat, you could hear them singing outside. As soon as she got in, everybody had gluey fingers, grinned from ear to ear, and apple slices on the table. Yes, the mother thought: 'They don't do crafts anymore, which they used to do in kindergarten, so we are going to do crafts together.' So, I thought: 'Great, she learned, she realized that: I can have good contact with them. I can keep them busy.' The social worker then started bringing stuff for craft work as well. Yes, I found that pretty amazing. (Jugendamt 29, second interview)

Moreover, some families found solutions by relying on family and social network support rather than on the professional help system. For example, family members moved to live with relatives in order to reduce tension at home.

The social workers referred to this family process in terms of a strength. It can also be seen as an increase in family capabilities according to the FAAR model (McCubbin & Patterson 1983; Patterson 2002), particularly those within the family itself, rather than those which are rooted in the social services. Hence, social workers concluded that the extensive reliance on community capabilities prior to the Covid-19 pandemic might have

hindered them to be aware of and develop individual family members or the family's capabilities.

3.2 Demand 2: Expansion of parental responsibilities in caregiving and educational training

During the first lockdown and in the following months with the specific quarantine of groups of students and school closures, parents faced an expansion of parental responsibility in their children's educational training and for younger children in their everyday caregiving. Parents were now responsible for structuring educational activities, motivating their children, establishing routines that enhance learning, enabling access to learning materials, including sufficient technical equipment, and explaining new syllabus contents to their children. Social workers assessed this development clearly as a demand for families. Four different family processes were described within these interviews in relation to this demand. Here, too, negative and positive aspects are included.

3.2.1 Theme 2A: Excessive demands on parents due to home schooling

Social workers reported a high parental burden when facing the demands of home schooling. The range of problems included lack of understanding of contents, struggling to motivate their children, and establishing discipline to foster learning. Within this context, social workers reported conflicts between parents and children in some families.

Well, sometimes they don't even have the right technical equipment, and there were huge conflicts between parents and children, because the parents were overwhelmed by the task of teaching their children. This had, this has an enormous potential for conflicts, well, until the parents reached a point where they said: 'We won't do it anymore because otherwise the situation would escalate into a massive conflict.' (Jugendamt 30, second interview)

Moreover, some parents faced challenges in providing the technical equipment for their children, e.g., internet access, mobile devices, and printers. This problem was considered particularly relevant for large families, with every child needing equipment simultaneously. The parental burden of home schooling was also exceptionally high in families with many children, and affected mothers more than fathers. Families with disabled parents or children suffered even more from the loss of the support of the educational system.

Social workers also reported that they perceived a higher parental burden in families of a middle to high socioeconomic status as they had higher expectations about their children's education and were more likely to work from home so that they had to manage their own workload as well.

I had the feeling that, especially in well-educated and well-situated families, the stress level has been very high in some instances because those were the people who should work from home, because those are the people who [usually] mostly work in offices in some way. So they were able to work from home. And suddenly, they had to [...] take care of their children and

simultaneously, work more or less fulltime, which just doesn't add up. And I am sure they wanted their children to really learn something. They [the parents] surely have an expectation that they [the children] succeed in their A-levels when you study English vocabulary, Latin vocabulary, and so on. And to get this done all at the same time is not an easy task, for sure. (Jugendamt 3, first interview)

The social workers' narrations referred to the imbalance between demands and capabilities in home schooling. A pile-up of numerous demands tended to lead to stress for parents and children (McCubbin & Patterson 1983; Patterson 2002). The observation that well-educated parents seem to struggle more due to the aspirations they have for their children also points to the aspect of family meaning making of certain (anticipated) events, such as possible educational failure. This relates to family stress in the FAAR model. At least in terms of parental exhaustion, high educational background should be considered a risk factor, which is in line with Walsh's (1996) assumption that in some circumstances protective factors can turn to risk factors.

3.2.2 Theme 2B: Insufficient educational support of children

Particularly in the second wave of data collection, most social workers reported negative educational outcomes following the prolonged period of home schooling for a group of children. These children tended to be from families in which the parents supported children's home schooling activities insufficiently. The social workers referred to them as 'left-behind' (German: 'abgehängt'), echoing the public discourse on disparities in educational attainment. The lack of knowledge and skills became apparent with the re-start of face-to-face schooling during summer 2020.

They didn't find back into their regular school routine after the first lockdown at all. They completely lost track of everything. Even at school, they feel completely left behind, because they come from a milieu where the mum isn't around and does not check that you have done your virtual homework. (Jugendamt 14, second interview)

Social workers reported that children from families with a lower educational background, and with parents who did not monitor educational activities, showed negative educational outcomes. Moreover, economic issues hindered achievement for these children as they faced non-optimal circumstances, such as no room of their own to study in quiet and a lack of technical equipment. In light of these differences, social workers concluded that those children are disadvantaged in adapting to the new method of online teaching and in achieving e-literacy.

Social workers clearly define this as a problematic development in families in the second wave of data collection. They link the insufficient educational support with the loss of structure in families (Theme 1A) and the reaction of parents to the excessive demands of home schooling (Theme 2A). However, it has to be acknowledged that social workers also consider refraining from educational support as a strategy for some families not to fall into more maladaptive behavior such as physical and emotional violence due to parental burden.

3.2.3 Theme 2C: Relief of performance pressure

Whereas for some families social workers reported increased parental burden and pressure, they reported a decline of stress in other families, particularly during the first 'lockdown' in March and April 2020. When the schools reopened, expectations were lower.

