

European Child Guarantee
AGF-Recommendations for a National Action Plan in Germany

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BACKGROUND

On 14 June 2021, the EU Member States adopted the European Child Guarantee. It is a targeted initiative to support vulnerable children at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the EU. The Child Guarantee aims to "prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing access for children in need to a range of essential services, thereby also contributing to the protection of children's rights by tackling child poverty and promoting equality of opportunity."

The Child Guarantee defines its target group as "children in need". This includes children living in or at risk of poverty in precarious family situations. However, the Child Guarantee also classifies children experiencing other forms of disadvantage as "children in need". Other disadvantages that can make social inclusion and participation difficult include homelessness, disability, a migrant background, ethnic discrimination and institutionalization. The target group-oriented Child Guarantee is embedded in the European Strategy on the Rights of the Child, which was published on 24 March 2021 and encompasses all children throughout Europe.

The European Child Guarantee contains commitments by the EU Member States by 2030 to guarantee children in need access to services and goods that are central for their wellbeing and growth to adulthood. These are in particular:

- effective and free access to high-quality early childhood education and care and educational and school-based activities, as well as at least one healthy meal each school day;
- effective and free access to healthcare;
- effective access to healthy nutrition and
- effective access to adequate housing.

The Child Guarantee provides that the individual EU Member States each develop a National Action Plan with country-specific measures for implementation. The AGF has developed recommendations that represent normative guidelines and proposals for specific German measures to implement the Child Guarantee.

In this paper, the AGF has turned its attention to the corresponding abovementioned areas of important goods and services. Particular reference to the specific needs of the individual target groups is taken in the respective chapters. The chapters have, however, been conceived and written independently of one another and should be able to stand on their own. Hence, there are overlaps and duplications of some aspects.

The recommendations are based on the results of several expert interviews conducted by the AGF during the preparation of this paper. The AGF would like to thank all experts for their constructive contributions to this process. However, responsibility for the recommendations for the National Action Plan for the implementation of the Child Guarantee set out below lies exclusively with the AGF.

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GENERAL ASSESSMENT OF THE CHILD GUARANTEE

The AGF welcomes the European Child Guarantee and sees it as an opportunity to intensify the fight against child and family poverty and for greater social inclusion. Its implementation is accompanied by the hope and expectation that the fight against child poverty will receive new impetus.

In the National Action Plan that is to be drawn up, the AGF expects the Federal Government to encourage substantial progress in the individual thematic areas for opportunities for disadvantaged children to participate in society. The basis must be the objectives of the Child Guarantee against the background of the current situation in Germany. This means that the Action Plan must, where appropriate, go beyond the individual demands of the Child Guarantee in order to achieve its basic goals. It will not be sufficient to limit measures to those that already exist.

In essence, some fundamental conditions apply both to the development of the National Action Plan and to the implementation and realization of the measures proposed in it, which are of great importance in all topics. These include, above all::

- Improving the social participation opportunities of disadvantaged children is an important process, which can bring about lasting changes in their lives. On the other hand, the Federal Government must not neglect the fight against poverty in addition to the goal of mitigating the consequences of poverty.
- Monetary and infrastructural benefits should not be played off against one another, either in preventing and combating poverty or in mitigating the consequences of poverty.
- This is an initiative that should be tackled not with single measures alone but with a whole package of measures, in which the individual measures are coordinated with one another. Therefore, the National Action Plan should be accompanied by an overall strategy and its implementation should be given high priority.
- This requires both interdepartmental coordination with a separate budget for interdepartmental measures and constructive cooperation between the Federal, State and local governments.
- In addition, families, children and young people as well as civil society, associations and academia must bring their expertise fully to bear in this process.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE, EDUCATION AND INCLUSION

With a view to guaranteeing effective and free access to high quality early childhood education and care, education and school-based activities [...], Member States are recommended to:

- (a) identify and address financial and non-financial barriers to participation in early childhood education and care, education, and school-based activities;*
- (b) take measures to prevent and reduce early school leaving, taking into account a gender perspective, to re-engage children who are at risk of dropping out or have dropped out of education or training, including by providing personalised guidance and strengthening cooperation with families;*
- (c) provide learning support to children with learning difficulties to compensate for their linguistic, cognitive and educational gaps;*
- (d) adapt facilities and educational materials of early childhood education and care and of educational establishments and provide the most appropriate response to the specific needs of children with special educational needs and of children with disabilities, using inclusive teaching and learning methods; for this purpose ensure that qualified teachers and other professionals are available, such as psychologists, speech therapists, rehabilitators, social workers or teaching assistants;*
- (e) put in place measures to support inclusive education and avoid segregated classes in early childhood education and care establishments and in educational establishments; this may also include giving priority to, or, when needed, early access for, children in need;*
- (f) provide at least one healthy meal each school day;*
- (g) ensure provision of educational materials, including digital educational tools, books, uniforms or any required clothing, where applicable;*
- (h) provide high speed connectivity, digital services and adequate equipment necessary for distance learning to ensure access to educational content online, as well as to improve digital skills of children in need and teachers and make the necessary investment to tackle all forms of digital divide;*
- (i) provide transport to early childhood education and care and education establishments, where applicable;*
- (j) ensure equal and inclusive access to school-based activities, including participation in school trips and sport, leisure and cultural activities;*
- (k) develop a framework for cooperation of educational establishments, local communities, social, health and child protection services, families and social economy actors to support inclusive education, to provide after school care and opportunities to participate in sport, leisure and cultural activities, and to build and invest in educational establishments as centres of inclusion and participation.'*

AGF recommendations

It is gratifying that the Child Guarantee tackles the issue of care and education. Few other experiences shape later life as much as long periods of deprivation and exclusion in childhood. If, for financial reasons, children are denied participation in educational events, class trips, celebrations, sports and culture, this not only affects their educational life but also leads to stigmatization and a lack of opportunities to participate in the social arena.

In its care and education section, the Child Guarantee formulates numerous recommendations that focus on formal early childhood and school education. Non-formal and informal educational processes, such as those that take place in out-of-school youth work, are not considered. However, these are of great importance in the educational development of children and young people and should be given appropriate consideration in the design of the national implementation. When implementing the Child Guarantee, special attention must also be paid to families and their resources and needs, as they are the primary actors in the education and upbringing of the children.

Basic remarks on the concept of education

From the AGF's point of view, childcare, school and out-of-school education systems must play a key role in poverty prevention. Overall, educational success in Germany is, by the very nature of the way education is structured, too closely linked to social status. At the same time, it is necessary to adapt the education systems to future challenges, such as new production methods, climate change, digitalization challenges and changing individual life plans. In this respect, major efforts are required, which the AGF cannot cover fully in this paper. However, already a serious attempt to achieve the goals of the Child Guarantee undoubtedly needs an urgent better funding of the daycare system and schools and other educational institutions.

