

Comments on the current situation

## Supporting families - a responsible, stepwise procedure for reopening daycare centres and schools

On 30 April 2020, the Federal and state ministers for family affairs discussed measures to contain the coronavirus and to gradually return to normal daycare and school life. Today, Wednesday 6 May, the Federal Government and the states (Bundesländer) decide on a procedure for this. The Association of German Family Organisations (AGF) supports a criteria-based, stepwise reopening of daycare centres and schools, controlled in such a way as to prevent a new wave of infections. Families need transparent procedures and timescales to plan their lives and work, and the Federal government and the Länder are required to lay these out this week. The crisis should now be used as an opportunity to further develop the quality of daycare facilities, and quality must be a central consideration in the measures to meet the current challenges in this area.

The coronavirus crisis brings with it new burdens for many families, considerable loss of income and the threat of unemployment. At the same time, families have largely taken over essential services in society such as caring for children, sick family members and vulnerable relatives, despite / because having lost support and assistance. Parents who have children of kindergarten and school age have the added responsibilities of caring for and homeschooling the children. At present, women are particularly shouldering most of the additional burdens resulting from the coronavirus crisis, often disproportionately, owing to the closure of daycare centres or problems with outpatient care services – all this while being expected to continue to perform well at work.

In addition, people are very concerned about the health of their family members, especially the elderly.

Families need appropriate support in this situation.

### Gradual opening of childcare facilities

All things considered, the AGF sees the gradual opening of daycare facilities as an important element in relieving the burden on families with small children, for the following reasons:

- Families bear the bulk of the burden of the coronavirus crisis and need support to cope with the twin burdens of childcare and work. This particularly affects single parents.
- For families in difficult living and housing situations, contact restrictions and the lack of institutional care can cause high psychological stress.
- Children need children! Contact with peers is important for the development of children, to maintain friendships, as play and learning partners and to develop good social behaviour. Children have a right to education and to social relationships.
- The lack of institutional care can lead to the deepening of educational inequalities if parents cannot create a stimulating learning environment for their children because they themselves are under stress or because of a lack of resources. The language acquisition of children with parents whose first language is not German can also be impaired.

The AGF supports the aim proposal for a cautious reopening of child daycare, taking into account the epidemiological situation, and proceeding by the following steps: limited emergency care, flexible and step-by-step extension of emergency care, limited normal operation, complete normal operation.

The normalisation of daycare and school operations is likely to be a process that will take a long time. Families need full information on what can be expected when and what a medium- and long-term perspective for them looks like. To this end, the Federal government and the Länder are required to submit framework plans as soon



as possible, even if medium- and long-term plans need to be conditional on attempting to avoid a new wave of infections.

Against the background of the current state of knowledge, the AGF advocates criteria-based access to limited emergency care, followed by a flexible and gradual expansion of this service. For reasons of health and safety and in order to reduce possible contacts, emergency care should be provided only with significantly smaller groups. There should be no exchanges between children in the different groups and the rooms must be big enough to ensure distancing between the groups. At this stage, teachers should not switch between groups. These measures serve not only to protect the children and their families but also, and especially, to protect the staff, some of whom are more vulnerable, being 50 years or older or having underlying conditions. Obviously, staff members often have families too, who must be protected.

Establishing criteria for limited access to care over the phases of gradual opening is inevitably associated with hardship for families, some of whom will be more severely impacted than others. Nevertheless, the AGF does not currently see any alternative. The AGF proposes the following groups of children who should have access to limited and then gradually expanded emergency care.

- Children of parents working in important sectors of the economy and society
- Children of working single parents
- Children whose parents are both employed
- Children in difficult living and housing conditions
- Children with special socio-educational needs
- Children with an increased need for language support and especially children with German as a second language

There has to be a continued **vigilant monitoring and constant assessment** whether opening up to all children at some point in the future, on a limited time basis, is compatible with health and safety. For example, a visit to a daycare centre one or two days a week would enable children from families who do not have priority access to emergency care to resume social contacts with staff and friends.

The AGF supports plans to allow a period of at least two weeks after each opening step to observe the rate of infection in the population before taking the next step towards fully opening.

The criteria outlined above may cause economic difficulties and possibly also additional psychological stress for those families whose children may return to care later than they would otherwise have done. It is important therefore to look for other ways of helping to ease their situation. These may include, for example, measures to protect the household income, like the reconciliation of family and work life, and extended parental allowances for people who cannot currently work.

### **Thinking about the future at the restart**

The Family organisations are aware that the current situation and the demands for a gradual reopening of institutions are a great challenge, especially for professionals. They must therefore not be left to cope with these extra responsibilities on their own and need appropriate support that will make a gradual transition to reopening possible while continuing to ensure health and safety. At the same time, we should take the opportunity of this exceptional situation to test new quality approaches in childcare and schools. In its position paper on quality in daycare centres ([download](#)), the AGF has highlighted these approaches. The Federal government and the Länder have also agreed to strive for improved quality, in keeping with the Good Childcare Facilities Act. These quality criteria should be taken into account in any new concepts, some of which are currently being discovered pragmatically, in order to avoid falling back into old patterns after the crisis.