The performance pressure at school is lower at the moment. You have to be honest about that. Because nobody... you cannot count on anything. Everybody knows: 'Okay, this is one year.' It's probably not possible to achieve the educational goals. Overall, I feel that... that is my evaluation, that, well, people already assume that and expect that this is not possible to achieve. Like, apart from high-school graduates, A-level classes. But apart from that... it must be obvious. It is already obvious to everybody that you can't get through the whole curriculum, and because of this, it seems performance pressure is a little lower or maybe it is the expectation. Because you just struggle from week to week, then have an overall look, then one class has to be quarantined, then the school needs to be closed because somebody in the school canteen has been tested positive or something, so, yes, that is a great relief for children. I can imagine that in the long run, it will be a challenge. But for the moment, it must be relieving great relief when the pressure is gone. (Jugendamt 25, second interview)

Families faced fewer expectations regarding their children's school achievement from teachers and other professionals from the help system, which was experienced as a relief. This applied in particular to families that had a troubled relationship with the school. When children returned to school in summer 2020, some parents experienced an increase in pressure again. For some of them, this led to tensions with their children. Others seemed to be more relaxed concerning the educational achievement of their children. Social workers reported that some children experienced the lack of pressure on their educational achievement as very positive and hence enjoyed learning and doing their schoolwork.

When children don't have that kind of pressure from school, the daily confrontation, then they flourished and were relieved by the virtual schooling or doing tasks at home, and out of the sudden, they appear to find joy in learning again. (Jugendamt 32, second interview)

This theme is related to Theme 1C, yet it is not related to time use, but to the expectations about the family and their children's achievement brought to the families by the professionals, which before March 2020 constituted a family demand. Subsequently this contributed to emotional and relational distress in these families. Within Theme 2B, there is also the notion that families experienced a relief in stress as they did not have to face stigmatization as 'problem family' or 'problem child' at school anymore.

3.2.4 Theme 2D: Benefits from new types of schooling and caretaking

Some specific groups of children, e.g., children with autism, ADHD, and specific learning difficulties, benefitted from the new learning setting, either at home or in smaller groups at school.

[...] It is easier for them than to sit with 15 to 20 other students even though they had school assistants, they really enjoyed the calmness at home, like that... or even children who are emotionally normal, they go to preschool or kindergarten from 7 am to 5 or 6 pm which, of course, overwhelms every child and everything was different then, and the parents were there and had to be at home, and suddenly the children got what they really needed, which is their parents and attention. And then suddenly the schools say 'oh God, even with difficult cases, with our, gosh, a child, we wouldn't have thought this, he or she is better now than before, despite the problems... being a classic problem family of ours.' You find that, for sure. (Jugendamt 20, second interview)

In some families, the new situation enabled the activation of family ties with the extended families and thus, e.g., caretaking by grandparents was established.

The [families] mobilized whoever they could, used their social contacts with other parents, grandparents, rebuilt them, and supported each other well, I think. (Jugendamt 28, second interview)

It is noteworthy that only a few social workers reported benefits from the new types of schooling, and when they did, it was reported as an exception. There were no narrations in the interviews of parents experiencing joy in teaching their children.

Some demands, which lead to distress for some families, seemed to suit others. This appears to be particularly true for a specific group of children, namely those who have individual needs that are ill matched in crowded classrooms with a large number of students.

3.3 Demand 3: Increase in family time

Due to the restrictions to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV-2, including school closure, working from home, short-time work, closure of restaurants and museums, and restrictions of contact with other households, the time spent with the family and within their house or apartment increased significantly in March 2020. In summer 2020, some restrictions in Germany were lifted due to the receding number of SARS-CoV-2 cases. However, possibilities of spending time outside the family and the own household remained restricted. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, almost all family psychologists would have argued that an increase in time spent together as a family is beneficial for the family and can be considered something positive. Only when families did not have any or very reduced contact with the community this is considered a risk factor for child abuse and neglect (Stith et al. 2009). With the Covid-19 pandemic, increased involuntary family time was considered a demand on families and their members. Yet, as the social workers' narrations show, there have been negative and positive family processes in reaction to an increase in family time.

3.3.1 Theme 3A: Conflicts due to reduced possibilities to retreat

The social workers reported that the increase of time spent together within one particular place reduced the possibility to retreat from stressful and dysfunctional family interactions. There was no place or time to 'cool off' heated arguments.

What really changed is, on the one hand, that families inside the system are crammed together, that you can see a lot of fights or disagreements, simply because you can't go out of each other's way. Nobody leaves for work. Such kind of things can blow over if you are outside the house. Conflicts in families happened more often, I would say. (Jugendamt 27, first interview)

In some instances, intense arguments between parents led to violence between parents. Moreover, they reported on parental violence against children in the course of conflicts. There were also instances of violence of children against their parents.

We noticed more and more domestic violence, like violence in intimate relationships. We really had an increase. [...] And on top of that, an increase in domestic violence from young adults towards their parents when they tried to establish a structure that adolescents disagreed with. (Jugendamt 21, first interview)

Social workers reported that families with many children, small apartments or houses, previous conflicts, and a propensity to violence were suffering most from heated conflicts and violence. Moreover, alcohol consumption by parents and working from home were contributing factors to an increase in conflicts. Being quarantined as a family, or isolated due to an infection within the family, constituted an additional stressor.