The AGF understands education comprehensively according to Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It should fully develop 'the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential'. From the family's point of view, childcare and educational institutions thus have a complex educational mandate that encompasses far more than breeding youngsters for the labour market. Education is a right, which aims at the development of personality and values, social skills, the ability to cooperate, tolerance and the capacity for democracy. It is intended to impart general knowledge, to lay the foundations for professional training and to support children and young people holistically on their way to a fulfilled life.

In the course of implementing the Child Guarantee, we must therefore also consider which fundamental reforms are necessary in our education system for all students to develop their personalities fully and realize their potential. Children and young people need to develop not only technical skills but also general skills for future areas of responsibility and capability. This requires a discussion about a new learning and examination culture that promotes not only subject skills but also a broad spectrum of other competences.

'Effective access'

The Child Guarantee calls for 'effective [...] access to high quality early childhood education and care, education and school-based activities'. It understands this to mean 'a situation in which services are readily available, accessible, of good quality, provided in a timely manner and where the potential users are aware of their existence, as well as of entitlements to use them (...).'

The AGF welcomes the fact that access to childcare facilities in Germany has already been improved in recent years. The process of quantitative and qualitative development is far from complete, but at least a path ahead has been plotted that must be taken in the future. However, the National Action Plan for the implementation of the Child Guarantee must also focus on access to extracurricular leisure and educational opportunities as places of non-formal learning and the development of self-determination and self-efficacy. In addition to socio-structural access barriers, there are also major regional inequalities and urban–rural differences in effective access.

For the AGF, 'effective' access means that facilities are available at the times when families need them. Currently, there are still large gaps in this regard in Germany. For example, all children should have the right to high-quality, all-day care that meets their needs. Familiar childcare services must also be available during longer closures of facilities, e.g. during holidays, and viable solutions for off-peak hours and night care must be developed.

For children in refugee accommodation, specific measures should be included in the National Action Plan to guarantee their right to education and their access to schools, recreational, care and out-of-school educational opportunities.

'Free access'

The AGF supports the approach that access to facilities should be free of charge for the groups targeted in the Child Guarantee. For the family organizations, there is no question that the use of education and care services must not fail because of money. In the daycare centre, for example, families should therefore only contribute according to their actual ability to pay. Irrespective of this, long-term plans should be made to make this attendance free of charge for all children.

The Child Guarantee sensibly includes many costs that are associated with attending education and care facilities. Too often, exclusion is subtle. In Germany, for example, actual school attendance (as opposed to child daycare) is basically free of charge. However, the costs indirectly related to school attendance, such as lesson materials, school transport, entrance fees and costs for excursions or school trips or lunches, greatly predispose to exclusion. Including daycare and school transport in the catalogue of measures is therefore correct, as is the inclusion of other school-related activities, such as school trips and meals, which is called for by the Child Guarantee elsewhere. For example, parents and children may be stigmatized by the procedures for receiving support when they cannot afford the costs of excursions.

'Good quality' in all services

The Child Guarantee emphasizes that 'effective' and 'free' access means 'good quality' early childhood care, education and upbringing. Only if the services are of high quality can the principle be fulfilled that all children have a right to the advancement of their development and to an education that will make them self-reliant and capable of living in a community. And only if the services are good can they hope to reduce educational disadvantage, overcome poverty and enhance children's economic and social stability.

Numerous proposals from the AGF have emerged from discussions on the expansion of child daycare and all-day care in primary schools.¹ These emphasize, for example, that there must be binding, nationally uniform and scientifically based standards for the quality of childcare facilities. Among other things, they call for educational and care services that offer children an emotionally safe environment, are intellectually stimulating and have health-promoting effects.

Participation

In order to achieve high quality in childcare and educational institutions, children, young people and their parents must be systematically involved in the decision-making and design processes. Distinct and extensive opportunities for participation are the only way to ensure that child daycare centres and schools transform from places of care and learning into real places for living. To this end, the interests of children, young people and parents in the design of structures and everyday processes must be further systematically included.

With the increasing time children spend in childcare facilities and schools, there is a growing need among parents to be able to participate in this important area of children's lives or at least to be able to follow their development there. It is desirable to improve the exchange between the child daycare/school and family systems. New formal and informal forms of parental work are needed to achieve greater transparency in both directions. The family, social and cultural backgrounds of the parents and the associated interests and possibilities must be taken into account.

Professionals

Professionals such as educators, social workers and teachers play a central role in achieving the Child Guarantee goals. Germany is facing a glaring shortage of skilled workers in this area, which will become even more acute with increasing demand.

Measures to implement the Child Guarantee should therefore be dovetailed with existing initiatives to improve the skilled labour situation. This applies to all areas of education and care: teachers, educators, school social workers, etc. These professions should be made more attractive to entrants. This means better pay, especially for educators and social workers. Professionals need more room to manoeuvre in order to be satisfied and to do high-quality work. Promotion opportunities and horizontal career opportunities are also measures to increase the attractiveness of these professions.

The implementation of the Child Guarantee must take up and build on existing strategies to expand training capacity for educators, teachers and school social workers. This requires close coordination between the federal level and the

¹ See the AGF position papers "[Fields of action for high quality education, care and upbringing in Kitas](#)" and "[Requirements for the quality of all-day care for children of primary school age from a family perspective](#)".

Länder. However, greater efforts must also be made by the federal government and the Länder to meet the demand for suitable university and technical college teachers for the abovementioned training programmes.

Work in the care, upbringing and education of children and adolescents is characterized by a high and increasing need for cooperation between professional groups, which has not yet been sufficiently reflected in the curricula. In order to promote the ability of professional groups to cooperate, specific joint training sections of these professions could be useful, as a preparation for the requirements of interprofessional cooperation. In addition, especially against the backdrop of the Child Guarantee, professionals must be qualified in their initial, further and continuing training to work in a poverty- and inequality-sensitive manner. Furthermore, it is necessary to recruit multilingual professionals and those with a migration background.

The training to become an educator should be regulated at national level. In the childcare sector, too, at least some of the pedagogical staff, and in any case the management, should have at least a bachelor's degree, and it must also be possible to provide corresponding further training for educators. Moreover, the professional training would need to be constantly updated and more closely linked with daycare centre practice.

Involvement of different levels and actors and cooperation in support

The Child Guarantee calls for developing 'a framework for cooperation of educational establishments, local communities, social, health and child protection services, families and social economy actors [...].'

This approach requires the involvement of different actors at several levels. State, regional and municipal actors are responsible for many measures in the education and care sector. Here, however, the conditions are sometimes very different, both between city and rural areas and with regard to the financial situation of the municipalities. This must be taken into account when implementing the Child Guarantee. Financially weak municipalities find it much more difficult to provide the necessary infrastructure for children and families affected by poverty. In particular, preventive measures as well as family education and counselling services often fall victim to austerity measures.