We had one case that has been tested positive, a family where a mother lives with four children, the father lives in town, children experienced domestic violence, are very violent against each other, and out of the sudden, they had to be quarantined together, because, I can't even remember the reason, there was some reason. My coworker was afraid that...'Oh my God, what should I do?' First question, what if they start attacking each other, which was pretty likely in that case and what if b) the boy walked out who is possibly infected, because he runs away, because that is what he does. [...] There are families where I would say that the possibility of having to quarantine in a tiny three-room apartment with at least four people living there could lead to a different kind of danger. This is the bottom line for what really changed for us. They aren't allowed to leave the house, they aren't allowed to leave the house. I am forced to sit at home, and there is literally no possibility to leave if I follow the rules. And for a fortnight having to sit with a troubled family, in a small flat, without a garden, nothing anywhere, that can be more demanding, naturally. (Jugendamt 33, second interview)

Social workers attributed increased tensions to the limited possibilities of physical exercise outside the family household. Outdoor leisure activities were able to soothe tensions within the family. However, social workers noted that the families often did not

seize the opportunity to use local recreational sites, which were accessible despite the contact restrictions.

In the first wave of data collection, social workers viewed the good weather during the first lockdown and the 'mild' restrictions, which still allowed for outdoor sports and activities, as protective factors. They also noted differences by social class in the ability to spend time outside.

And it is—obviously this has become clear—an issue of social classes because rich people's children, they have a backyard and can go outside easily. And those children who weren't allowed to leave their apartments, yeah, well, it's still a matter of social classes when a pandemic hits. (Jugendamt 19, first interview)

However, in the second wave of data collection, the social workers raised concerns about an impending lockdown during the winter, which would prevent families from spending time outdoors.

This theme highlights the problematic family processes in relation to increased family time that is aggravated by existing strains on family life and leads to maladaptation according to the FAAR model (Patterson 2002). There is a difference in family awareness about possible resources such as recreational areas, which seems to be a key to either positive or negative processes. This difference is linked to social class, pointing towards different family capabilities in finding solutions for positive family processes.

3.3.2 Theme 3B: Discovering shared family activities

In contrast to families in the theme mentioned above, who felt the strain of the involuntary time spent together, some social workers also reported about families that benefitted from the extended shared time. The relationship between parents and their children improved by the increased time spent together, leading to a decrease in problem behavior for some children. This was particularly true for families with parents who managed a heavy workload before March 2020 and reduced their workload in the course of the first 'lockdown'.

What really was a good thing, many, many parents, whose children we know to be 'neglected in affluence,' [German: Wohlstandsverwahrlosung] where Mr. 'Attending Physician' and Mrs. 'Whatnot and Whatsit' like, who work for 18 hours each day and leave their child to daycare for 12 hours, and then to others as well, that was really the case. We have many children who miss their parents as caretakers, and we really got some feedback, where children came back to daycare, and suddenly the carers went like: 'Oh God, what happened to that child? It's working out fine with them.' Children who just got the attention then spent time with their parents, something they never had before. So we had that as well. (Jugendamt 20, first interview)

Living in a rural area and having the possibility to spend time in a garden, in parks, woods, or other outside recreational areas increased the likelihood of positive developments within the family.

Theme 3B can be interpreted in terms of a second order change within some families following the demand of increased family time pointing towards the entrance in the adaptation phase of the FAAR model (McCubbin & Patterson 1983; Patterson 2002). The external demands gave room to restructure family processes. Yet, given that the information is limited to family processes over a short period of time, it is not possible to assess whether this processes will consolidate over time and even remain stable after the end of the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.4 Demand 4: Navigating contacts with non-household members

Since March 2020, the possibilities to meet persons outside the own household had been restricted in Germany. In the beginning, contacts with non-household-members were very limited. Starting early May 2020, the number of persons allowed to meet increased again. At the time of the second wave of data collection, the number of allowed contacts was reduced again in some states. In addition to these regulations, the population was also asked to keep face-to-face contacts to a minimum. As families in most cases share one household and thus are likely to infect each other, negotiating the amount of contact with non-household members was considered a demand for the whole family. There are three themes within the narrations of the social workers including positive and negative family processes.

3.4.1 Theme 4A: Reduction of face-to-face contacts and social activities

Overall, the social workers reported a reduction of face-to-face contact for all families, which also led to the loss of possibilities for stress relief, such as contact with grandparents and activities in sports clubs.

Specific burdens? I think a specific burden for families is that cultural stuff can't take place [...]. We're living here in a city, yes, there used to be always one festival or another, this or that event. None of this took place the whole summer, where you usually meet each other, where you meet other people as well, where you can stay in contact socially. I think this is something that was a burden to families because every day is the same. And for those who are at home the whole day, without leaving for their job each day, it really feels even more like always the same, and also on the weekends. Like there is no variety. And I think that this, well, the restriction by the government, well, if I organize something at home I'm not allowed to have more than ten people over, I think, with these restrictions, this is getting hard for families like to follow through because they only have their closest contacts and nothing else around here. But, well, everybody feels that way, it's not only these families. I am feeling the same way, like I really miss that, too. Now they cancelled the Christmas markets, and so on and so forth. Like that's the right thing to do for infection prevention reasons, but it always has been a beautiful thing, that's something you have to admit... and all of it is cancelled now. Like everything that is... cinema still possible, theatre still possible with like half of the guests only of course. But that doesn't replace events where you can meet other people, meet people again you haven't seen for a while, where you can have some exchange. And I think I am not the only one to feel like that but also a lot of families and clients. (Jugendamt 28, second interview)

Social workers reported also that the possibilities for diversion were reduced due to the closure of cultural offers. As the following quote shows, social workers perceived the closure of theaters and museums as something that affected families of middle to higher socioeconomic status, who were used to rely on a solid social and cultural network. For their 'typical at-risk families,' the loss of other possibilities had more negative effects.

> *Those [cultural activities] are used pretty less anyway here [by the families]. Yes, but if there is a shopping mall closed now this can lead to problems. (Jugendamt 15, second interview)*

In contrast, to these adverse developments, some social workers reported that the reduction of outside contacts with extended family led to fewer conflicts with these family members. Moreover, the reduction of contacts had positive effects on children in out-of-home placements as it enabled 'peace.'

Theme 4A is linked to Theme 3A, particularly the reduced possibilities to retreat. However, it also highlights other aspects of family processes, namely the interaction of the family and family members with non-family members. In terms of Bronfenbrenner's socioecological model on children's development, these constitutes the exosystem and mesosystem (Rosa & Tudge 2013). Good relationship quality within the exosystem and mesosystem have repeatedly been considered protective factors for child development. Social isolation, in contrast, has been found to be risk factor for child maltreatment (Stith et al. 2009).

3.4.2 Theme 4B: Reduced developmental opportunities for adolescents

Although in line with the previous Theme 4A, the reduced opportunities for age-typical developmental opportunities for adolescents was mentioned so frequently, particularly in the second interviews, it is considered a separate theme in this analysis. Social workers reported an increase of stress and frustration for adolescence in light of the restriction of contacts with their peers.

> *Well, for children and adolescents, the restriction will obviously again be a burden. At the moment they are still allowed to be on the streets, at the moment they are allowed to meet each other, but I think that this will be restricted again and then it is like when they're at home, the parents aren't able to hold onto their children, and where children meet, children don't have a paper with them and adolescents neither, and if someone is infected, then to keep track of contact persons, this is a lost cause. Well, I really think that this is also for adolescents... it really has been a hard time for them. So there wasn't anything for them at all. There were no clubs, no events, no stuff where they could be like they wanted to. Surely, they met for a barbecue or sit somewhere, you can still see that here in the city center. But it really got less. Well, we had holidays last and this week, it really is less. Usually, many many more adolescents and children were sitting somewhere and meeting somewhere. That really got less. Well, I think that is ... the whole society got more cautious. (Jugendamt 28, second interview)*

Eventually, adolescents experienced an increase in mental health problems and conflicts with their parents about peer contact.

It was pretty obvious that something had clashed in the family: One child started a fire, started to beat up others, or threatened to kill himself. So really obviously a stressful situation for adolescents. (Jugendamt 31, first interview)

Besides the reaction of the adolescents, the social workers expressed their concern regarding the reduced developmental opportunities for adolescents that are linked to testing behavioral sets and receiving social feedback. Although, the reduction of contact was considered most harmful for adolescents, social workers also voiced their concerns for younger children's development.

Social workers reported an increase in social media use in adolescents. They perceived it as a good opportunity to stay in contact with their peers. However, they also reported an increase in conflicts and aggression via social media. Given that social media was their primary way of communication, it led to misunderstandings, conflicts, aggressive behavior, and harassment.

Whereas the reduction of face-to-face contact of adolescents gave rise to concern, particularly in the second wave of the data collection, some social workers also reported the reduction of adolescent delinquency, running away, and reduced alcohol and drug misuse as a positive development. This development was due to the reduction of opportunities. Yet, one social worker reported a specific case in which an adolescent got involved with a delinquent youth group due to the lack of other alternatives.

Notwithstanding some exceptions, this theme shows the effects of a long-lasting crisis in combination with other normative demands on families, such as autonomy development of adolescents, as outlined by Patterson (2002). This can lead to a pile-up of stressors (Patterson 2002), particularly as the normative development of adolescents with the increase of the number of social settings in which they can make new experiences is limited due to the restrictions. Social workers clearly described the reduced developmental opportunities as a problem. Yet, it is unclear whether the families shared their view.

3.4.3 Theme 4C: Arranging contact for children with separated high-conflict parents

In both waves of data collection, most of the social workers reported that conflicts regarding contact of children with separated parents increased. Some parents restricted face-to-face contact of their children with the other parent using the contact restrictions and the increased risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission as a reason.

Not only here but a unique aspect—that I wouldn't have predicted in those well-situated areas—was that those people who were going through a separation or were fighting after a divorce... that those really fought such battles, really used Corona as a weapon to forbid contacts with the other parent. Just like 'The way how he handles stuff, I won't take my child over there for the weekend. Who knows how he or she follows Corona rules.' And then with lawyers and with every claw ready you can possibly imagine. (Jugendamt 3, first interview)

Social workers reported that these problems were more likely in parents that had already experienced conflicts regarding contact arrangements before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Families at risk of child maltreatment with a double residency model experienced severe problems when facing quarantine or isolation. This was particularly true for the parent who then had to take care of the children during this period without being able to rely on help from the other parent.

Previous strains within families can lead to aggravation when a family faces demands. Theme 4C highlights one of these dynamics within families with already strained relationships between parents. From the perspective of children's rights, which is also reflected within the statements of the social workers, reduced contact with one parent is considered a problem. However, this perspective might not apply to the families, particularly the parent who wished to reduce the contact.

3.5 Demand 5: Financial and economic consequences

With the measures to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV-2 global financial and economic consequences emerged. These included the closure of shops, restaurants, and other cultural activities. Some factories were closed due to restrictions, insufficient supply of source products, or reduced demand of certain products. In turn, employees from these institutions either lost their job or were put on short-time work. The financial and economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic have been publicly discussed and it can be assumed that the actual or expected loss of income or even livelihoods must be considered as a family demand (Walsh 2020). In the social workers' interviews, different themes emerged which could be seen as contradictory. Differences, however, may reflect different perspectives of the social workers as well as different reactions of families in their economic consequences.

3.5.1 Theme 5A: Financial problems

Existing financial problems of some families in contact with child protective services increased with the Covid-19 pandemic. This was caused by job loss or short-time work. Moreover, persons previously working in mini-jobs[1] are not eligible for short-time work compensation in Germany. Social workers also reported on lost potential incomes in migrants who could not attend language courses.