On the ground, successful cooperation requires that interprofessional cooperation occurs on an equal footing. This requires the provision of the appropriate (time) resources, continuous development of a culture of cooperation and corresponding structures in and between the institutions (see AGF position paper on 'Requirements for the quality of all-day care for children of primary school age').

Additionally, the quality of the relationship between child, professional and parents is an important factor for the success of education, care and upbringing. Families are the primary places for the upbringing, personality development and education of children. They exercise this responsibility in cooperation with care facilities. The central point of this joint upbringing and education partnership is the well-being of the child, taking into account his or her individual life situation. The implementation of the Child Guarantee should also include improving family counselling, family education and family centres, as these are the places that support parents in increasing their competence and reflecting on their role in the educational partnerships.

A prejudice-conscious, poverty-sensitive attitude on the part of professionals and teachers is of central importance. They should treat parents and families with respect, regardless of their socio-economic background. Resources must be made available to enable a good exchange and meaningful participation by parents and children. At the same time, children and young people in general must be able to participate more than hitherto in shaping the structures and processes in schools and childcare facilities.

Digitalization

Proposals for digital equipment and participation in the digital realm are mentioned at various points in the Child Guarantee. The AGF supports this and has set out criteria for these digitalization processes in daycare centres and schools in its 'Discussion paper on digital change and its impact on families'.² Daycare centres and schools should

² https://www.ag-familie.de/media/docs19/AGF_Diskussionspapier_digitalisierung_und_familie_November19.pdf

teach media skills as part of the use of digital tools for the acquisition and presentation of knowledge, for artistic expression and also for skills related to the world of work. However, media and techniques should only be used in schools and (particularly) in daycare centres as one educational tool among many to achieve defined pedagogical goals. In addition, schools should teach a reflective approach to media content, which includes the processing of information as well as source criticism and an understanding of interest-driven communication and manipulation.

Younger children should use digital media in daycare centres only in the context of specific media education objectives and concepts, for a limited period of time and only under the guidance of appropriately qualified staff. The AGF is critical of the use of digital media by children under the age of three.

In the school sector in particular, Germany has a fundamental need to catch up, from different perspectives. The COVID-19 pandemic in particular highlighted the inadequacy of the digital equipment. While other countries were able to build on a fundamentally functioning structure during the pandemic and were thus able to introduce or expand distance learning at relatively short notice, the German school system was not ready for it, in terms either of infrastructure or of content. Equipment in schools and among families was and is lacking. There is also a lack of competence in terms of content, both technical and pedagogical.

Within the framework of the Child Guarantee, families should be provided with one or more computers in the household in line with their needs, enabling all children in a family at the same time to attend lessons virtually and have access to digital educational opportunities, as well as being able to do their homework on computer.

School dropout

Currently, according to the Education Report, around 7% of young people leave general education schools each year without a lower secondary school leaving certificate (2018: just under 54,000 young people, see Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung (2020): Bildung in Deutschland 2020. Bielefeld). The Child Guarantee accordingly points to this issue. Boredom with school, truancy and dropout can be attributable to the personality of the children and young people, to their families, the school system or the specific school situation, to the peer group of those affected, and often also in combinations of these factors. Preventing and dealing with these problems requires the cooperation of school, family and child and youth welfare services.

The implementation of the Child Guarantee should focus on two levels in particular. On the one hand, school must be seen as a place where children and young people who have difficulty in coping with the demands of school behavioural expectations and cognitive performance can find mechanisms and contact people who represent trust and security. This requires, among other things, the expansion of school social work across the board for all types of schools. Schools must develop an inclusive positive climate and at the same time an early warning system for pupils at risk. Teachers need to be sensitized not only to the warning signs of boredom and truancy but also to their own restrictive, rejecting behaviour towards pupils, which can drive the pupils into truancy. At the same time, there is a need for family and parental support services, learning support, the accompaniment of young people who are 'tired of school' by school social workers and, last but not least, a variety of counselling and support services for immigrants.

On the other hand, young people who will not achieve a school leaving qualification in the medium term need alternative pathways that serve to bridge the gap between school and working life outside the normal school and vocational training system. Despite the criticism that these offers initially require that an individual experience failure in school and the labelling of young people as 'dropouts', the promotion and widespread availability of such approaches within the framework of the Child Guarantee makes sense. There are already good approaches here, but they are too often merely project-based and underfunded.

Inclusive education

The Child Guarantee contains various proposals relating to individual support needs and inclusion. This is to be welcomed in principle, although the aim must be to create structural conditions for successful inclusion.

The AGF is sharing the results of the discussions within the “Bundesforum Familie”, which focused on the topic of ‘inclusion’ in 2013–2015.³ Those discussions highlighted that ‘inclusion’ means an appreciation of the diversity of people and families and the goal of enabling every individual to participate fully in all areas of society. Families and children are acknowledged and accepted in their diversity. Regardless of origin, skin colour, economic living conditions, educational standards, lived family form, disabilities and other individual characteristics, they are a recognized part of society, have access to all areas of society and can actively participate in shaping it. Inclusion thus does not refer to people with disabilities alone but relates to barriers to participation along social dimensions of inequality.

However, children with physical, mental/psychological, intellectual and multiple disabilities have specific participation problems in the current daycare and school system, which require more fundamental measures than other target groups.

The Child Guarantee expects measures to be put in place ‘[...] to support inclusive education and avoid segregated classes in early childhood education and care establishments and in educational establishments [...]’. The AGF supports this approach, but points out that, in Germany, given the distinctive structure of special schools and the current qualitative and quantitative state of expansion of inclusive schools, parents currently have hardly any real alternative but to choose between an inclusive school and a special school.

- Currently, children of preschool age with severe disabilities can often not find daycare centres or institutions that will accept them, let alone offer appropriate support that fulfils their right to an education. The reason is that there are too few all-day inclusive education and care facilities nationwide to meet existing needs. This is where the Child Guarantee must come in, so that such services can be made more widely available.
- Parents’ choice between an inclusive school and a special school can only become a real alternative if the right conditions are in place. This requires corresponding offers of high quality, which, however, are not available everywhere. To ensure this, what is needed is appropriate implementation of the Child Guarantee proposals, further qualification of the staff and adequate equipment in schools, supported by a socially fair distribution of funds for all school activities.
- In particular, access to all-day schools and after-school care is not widely enough available. The current expansion of all-day support for primary schoolchildren must also take into account the specific needs of children with disabilities, which, for the latter especially, means a needs-based staffing ratio, qualified staff and suitable physical equipment.
- For inclusion to be successful, the right to assistance and support for inclusion must be enhanced: this must go beyond the school sector alone and include support, in the form of funding also, in after-school centres and extracurricular educational and leisure activities. In addition to the expansion of individual rights, the application procedures for benefits for parents must be simplified and de-bureaucratized.
- Although education in Germany is largely the responsibility of the Länder, binding solutions for the implementation of the UNCRPD must be imposed at the federal level in the interest of children and young people. To this end, the children, young people and their families must be systematically involved in the decision-making and implementation processes for inclusive daycare centres and schools. The rights of people with disabilities and their families must be rigorously effectuated as quickly as possible.
- Inclusion in education entails more than taking into account the needs of children and young people with disabilities. Educational institutions in general must ensure that each individual child, with his or her specific abilities, talents and experiences, is accompanied and supported. Such an education of diversity aims at