> *For example, the mother comes from wherever, like Kazakhstan or something, and she has built up a livelihood here, bringing her child. Now her husband got here and has struggled to find a job although they are well educated, and those are the jobs that were cancelled in these times of Corona. Then, there were no language courses for integration. (Jugendamt 20, second interview)*

In addition to families who already experienced financial difficulties before March 2020, social workers also reported on new types of families experiencing financial difficulties—families who relied on the income from self-employment.

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1 Jobs with an income of less than 400 Euros per months can be considered differently for taxation. Taxes are reduced at the expanse of social insurance entitlements such as unemployment benefits.

Children will be much more aware of their parents' worries because they spend much more time at home, short-time work, less money. I feel like there are the ones that always get more and more money, and there are those who have enough money, and they cannot spend their money right now, because the restaurants are closed, you don't go to the theatre and so on. And then there are the others who are suddenly on the verge of ruin because the father had been driving a Porsche before and had a flourishing event agency, and now he is suddenly facing a bottomless pit. Well, a lot is going on in the families. (Jugendamt 29, second interview)

Financial difficulties were further increased by problems accessing state welfare services due to difficulties obtaining the necessary information via the internet. One social worker reported that due to restrictions of personal contact, families did not have the option to get advance payments from social services. For some families, the school closure increased financial difficulties as children did not receive a free meal at school but had to be provided with meals at home. During the first lockdown in March 2020, some inexpensive food items were not available in groceries. Difficulties also arose when take-home meals, e.g. pizza, were bought as a measure to relieve family burden and later the same month, this money was lacking for grocery shopping as the take-home meals had exceeded the family budget.

What increased were worries concerning money. We really dealt with hunger. I never expected that; I never even would have had that thought that the provision of food at school—where children get one free meal a day—played such a huge role. And then, later on, everything was done to compensate for that, well, to make a lunch possible for children again or to distribute lunch packages. (Jugendamt 3, first interview)

Theme 5A points to the delicate balance for some families in contact with child protective service to meet basic needs, such as food for their children. There is only a very small leeway for families to adapt to the new situation and find solutions when they depend on social benefits.

3.5.2 Theme 5B: Fear of negative financial consequences

Besides already apparent financial problems, social workers also reported troubles within families due to the fear of the negative consequences on their financial situation. This included worries about job loss, continued short-time work, or the repeated necessity to use unpaid leave for child-rearing due to the closure of schools and daycare.

Many parents are afraid of a second lockdown. They really express their fears, like how everything works in case of a second lockdown, existential crisis, and also 'What am I going do, like, what am I going do with my child?' Many—we have many parents that work, and they be like 'Oh, if school or preschool closes again and I have taken all my leave, what happens then?' (Jugendamt 30, second interview)

This concern was more prominent within the second wave of data collection as the Covid-19 pandemic continued, and it became apparent that Germany was facing the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic.

What I believe is the case is that people who are let's say ordinary folk, who are afraid of losing their jobs, that maybe those are more likely to drink alcohol or have anxiety attacks like that is what I would say, those who are less-educated or, of course, those when you think about self-employment. That is very stressful, of course. (Jugendamt 19, second interview)

The reactions as perceived by the social workers reflect the effects of anticipatory loss which is prominent within this time of uncertainty (Walsh 2020). It can be considered one aspect of family demands. Its effects increase with the meaning families attribute to the financial stability of their family income.

3.5.3 Theme 5C: No changes in the financial situation

For some families, social workers did not report on changes in their financial situation as the amount of money of families living on state welfare did not change. Thus, there was no increase in problems.

I can't remember that these [financial problems] have been an additional issue. Well, for those families we are in contact with, money is always running out quickly. (Jugendamt 33, first interview)

When you have been living on social welfare before, you are living on social welfare during Corona as well. The change is not that big. I can imagine that especially in families which, let's say, which had a better financial situation before—those which are not the typical child and youth welfare services families—that for these families, the pressure is really on, due to short-time work financial resources are lost which have been there before. (Jugendamt 14, first interview)

Social workers reported a change in family incomes due to short-time work. However, some families were able to live with less income and enjoyed the time gained very much. Eventually, this led to a change in family priorities.

Like I have a family in mind where, as I said, one parent wasn't able to go back to work, and the other one was the only one to work, and the short-time work compensation was sufficient for them and then indeed a lot of the child's behavioral problems got better during the time, bit by bit, just because the child got the attention that wasn't there before. (Jugendamt 34, second interview)

Some professional groups in Germany received more attention and gained in status, as well as receiving additional financial benefits. However, the social workers never mentioned a decrease in financial difficulties in families with whom they had contact.

In some families, less income seems to have led to a shift in family values about money and time, which can be interpreted in terms of a changed family view within the FAAR model (McCubbin & Patterson 1983). Theme 5C and Theme 5A are also examples

of the social workers' different perceptions about the financial sustainability of families, who depend on state welfare. Moreover, children and youth welfare organizations differ between regions (Witte et al. 2019), so different support measures might have been available to families since March 2020. For example, some municipalities might have more free food available for families with low income due to charity work.

3.6 Demand 6: Protection against SARS-CoV-2 infection

Although infectious diseases are common (Winkle 1997), the global Covid-19 pandemic confronts families and society with a new dimension of threat. This applies in particular to the extent of infections, the air-borne and thus relatively easy transmission compared to transmission through body fluids (e.g., HIV, Ebola). Due to this transmission process, the risk for infection is considered equally high for all people, not only for specific groups. Moreover, the media coverage in news media and social media was extensive. Additionally, drastic legal measures to reduce the spread of signaled the severity of the threat. Thus, the protection against SARS-CoV-2 infections and hence Covid-19 becomes a dominant issue in everyday life.