³ See BFF final report “Family is Diversity - Living Inclusion, Ensuring Participation”: https://bundesforum-familie.de/familie/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/BFF_2015_Familie_ist_Vielfalt_Inklusion_leben_Teilhabe_sichern.pdf.

creating equal opportunities and evening out social differences. In implementing the Child Guarantee at national level, the focus must be primarily on creating conditions for a long-term, inclusive social framework

The family organizations point out that it can also be the parents in families who are affected by a disability and need proper support. Their children often also experience disadvantage as a result. For example, parents with a disability are more often dependent on support in their family life, due to their physical, mental or intellectual impairments. This is especially true for everyday problems: For example, registering children in daycare centres and schools can be difficult for parents with intellectual disabilities to manage on their own. The national action plan must therefore also provide for the necessary measures to compensate for the disadvantages of disabled parents. In addition to technical assistance, this also includes personal support for parents.

HEALTHCARE

In order to achieve the objective of "guaranteeing children in need effective and free access to quality health care", the Child Guarantee specifically requires the following commitments by Member States:

- (a) 'facilitate early detection and treatment of diseases and developmental problems, including those related to mental health, ensure access to periodic medical, including dental and ophthalmology, examinations and screening programmes; ensure timely curative and rehabilitative follow-up, including access to medicines, treatments and supports, and access to vaccination programmes;*
- (b) provide targeted rehabilitation and habilitation services for children with disabilities;*
- (c) implement accessible health promotion and disease prevention programmes targeting children in need and their families, as well as professionals working with children.'*

AGF recommendations

The national action plan must be guided by a comprehensive concept of health and must place health-promoting, proportionate preventive measures that target physical, mental and social influences on child health at the centre of its political strategy.

The relevant health policymakers and experts, as well as child and family associations, must be systematically involved in the preparation and implementation of the action plan. To achieve the goals of the Child Guarantee, close cooperation is necessary between federal, state and municipal structures, health and child/family-related actors and civil society.

General remarks on the relationship between poverty and health and on the implementation of the Child Guarantee

The link between poverty and health is still rarely emphasised in political discourse, so the explicit focus of the Child Guarantee on the context of "poverty" is very welcome.

- Improving the inclusion of children in need in the health system is an important aim that can bring about lasting changes in their circumstances. In addition to mitigating the consequences of poverty, the actual fight against poverty must also be intensified. Child poverty is a consequence of family poverty.
- At the heart of the policy strategy must be clear reference to the most vulnerable target groups, a focus on their circumstances (rather than solely on individual behaviours) and a basic concern to empowerment. The national action plan must be based on a comprehensive concept of health, taking into account physical, mental and social aspects.
- To achieve the objectives of the Child Guarantee, interdepartmental cooperation with a multidisciplinary steering group and a joint, cross-sectoral budget is necessary. The interdepartmental structures must be characterised by cooperative thinking and action. Constructive cooperation between federal, state and local structures is urgently needed.
- Structures for exchange and cooperation must be created that enable the children in need and their families, as well as associations and civil society initiatives, to participate to a large extent.
- In the area of healthcare, there are already approaches / initiatives to promote the health of children, such as the national centre for early support ("Nationales Zentrum Frühe Hilfen") and the "Health target: growing up healthy – life skills, exercise, nutrition". Their results need to be systematically included in the process of implementing the Child Guarantee.

Further developing early intervention and follow-up measures

The early support services (Frühe Hilfen) established in Germany in 2007 provide parents of children in the early years, from pregnancy to the age of three, with access to medical as well as psychosocial and educational support services. Linking health services with child and youth welfare services is particularly beneficial for vulnerable target groups.

- Within the framework of the implementation of the Child Guarantee, the heterogeneity of the services should be standardised as far as is reasonable by creating a stronger nationwide profile. The aim should be to make it easier for parents to identify and find their way to the services.
- Positive effects of the early support services (Frühe Hilfen) that support parents with young children up to the age of three years) are proven. In order to continue these effects after the child turns four and to give targeted support to their families, follow-up structures must be created. A social work-supported structure must be established for children from the age of four and their parents. It should offer counselling to help with social and health-related problems and must advocate for families and help them gain access to facilities or programmes.
- Some children in need do not have (sufficient) access to counseling, care and health promotion and therefore do not benefit from these services. Services must be geared to target groups that existing services have hitherto found hard to reach. Additionally, it has to be located in the settings in which the target groups live and relevant outreach offerings must be available.

Preventive medical checkups

Preventive medical checkups for children and adolescents are established procedures in Germany to detect health disorders or abnormalities in development at an early stage. They have high take-up rates in the younger age groups. However, take-up declines with the age of the children. In addition, there is a lower take-up rate in families with a low socio-economic status and among families with a migration history.

- Within the framework of the Child Guarantee, measures should be taken to encourage screening of children and young people in all social groups as fully as possible. This includes, among other things, providing more target group-specific information and counselling, taking steps to overcome language barriers and promoting cultural sensitivity among all healthcare professionals involved.
- Doctors and medical practitioners involved in screening should further develop their awareness of and ability to spot mental abnormalities, family violence or child neglect. In addition, they should increase their knowledge of local referral possibilities when a need for educational or social counselling is identified. Furthermore, paediatricians and adolescent doctors should, where possible, be more firmly embedded in municipal networks of medical, psychosocial and counselling support structures, including child and youth welfare.
- Overall, access routes and support services for families and children under stress must be developed in such a way that the necessary support can actually be taken up if risks and stresses are identified in the course of early detection examinations.
- In order to increase the value of school entrance health examinations for research and evaluation of health-related measures in early childhood, a far-reaching standardisation of the parameters of such examinations and the procedures used should be aimed for. In health examinations at the time of school entrance and at other standard health examinations in children's lives, reference should be made, if necessary, not only to school-related special support and other options but also to low-threshold, family-related services such as family centres, family education and family counselling.

Facilitating access to rehabilitation for children and young people

Medical rehabilitation services for children and adolescents are of great importance in mitigating the physical and psychological consequences of disabilities, illnesses or accidents and thus maintaining the children's ability to go to

school and their social inclusion, among other things. For young people, such services also increase the chances of finding their way into training and employment. Thus, in the case of mother/father–child measures, the children also benefit considerably, although the mother or father is initially at the centre of the intervention. Although Germany has an extensive system of outpatient and inpatient medical rehabilitation services, there are still barriers to accessing them.