Three themes emerged in the social workers' interviews in relation to this demand for families. The first is related to the fear for their own health and those of others. The latter two are linked to the measures to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV-2. Thereby, the last theme 'social solidarity' can be interpreted in terms of a positive development or the increase of family resources.

3.6.1 Theme 6A: Fear of infection and subsequent severe course of disease

Social workers reported that some parents and children worry about SARS-CoV-2 infections and severe courses of disease. These concerns were particularly pronounced in persons with mental health problems.

> *Well, especially in relation to the Pandemic. Like there was, of course, there are people that struggle with, let's say, mental disorders, like delusive perception, who obviously struggle with a lot of anxiety, who let their washing obsessions rule them and thought 'nobody is allowed to touch the doorknob anymore.' And, and that these anxieties got triggered. Right? Like when the anxiety system is activated, and you struggle with an anxiety disorder anyway, this really can build up to something [severe]. (Jugendamt 29, first interview)*

Also, single parents with a weak social network worried about being infected and suffering from a severe course of Covid-19 that would leave them unable to take care of their children. Children and adolescents were concerned about transmitting SARS-CoV-2 infections to persons considered at risk of a severe course of the disease, such as their grandparents.

> *Of course [for adolescents] there is the concern, the concern—not for everyone—but a concern, when the grandparents are still alive, because the older generations are more in focus 'How is my grandma doing, how is my grandpa doing?' (Jugendamt 30, second interview)*

For some families, the fear of infection led to a reduction of all contacts and even to school absenteeism of children.

There is one case that comes to my mind where you could say that they [the family] have overcome this pretty well, but for us [child protection unit], it is not good. It may sound weird, but I am talking about a single mother whose daughter—her daughter did not go to school for a couple of months now—is homeschooled and does not leave the house for any other reason. But that is perfectly fine for her mother because she is a very anxious mother. (Jugendamt 9, second interview)

In the interview data, there is no indication of the loss of loved ones to Covid-19 as an issue for families known to the social workers. This is even more surprising given the fact that socioeconomically disadvantaged communities have a higher risk of SARS-CoV-2 infections (Hoebel et al. 2021) and a higher mortality rate (RKI 2021). Moreover, other authors have highlighted the loss of loved ones and remorse over possible transmission as a major challenge for families throughout the Covid-19 pandemic (Walsh 2020). Along with the lack of narratives about the loss of loved ones, there is a lack of narratives about social disparities in infection rates and possible effects of this inequality. This is in contrast with reports from other countries, particularly the United States of America (Walsh 2020).

3.6.2 Theme 6B: Dealing with measures to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV-2

The fear of infection but also the measures to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV-2 put a strain on the families. There is a high level of uncertainty about the duration of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also about the availability of face-to-face schooling and daycare for children.

Well, I witness this, this uncertainty 'What am I allowed to do? What is forbidden?' or the restrictions in private life 'Why am I not allowed to meet other people?' Well, especially our clients in social hotspots, who stay door-to-door to drink their beer. Like either I ignore all of this and keep going anyway, or I obey the rules and take a step back. We really notice that the families aren't as strong any longer, well, they can't go on like that, to be restricted like that or even the whole pandemic, 'Could I get infected?', 'What could happen to my children?'... well there is more work to do now. (Jugendamt 31, second interview)
    Even fear of the future 'How will it go on?'... and what has become clear is that o lot of adolescents react pretty anxious and in panic. (Jugendamt 12, second interview)

Moreover, conflicts arose between parents and children about the need to follow specific regulations. Exhaustion and frustration became particularly apparent in the second wave of data collection, with the second wave of SARS-Cov-2 infections on the verge in Germany. Social workers reported exhaustion and low mood in families.

What also happened quite frequently, right, like we deal a lot with such kind of things and that makes everything so difficult. I think that it is such an overall negative mindset to get motivated, like keep on doing everything and to believe that this will come to an end. Like at

the moment, it's really hard for everyone who is involved. [...] I think that the prediction 'until March' is worrying. To get through this season, that is hard, and there are a few creative people that can cope with it pretty well. But many, I believe, for many, it is harder for them than during the first pandemic- pandemic phase. (Jugendamt 9, second interview)

Social workers worried that the burden might increase during winter 2020/2021, as possibilities such as meeting outside would be less an option for social contact.

I wouldn't reduce it to Corona only at this point. I would rather say that there has been a package of problems, deficits in these families that resources cannot balance. And now Corona... now Corona this long period they are getting to the breaking point where they can bear it no more, like Corona is the trigger to be unable to carry the burden any longer. (Jugendamt 16, second interview)

Social workers reported that families with many children in different institutions faced difficulties following the various rules and protocols. Moreover, it was difficult for parents with a lower educational background or insufficient German language skills to understand and follow the different regulations.

There were people that might come from somewhat less-educated families who just couldn't go through all those bits of information. They just didn't understand it. That leads to either not meeting anyone or completely overreacting because they thought this [Corona] leads to death immediately. I am exaggerating to make it clearer. (Jugendamt 29, first interview)

McCubbin and Patterson (1983) propose that there are many hardships associated with family demands. Theme 6B highlights the different hardships in relation to the family capabilities and demonstrates the interrelation between previous resources and the capabilities of families to adjust to new demands, such as the restrictions.

3.6.3 Theme 6C: Social solidarity

In the months following March 2020, social workers reported that the families experienced a sense of social solidarity within the society as a positive aspect of their lives. Mainly, for families who had perceived themselves as being outside the expected societal norms, this had a positive effect.

For some families, this was also something soothing and stabilizing: 'Everybody is in a state of crisis, not only us.' [...] I think you cannot underestimate this factor: 'When everybody is in a crisis, my own crisis is not the most prevalent.' That was my personal impression. Their personal crisis became more legit. (Jugendamt 2, first interview)

The solidarity in the face of the crisis led to feelings of shared reality between professionals and the families.

I would rather say: There was some sort of spirit like 'we're all in the same boat' – like a great insight that specific things can't happen anymore. Due to Corona, everybody was

facing the same psychological strain. This united us a little bit with the families once again. (Jugendamt 21, first interview)

In the second wave of data collection, we specifically asked the social workers about their experience with families denying the existence of the Covid-19 pandemic or believing other conspiracy theories. However, the social workers did not report any family experiencing conflicts within their social environment because of differing perspectives on Covid-19. In contrast, they perceive the families as very accepting of support measures.

I think that families and especially children and adolescents have achieved something big; they have reacted with lots and lots of understanding regarding the restrictions. And that one or another thing can't take place now, like you can't go out on a soccer field, on playgrounds, I think, the children really reacted level-headed. (Jugendamt 6, first interview)

The Covid-19 pandemic affects all families, it is not a particular crisis for one group of families Thus, it has a less stigmatizing effect as the families at risk are not considered at fault for their situation. For families in contact with child protective services this seems to be a new and positive experience. It fostered a feeling of unity and solidarity with society. This can also be seen in the changed relationship between social workers and client families: The social workers now perceived them as being in the 'same boat'. Besides explicit statements, there is also some implicit evidence when social workers talk about family demands using 'we' instead of 'them' to refer to the experience of families. This change in the relation with clients has been noted by Walsh (2020) for therapeutic relationships as well.

In Theme 6C, the perspective of social integration of families in contact with child protective services is very positive and this could increase family capabilities to meet the demands of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, given the disparities of effects on different social classes it is questionable whether this effect will be stable until the end of the Covid-19 pandemic.

4.   Discussion

This research is one of the very first studies investigating the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on families in contact with child protective services. It targets a very specific population that might most likely suffers from the effects of any crisis. It focuses not only on the negative effects and the often expected higher risk for child maltreatment during 'lockdown,' but also on the strengths, capabilities and resources of these families. In the discussion, we outline the specific family processes within families in contact with child protection services compared to findings on family processes as described by population-based studies and integrate these findings into the framework provided by the FAAR model. The discussion concludes with the strength and limitations of this study and implications for practice and further research.

4.1 Differences and similarities with population-based findings

In comparison to population-based studies, families at risk of child maltreatment had many similarities in the family processes in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Population-based studies also found both positive and negative dynamics in family life during the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany (Andresen et al. 2020a, 2020b) and in other countries (Tang, Xiang, Cheung et al. 2021). These studies (Andresen et al. 2020a, 2020b) emphasized in particular the less busy rhythm of everyday life due to reduced obligations. This relief was apparent in families in contact with child protective services as well. In addition, the families benefitted not only from a reduced number of school and leisure activities but also from a relief from daily tasks expected from them by the support and child protection system.

Some family dynamics mentioned by the social workers have also been found in population-based samples on family dynamics, such as increased (social) media use (Ortner, Kovacs & Jadin 2020), pressure through homeschooling (Lochner 2020), and the loss of social contact (Lochner 2020). Like other studies (Brom et al. 2020), we also found that some families adapted quite well to homeschooling activities and some children benefitted from homeschooling. What might be a unique challenge to families in contact with child protective services were difficulties in providing a supportive learning environment (e.g., room for each child, technical equipment) due to financial limitations. Moreover, given the lower academic background, they might even have faced more problems communicating with teachers and explaining school materials to their children. This highlights the possible negative effects of prior strains on families' adjustment and adaptation processes (McCubbin & Patterson 1983).

Population-based surveys from German families reported parental worries about job loss and money (Andresen et al. 2020b). Nevertheless, worries about the provision of food for children seem to be limited to families with lower income and social status and confined only to the first few weeks of the lockdown (afterwards, social workers reported improvement due to lunch packages for children). Food insecurities due to the loss of school meals have been reported as a problem in other countries, e.g., the US (Patrick et al. 2020) and Brazil (Malta Campos & Vieira 2021), as well.

Within the family dynamics reported by the social workers, it is apparent that some children suffered from abuse or harsh parenting practices or witnessed violence between their parents during this time, often due to multiple problems cumulating. This finding is in line with other international research, which shows an increase in child-rearing problems and harsh discipline methods in some families (Lee, Ward, Lee & Rodriguez 2021). Moreover, job loss and previous child maltreatment increased the risk (Gassman-Pines, Ananat & Fitz-Henley 2020; Lawson, Piel & Simon 2020). Given the nature of this study, however, it is not possible to quantify and to evaluate whether there was more abuse in general within these families. In line with quantitative analyses of reported child maltreatment in Germany (Mühlmann 2021), the findings show mixed results. This could also be due to limited possibilities for the local child and youth welfare authorities to notice abuse caused by fewer possibilities to 'see' children (Jentsch & Schnock 2020).

Overall, social workers commented on the change in the type of families that were in contact with them. There were now more middle class families suffering from job loss

and being burdened by homeschooling activities. They also seemed to suffer more from the loss of cultural and social activities. In contrast, particularly for the first lockdown, the 'typical child protection families' seemed to benefit from the social solidarity in the face of the crisis as they experienced a feeling of facing the common crisis and not a personal crisis. However, it remains up to question if these feelings remain stable as first analyses on regional level show an increased risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection (Hoebel et al. 2021) and a higher mortality rate from Covid-19 (RKI 2021) in socioeconomic disadvantaged regions.