- The national action plan for the implementation of the Child Guarantee should therefore include measures to facilitate access to child and youth rehabilitation and mother/father–child therapy.
- It is important to accentuate the family orientation in child and adolescent therapy, which takes into account the psychological and physical stresses of the entire family environment. In this way, family ties can be deepened and the family's ability to function for healthy child and adolescent development can be secured, even when they are suffering from health challenges.
- In order to improve education in hospital or clinic schools for children and adolescents and thus help them to achieve academically, these schools need increased financial resources.

Expanding prevention chains nationwide and promoting family health more vigorously

With its child-centred and resource-oriented approaches to combating poverty and preventing the consequences of poverty, the concept of "prevention chains" is directly compatible with the objectives of the Child Guarantee. The aim is in particular to enable children in precarious situations to grow and thrive. Prevention chains combine measures of health promotion and prevention, youth welfare, education, early support and early assistance and other departments at the level of the districts, cities and municipalities. Services are also interlinked across life transitions. Family health promotion offers a concept for action and structure in which, based on the needs of families and children, health-promoting conditions and interventions are coordinated and quality standards are formulated.

- The national action plan must include strong encouragement to implement community prevention chains across the board, from the earliest days of life to adolescence.
- The status of family health promotion should be specified and stressed in the national Prevention Act and in the health service laws of the states (Länder).
- Particular attention needs to be paid to improving family health promotion services for single parents, migrant families, foster families and children in residential care.

Boosting the health-promoting functions of family-related services

In Germany, there are family-related services and structures whose health-promoting effects should be brought into sharper focus in the implementation of the Child Guarantee and which must be strengthened in their health-promoting function. These include, above all, family centres, family education and family counselling facilities and public welfare-oriented providers of family recreation.

- Family centres are low-threshold contact points for families, although there are major regional differences in their design. They not only provide meeting points, educational and relief services for families but also take on important health promotion and guidance functions to further health-related counselling and support services. The national action plan should include a federal "Centres for Families" initiative, which, inter alia, should support and expand the health-promoting functions of family centres.
- Family education as a preventive service not only expands educational and parental competence but also encourages the healthy upbringing of children and adolescents and supports the competences and self-care skills of parents and children. Within the framework of the Child Guarantee, family education as a legal entitlement in the child and youth welfare system should be designed to meet the needs of families and firmly embedded in the municipal prevention chains.

- Family recreation enables low-income and stressed families to spend a holiday together. This supports families who would otherwise be excluded from the opportunity for a health-related break and for parents and children to experience themselves outside of everyday family life. Family recreation also provides low-threshold access to health, nutrition and exercise-related services during this time. The health-promoting function of family recreation must be recognised and enhanced.
- Family and educational counselling reduces health-related psychological stress in partnerships and in educational settings, as well as in separation processes. Appropriate counselling must be made accessible to all social groups throughout the country, tailored to the needs of the clients, and the sometimes long waiting times for help must be shortened.

Strengthening social work and health professionals in daycare centres and schools

The German 9th Family Report has pointed out the important tasks that school social work takes on in supporting and advising children and young people, in parental work and in reinforcing the educational partnership, as well as in networking institutions in the social space. It helps children and adolescents to experience their living environment as changeable. Health professionals can make direct preventive health offers in childcare centres and schools. Through this promotion of self-efficacy experiences and other health-related activities and consultations, school social work and health professionals have a health-promoting effect.

- The implementation of the Child Guarantee must include the comprehensive introduction of school and childcare social work. Standards must be implemented with regard to personnel, qualifications, space and equipment, as well as their structural integration into school and childcare teams.
- The integration of health professionals in multidisciplinary teams in schools and childcare centres must be promoted.

Promoting a health-promoting healthy eating and physical activity culture in childcare centres and schools

The AGF has already expressed its views in various papers on the quality of childcare in daycare centres and on the requirements of all-day care in primary schools in the areas of health, nutrition and physical activity.⁴

- Children must be able to experience themselves as competent and useful in childcare centres and schools in order to have positive (health-related) experiences of self-efficacy. They must have the space and time for non-educational encounters with other children, as well as for independent activities and for exploring the environment.
- Indoor and outdoor spaces must take the children's need for physical activity appropriately into account and rules for their use must not curtail this natural urge for activity. The framework must be designed in such a way as to positively encourage movement during breaks and in free play situations. This also includes organised sports, which can be offered through cooperation with, for example, local sports clubs.
- The implementation of the Child Guarantee should be accompanied by an initiative to increase a culture of healthy eating in daycare centres and schools, where meals should teach children about good nutrition and encourage the enjoyment of food and the joy of social interaction at mealtimes.

Attracting and qualifying specialists, promoting diverse teams and facilitating cooperation

Qualified staff and successful cooperation are central features in the areas of family health promotion, education, childcare and healthcare. To enhance the promotion of health, especially among the target groups of the Child

⁴ These papers include, but are not limited to: https://www.ag-familie.de/media/docs20/AGF_Positionpaper_All_day_care_older_children_June_2020.pdf and https://www.ag-familie.de/home/kitastandards_en.html and https://www.ag-familie.de/media/docs21/AGF_CG_Recommendations_Nutrition_2021.pdf.

Guarantee, good staffing ratios and well-qualified multiprofessional teams are needed. This includes multilingual professionals, as well as those with a migration background.

- The Child Guarantee must give a boost to the training and recruitment of professionals in the fields of family health promotion, healthcare, education and childcare. The Federal Government and the states (Länder) are responsible for ensuring that the training is geared towards producing sufficient numbers of qualified workers. This also includes meeting the demand for suitable university and technical college teachers to deliver the training.
- Within the framework of the Child Guarantee, measures should be implemented to sensitise professionals to their own tendency to discriminate against people living in poverty, as well as to the structural conditions. This aspect must be given greater emphasis in the training of the relevant professionals, which must also include developing their ability to consider different perspectives and assess resources with respect to disadvantaged target groups.
- Health promotion work with families, children and adolescents based on social situation and social space can only be successful if there is good inter-institutional, interprofessional cooperation and networking in the social environment. Networking is a fundamental and highly demanding condition for the functioning of systems and between systems that are relevant for young people and families. Professionals in education and care, health promotion and social work cannot cope with it on the side by, but network has to be recognized as an essential core component of successful professional work. Within the framework of the Child Guarantee, a mechanism must be found to consider the costs of networking and cooperation in the funding of care, education and support services, as well as of counselling services that may be needed.

HEALTHY NUTRITION

In order to achieve the objective of "ensuring that children in need have effective access to adequate and healthy food", "at least one healthy meal each school day" should be provided to children in need and the following actions are recommended to Member States:

- (a) "support access to healthy meals also outside of school days, including through in-kind or financial support, in particular in exceptional circumstances such as school closures;*
- (b) ensure that nutrition standards in early childhood education and care and education establishments address specific dietary needs;*
- (c) limit advertisement and restrict the availability of foods high in fat, salt and sugar in early childhood education and care and educational establishments;*
- (d) provide adequate information to children and families on healthy nutrition for children."*

AGF recommendations

'Healthy nutrition': an important topic in Germany too

The aim of the Child Guarantee to guarantee children in need effective access to sufficient and healthy nutrition is shared by the AGF and considered very important. Inadequate, unhealthy and unbalanced diets are an important issue in Germany, as elsewhere. Major nutrition studies (EsKiMo II study and KiGGs) consistently show that most children and adolescents eat too few fruits and vegetables or plant-based foods with a high content of complex carbohydrates. Instead, their diets are overloaded with large quantities of fresh and cooked meats, sweets, soft drinks and snacks. This is significantly truer for children from families with lower socio-economic status than for children from families in the average socio-economic range. Disadvantaged children are also subject to higher health risks. For example, they are significantly more likely to be overweight (27% of girls and about 24% of boys are overweight or obese, compared with an average of about 15% for all children) and have fewer family meals. Although the individual development of health and disease is a complex multifactorial process, family organisations recognise, with concern, the links between socio-economic inequality, the unequal distribution of balanced nutrition and unequal health opportunities that indicate a pressure for action.

In principle, the Child Guarantee offers important starting points that should be supported. In order to improve the situation with regard to nutrition, a comprehensive mix of measures is necessary that strengthens the competence of families as a whole, has a positive effect on the healthy nutritional behaviour of the children, protects them from misleading advertising and enables care and educational institutions to establish "good nutrition" as an educational topic for children and parents and also to implement it in practice.

Teaching skills and supporting families are more than just providing information

The Child Guarantee proposes 'to provide adequate information to children and families on healthy nutrition for children'. Providing information alone is not enough: a robust initiative is required to improve nutrition education for families in general.

In daily family life, parents are important role models for children, for whom they are the first reference points. Unhealthy eating and drinking behaviours of adults are often adopted by the children. Therefore, it is vital also to reach adults, to make them aware of the long-term consequences for the children of an unhealthy diet and to design a nutritional environment that enables health-promoting diets for themselves and the children. This also means encouraging adults to reflect on their own unhealthy eating habits and taking advantage of the demonstrably high willingness and openness of parents, especially in the first years of life, to ensure good nutrition for their children.

To this end, networked services that offer two-way access between services and users and are integrated into an overall municipal concept should be expanded. This requires services and their providers to be linked to the wider healthcare system. Low-threshold offers such as family centres are good examples, but they are not yet sufficiently available or known. Targeted nutrition information and educational offers must be adapted to the respective family nutrition-related background and prepared in a culturally sensitive manner.

Start early

Support for young families must be improved early on in pregnancy, around birth and in the first 1,000 days, when the nutritional behaviour of children and their families is shaped over the long term and parents are particularly amenable to accepting tips and advice.

Family midwives and other support structures around birth and in the early months of life are particularly good starting points for advising families on nutritional behaviour. However, insufficient access to aftercare midwives and shorter hospital stays in maternity clinics have contributed to a reduction in the opportunities and time for information, counselling and referral to further support services. This particularly affects mothers in stressful circumstances who, after discharge from the maternity unit, often lack the resources or the time, in their everyday lives with the child, to search independently for information about "nutrition", among other things.

As breastfeeding is of particular importance for a healthy start in life, the WHO's goal of increasing the rate of exclusively breastfed children in the first six months of life to at least 50% by 2025 should be supported in this context. The establishment of the National Breastfeeding Promotion Strategy of 2021 is therefore fitting. Its goals and actions should dovetail with the Child Guarantee National Action Plan. In particular, an increase in the social acceptance of breastfeeding and the promotion of a breastfeeding-friendly environment in public life, in universities, training and work and the municipal promotion of needs-oriented, networked and low-threshold breastfeeding promotion services should be taken up in the action plan.

In addition, professionals working with families must be supported in their competences, especially with regard to dealing with different cultural backgrounds. There should be given better attention on the possible reservations of professionals with regard to the (breastfeeding and) nutritional competence of the families, especially socio-economically deprived families.

Limit advertising for foods high in fat, salt and sugar

The Child Guarantee calls for the reduction of advertising of foods high in fat, salt and sugar. This makes sense. Given that a media-using child between three and 13 years of age sees about 15 advertisements for unhealthy foods per day and the obvious negative consequences both for the individual child and for society, regulation is urgently needed.

In the view of the family organisations, the National Action Plan should provide for the introduction of mandatory labelling of food products with the Nutri-Score. Parents and children must be able to recognise the nutritional value of products as easily as possible. In addition, the Federal Government should advocate mandatory EU-wide labelling of foods with the Nutri-Score. Children and parents can gain health benefits if they can rely on scientifically independent, colour-coded and easy-to-understand information on the front of food packaging.

School and (early) childcare facilities as central starting points

(Early) childhood education and care facilities as well as schools have central positions in the nutritional development of children. Structures in such places can remain effective over a long period of time. Important goals of health promotion and maintenance among children can thus be achieved through daycare and school catering. It is therefore very welcome that the Child Guarantee also mentions this as an important starting point, posing a challenge at federal, state and local levels to use the potential that already exists in such places. This potential is currently not fully used. According to the EsKiMo II study (2020), for example, 87% of children and adolescents could have a hot meal at

school, yet only 43% actually do so. Furthermore, there is a significant difference in the take-up of school and daycare meals between children from socio-economically deprived and stronger families.

Lunch in schools and daycare centres to be gradually made free of charge

Currently, school or daycare lunches are already free of charge for families who are entitled to benefits from the "education and participation package" (BuT). However, despite the reforms in 2019, the AGF believes that the take-up rate is too low and that the application process is still a hurdle for many eligible people. In this respect, it is important in the short term to further reduce the barriers to claiming the "BuT" so that more families benefit from a free lunch. In the medium term, however, lunch should be free for all. This would ensure that all children really benefit. In addition, social discrimination and stigmatisation would be reduced and equal (health and social) opportunities would be promoted for socio-economically disadvantaged families.

Nutrition in schools and daycare centres must be of high quality and follow the German Nutrition Association (DGE) standards

There is strong support for the requirement of the Child Guarantee to "ensure that nutrition standards in early childhood education and care and education establishments address specific dietary needs". It also rightly calls for limit advertisement and restrict the availability of foods high in fat, salt and sugar in early childhood education and care and educational establishments". Average nutritional quality in educational institutions is currently too low. Raising this must be a central goal of the efforts to implement the Child Guarantee, for which there are various approaches.