4.2 FAAR Model

The FAAR model (McCubbin & Patterson 1983) was developed to explain family processes when facing stressors or demands. The Covid-19 pandemic can be considered a stressor, including a pile-up of many stressors (Walsh 2020). The findings of this study illustrate that families in contact with child protective services faced family stress, hardships, and difficulties related to the Covid-19 pandemic but some also demonstrated family capabilities to cope with this situation. In these families, the change due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the following adaptation seem to have contributed to an increase in family capabilities. Families in contact with child protective services are very likely to have many prior strains and suffer most severely from the loss of community support levels on which they rely to uphold family functioning. Within these families, the aggravation of problems due to prior family strains and lower family resources is evitable. These particularly include economic resources and abilities to activate resources. However, there were also certain factors that seemed to enable some families to adapt more easily to restrictions, such as lower expectations about their children's school achievement and expectations about the availability of social and cultural activities. This points to different family values within these group of families.

Refraining from homeschooling might have been an adaptive solution at that time to avoid family stress. However, this solution did, for some families, become a problem later on, as children did not want to go back to school and also fell behind their classmates in terms of educational achievement. This is in line with Walsh (1996) statement that "a fit on one level may precipitate strains elsewhere in the system" (p. 6).

4.3 Strength and Limitations

As families in contact with child protective services have been hard to reach through research and thus samples a prone to bias, social workers' accounts are a feasible method to collect comprehensive information. Yet, it has to be acknowledged that social workers provided the information and not the families directly, possibly biasing the results. The reported relationship between families and social workers had improved during the Covid-19 pandemic. The social workers perceived themselves suffering from the same fate and the families being more thankful for their support. This might have influenced the perception of the social workers towards the families.

Given the nature of the data collection, it was not possible to assess any causal relationship between the dynamics within families and the Covid-19 pandemic. The study

was conducted in Germany and thus is embedded within a specific cultural context in terms of welfare state structure, children and youth welfare service structure, and the dynamics of spread of SARS-CoV-2 and responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, results might help inform the service provision for families in other countries as well.

4.4 Implications for Research and Practice

Further research needs to directly investigate the family processes within families in contact with child protective services, the effects societal crises have on the risk for adverse outcomes for children in general, and the long-term outcomes of the Covid-19 pandemic. These include particularly educational achievement and lost opportunities for age-typical development for adolescents.

The child and youth welfare system and the educational system need to further improve service provision for children at risk of maltreatment who have been disadvantaged in their educational achievement during distance learning. However, there are positive dynamics that could inspire further service provision. Some families improved following the cessation of service provision as a burden of organizing support measures was lifted. The weight of organizing multiple support services within families' everyday lives as a family demand should be considered in planning support measures. Moreover, the findings point towards capabilities within some families that seemingly were underestimated.

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Stärken und Problem in Familien im Kontakt mit dem Jugendamt während der Corona Pandemie

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht die Reaktionen von Familien, die Kontakt mit dem Jugendamt haben, auf die Covid-19 Pandemie aus der Sicht der Fachkräfte. Aufbauend auf das Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response (FAAR) Model werden Stärken und Probleme herausgearbeitet.

Hintergrund: In der Folge des ersten Lockdowns im März 2020 wurden vermehrt Sorgen bezüglich des Wohlbefindens von Kindern geäußert. Praxis und Wissenschaft waren gleichermaßen besorgt, dass besonders Kinder in Familien mit vielen Problemlagen unter schwerem Missbrauch, Misshandlung und Vernachlässigung leiden. Es bleibt jedoch unklar wie diese Familien tatsächlich von der Covid-19 Pandemie und von den Maßnahmen zum Schutz vor Infektionen mit dem SARS-CoV-2 beeinflusst wurden.

Methode: Sozialarbeiter aus 40 Jugendämtern verteilt über ganz Deutschland wurden jeweils zweimal telefonisch befragt. Die ersten Interviews fanden im Sommer 2020 und die zweiten Interviews zwei Monate später statt. Die Interviewpartner wurden zu ihrer täglichen Arbeit seit März 2020 befragt. Zusätzlich wurden sie dazu befragt, welche wahrgenommenen Effekte die Covid-19 Pandemie auf Familien hat, die Kontakt mit dem Jugendamt stehen.

Ergebnisse: Die Interviews wurden inhaltsanalytisch ausgewertet. Sechs übergreifende Herausforderungen für Familien wurden identifiziert. Die Familien entwickelten unterschiedliche Dynamiken als Antwort auf diese. Die Fachkräfte berichteten von Problemen in Familien wie elterlichen Konflikte, erhöhtem Medienkonsum und Alkoholkonsum während des ersten Lockdowns. Nichtsdestotrotz nahmen die Fachkräfte auch weniger Stress und Belastung im ersten Lockdown im März 2020 aufgrund der Abnahme der Anforderungen in Bezug auf die Schule in manchen Familien wahr. Manche Familien waren in der Lage neue Routine aufzubauen, Ressourcen zu aktivieren und eigenverantwortlich Lösungen für Probleme zu finden. Zum Zeitpunkt des zweiten Interviews hatten jedoch die Probleme in einigen Familien zugenommen. Dies gilt insbesondere auf Schwierigkeiten in der Schule aufgrund unzureichenden Homeschoolings.

Schlussfolgerung: Die Ergebnisse legen nahe, dass die Effekte der Covid-19 Pandemie auf Familien gemischt sind. Manche zeigen sich als ressourcenstark im Rahmen der Krise, während andere eine Zunahme an Problemen zeigen. Die Ergebnisse werden im Hinblick auf Befunde zu Familiendynamiken aus anderen Ländern diskutiert.

Schlagwörter: Kinderschutz, Familiendynamiken, Covid-19 Pandemie

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