- In Germany, the quality standards of the German Nutrition Association (DGE) are an established factor that enjoy general recognition. These should be used and become mandatory in schools as well as in other institutions of early childhood care, education and upbringing and in other educational institutions. This will create trust and reliability on all sides.
- In addition, far-reaching improvements are needed in conditions in schools and daycare centres. This includes:
 - appropriate space for cooking as well as for communal lunches: the establishment of kitchens with appropriate equipment is necessary for catering and for the usage as teaching kitchens for the practical instruction in nutrition;
 - additional specialists in home economics with nutrition-related training who work closely with the teaching staff.
- If an external caterer is used, good communication with the caterer and a clear definition of quality criteria are necessary when developing the catering concept.
- There is a need for good external quality assurance for school and daycare nutrition. This is too rare in Germany, which is why clear structures must be introduced throughout the country. Central monitoring bodies, such as those that already exist at the state level in Berlin, are a sensible approach.
- The nutrition in facilities should above all be measured by high quality. Currently, however, it is the prices or costs that are uppermost. In the future, the federal, state and local authorities will be required to plan sufficient budgets for the whole area of nutrition for daycare centres and schools. In publicly funded all-day facilities, this means no longer limiting the offer to lunch, but placing more emphasis on fresh cooking on site.
- It is counterproductive for the tenders for school and daycare catering to be awarded mainly on the basis of price. A change to competition on the basis of quality is necessary, which means that the tendering institutions need to have a good concept of healthy nutrition.
- Institutions can make another important contribution by linking daycare and school catering with the curriculum and thus integrating it into their educational programmes. This should be supported by the relevant Ministries of Education.
- School tuck shops and food stalls, which sell soft drinks and food with unhealthy sugar, fat and salt content, mostly in or near the school grounds, should be integrated into the whole concept of nutrition for the school. Consideration should be given to the feasibility of state / regional regulations that would limit the sale of

unhealthy options. At the same time, schools should be supported in their transformation towards a healthier food culture by information campaigns and advisory service.

In general, the AGF argues for the embedding of a health-conscious culture in the everyday offering of food for children. From the parents' point of view, the implementation of the Child Guarantee should be accompanied by an initiative to promote cultural competence around food and eating in daycare centres and schools to ensure social inclusion for all children. Daycare and school canteens need to have broader functions than simply providing food. They should teach children about healthy nutrition and communicate the ability to enjoy food and social interaction when eating, as well as opening up opportunities to help devise meals.

Involving families, children and young people

As in other areas of educational and care institutions, the involvement of parents as well as children and young people themselves is still very much in an early stage of development. They can and should be appropriately involved in the creation of the food and nutrition culture and a respective concept in the institution that forms the basis for everyday catering. Especially if this is done in the context of comprehensive nutrition and health education, very positive results can be expected from involving children and adolescents in decisions about the food offered, as well as its regular evaluation. However, since the question of nutrition has high potential for conflict between the institution and the parents, institutions need firm rules to regulate the handling of discrepancies between nutrition in the daycare centre and in the child's family environment.

Support and train professionals

Institutions that support families can make a great contribution to education about nutrition. They can communicate information to parents directly; moreover, they are important role models for the children as well as the parents in everyday life. In all fields of support, the professionals therefore need the relevant competences with regard both to their own knowledge about nutrition and to cooperation with parents. At present, for example, there are still too many uncertainties in the application of the quality standards, such as their flexibility or their application with food from other cultures. Nutrition and health-related content must be increasingly included in the training of professionals. With regard to cooperation with parents, it is particularly important to increase understanding of the living conditions and values of families with low socio-economic status and families with a migrant background and to critically question the families' own ideas about nutrition in their particular culture. Professionals have to deal with the fact that families may feel ashamed and unappreciated and that the use of external support services may amount to an admission of their own inadequacy. Families must not be treated top-down and professionals must be helped to approach families in a spirit of appreciation and joint endeavour.

ADEQUATE HOUSING

The Child Guarantee recommends that the Member States guarantee for children in need effective access to adequate housing. It defines 'adequate housing' as a 'dwelling that meets the current national technical standards, is in a reasonable state of repair, provides a reasonable degree of thermal comfort and is available and accessible at an affordable cost.'

With a view to guaranteeing effective access to adequate housing for children in need, Member States are recommended to:

- (a) 'ensure that homeless children and their families receive adequate accommodation, prompt transfer from temporary accommodation to permanent housing and provision of relevant social and advisory services;*
- (b) assess and revise, if necessary, national, regional and local housing policies and take action to ensure that the interests of families with children in need are duly taken into account, including addressing energy poverty and preventing the risk of homelessness; such assessment and revision should also include social housing or housing assistance policies and housing benefits and further improve accessibility for children with disabilities;*
- (c) provide for priority and timely access to social housing or housing assistance for children in need and their families;*
- (d) take into account the best interests of the child as well as the child's overall situation and individual needs when placing children into institutional or foster care; ensure the transition of children from institutional or foster care to quality community-based or family-based care and support their independent living and social integration'*

In addition, in the Child Guarantee 'homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation' are addressed as special target groups.

AGF Recommendations

Housing is a human right and is also implicitly embedded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. For children, the home and the living environment are of paramount importance for their well-being, healthy growth, safety and feelings of safety and the development of their independence.

In the majority of cases, the housing situation for children is directly dependent on the housing situation of their families and parents, who are normally the tenants or owners of the space. Children are usually not perceived as actors in their own right in the housing market. In advertising for housing that targets parents, children mostly appear as small children and rarely as 'older kids' or young people who want to escape the bonds of the 'DIY garden of their own' and carve out their own free space in the public arena.

The Child Guarantee must bring back into public consciousness questions such as what kinds of homes and living environment a society wants to give children and young people, and of what quality. Children from poor families in particular are often affected by cramped living conditions and traffic-polluted, health-harming environments in cities or cut off from the infrastructure necessary to enable participation in the housing market in rural areas.

In Germany, children and their families experience disadvantages in the housing market and the situation is deteriorating, especially in urban areas. The demand of the Child Guarantee to 'assess and revise, if necessary, national, regional and local housing policies and take action to ensure that the interests of families with children in need are duly taken into account, [...]' is therefore the central starting point in the implementation of the Guarantee. As competences in Germany are distributed variously at federal, state and local levels, all the relevant institutions must be involved in this process.

Access and barriers to housing

Lack of housing, housing that is unsuitable for families and rising housing costs with too low an income are the most important factors in the difficult housing situation. Families are particularly sensitive to these factors, and vulnerable families especially, such as single parents, families with several children, families without a regular income, families hobbled by debt and families with a migration background, experience severe disadvantages in the housing market.

Too little income

In order to have good housing conditions, families with children and young people need to be assured of having sufficient income to avoid falling into poverty. For low-income families, not only is the availability of adequate housing limited, but also, after deducting housing and energy costs, their financial room for manoeuvre and thus the opportunities for children and young people for social participation are extremely constrained. The proportion of housing and energy costs in disposable household income was close to 50% for households at risk of poverty in 2019, compared with only around 22% for groups not at risk of poverty (EU-SILC).

With regard to families' income, the Child Guarantee pays particular attention to housing benefits. Indeed, housing benefit is an important measure that must be designed to meet needs. In big cities especially, it is often not possible to find a flat for a level of rent that is covered by housing benefit. In addition, housing benefit is based on the basic rent, which in some cases is only 50–60% of the total cost of renting. A similar problem arises with support benefits in German social law. Here, housing costs are too often not covered in full (see Housing Cost Gap 2020, Bundestag 19/31600). The AGF is aware that increases in social benefits to compensate for excessively high housing costs can have an indirect negative impact on rents, because they may be factored into determination of the level of rent. However, this should not be an argument against the use and improvement of social benefits as an important housing policy measure for low-income earners.

Housing and energy costs too high

The reasons for the current high housing costs and the lack of affordable housing for low-income families in large cities and urban areas are manifold. These include long-term trends such as the slow but steady growth of urbanization, as well as the number of single households and the amount of living space occupied per person. Building land and flats have become objects of speculation. The internationally increasing demand for building materials is also raising construction prices. In addition, the supply of social housing is decreasing continuously. Ultimately, there is too little housing available for low-income families and, in certain regions, for some middle-income families also. The problem is that every year significantly more dwellings fall out of the social housing supply than are being built.

In implementing the Child Guarantee, Germany is therefore required to develop plans to limit high housing and energy costs. The construction of affordable housing should be an important component in this. Especially in cities, there is a need for more consistent development of building land, more new housing construction and accelerated building completion and approval procedures, as well as the expansion or preservation of social housing stock. When developing building land and constructing new housing, criteria for climate-friendly, sustainable and environmentally sound land use must be rigorously considered. Children and young people should participate in planning and be given greater consideration in the creation of open spaces, parks and infrastructure.

In addition, the national action plan must aim to significantly limit price increases for new rentals. Strong political and administrative measures should be taken to counter rent increases and speculation in building land and housing. The public welfare-oriented and cooperative housing sector must be enlarged. The reintroduction of not-for-profit housing can also be an important component of reform.

In recent years, the problem of energy costs in addition to the initial rental costs and thus the issue of energy poverty have become more prominent, owing to rapidly rising prices of electricity, gas and heating oil. Energy is a basic resource, which must remain affordable for all families. In particular, families on low incomes must be supported in their efforts to gain efficiencies in heating, household appliances and energy supply. In order not to overburden such

families financially, policy-makers should use maximum leeway in energy taxation and financial support, according to need.

In addition, there should be an extension of legal protection and improved support for families with children and young people against disconnection of their electricity and heating supply. The threat to the well-being of children if supplies are disconnected – against the backdrop of digitalization – is obvious; it also massively harms the opportunities for children and young people to go to school and take up other forms of education.

Non-monetary access barriers

In implementing the Child Guarantee, non-financial barriers to access should also be tackled. For example, the experiences of family organizations show that, on the one hand, families are, on principle, often less welcome as tenants. Too often, the presence of children is a fundamental barrier to accessing housing. In a housing market where very many people are interested in renting a flat, flats are often given to retired couples or people without children.

On the other hand, an ethnic migration background (often only ascribed) increases the risk of being discriminated against when looking for a flat. Here, even a 'foreign'-sounding name can become a criterion for exclusion. Legal protection against discrimination in access to housing should be extended. For example, the General Equal Treatment Act currently allows housing companies to treat people differently when renting housing in order to '[...] create and maintain socially stable resident structures and balanced settlement structures as well as balanced economic, social and cultural conditions [...]' (see (§19 Abs 3 AGG).

Families who are already homeless also face barriers to being rehoused. Public and private housing associations should be put in place quotas for housing specifically reserved for homeless families with children, as well as social work support during the transition phase.

Living environment

The residential environment in the public sector, with its local infrastructure and neighbourhood or community support networks, influences the quality of life and participation opportunities of families, just as private housing does. Good local structures can relieve the burden on families, but a lack of structures or poor structures can be a risk for children and families. The quality of the neighbourhood, the availability of educational institutions, counselling, structures for public benefit, leisure activities, opportunities for exercise and open spaces, opportunities for participation and, last but not least, the avoidance of factors that are detrimental to health are all important elements of the residential environment. Displacement from individual neighbourhoods can be particularly difficult for families, as children and young people will lose their familiar social environment.

In addition to suitable housing, needs-based housing for families also means the holistic and community-oriented development of a residential neighbourhood. Community work can be a key to widening the participation of residents, especially children and young people, in neighbourhood development. Ideally, infrastructure planning should identify the needs of families and then be geared towards them. Guiding principles such as the 'city of short distances' or the '15-minute city' have positive effects on the quality of life of families when implemented in a way that is suitable for children and young people.

As in the city, the accessibility of educational, cultural, sports and recreational facilities is an important factor in the design of child- and youth-friendly rural living environments and a decisive factor for social inclusion in the countryside. Provision for mobility on local public transport is of particular importance, as it allows children and young people to visit the places that are relevant to them at low cost. In rural areas, too, participatory mechanisms are needed to shape the living space for children and young people. These must be adapted to the special features of rural areas.

Prevent (housing) emergencies, improve support in the event of homelessness

In Germany, too, families are affected or threatened by the loss of their homes and the disconnection of electricity or gas heating, etc., owing to unpaid bills. Every effort must be made to avoid this, especially if minor children are affected. Currently, families often recognize their impending homelessness far too late, as they first fall back on their private support networks (families and circles of friends). In this situation, families are quite willing to accept outside help. In implementing the Child Guarantee, special attention should therefore be paid to preventing the loss of housing for children and their families. On the other hand, assistance in the case of homelessness and the standards of accommodation for children and their families in the case of housing loss must be standardized and improved. Municipalities currently attach very different weightings to these tasks. The implementation of the Child Guarantee in Germany should therefore include measures that encourage municipalities to follow existing good examples of prevention of housing emergencies and assisting the homeless, in the interests of children and young people.

Prevention and counselling measures as well as support networks urgently need to be strengthened. The model of the specialist municipal agencies, which can actively approach families through outreach services in the event of imminent loss of housing and provide support in the event of (threatened) eviction proceedings, is a good example of this. Furthermore, the regulations should be widened to enable the municipalities to take over rent debts of families as a subsidy. Appropriate legal changes should be made to enable ordinary terminations that have already taken place to be cancelled when rent debts are settled (as is already the case with extraordinary terminations).

Single women with children usually seek counselling at an early stage when they are threatened with losing their home. However, social workers report that, once they have become homeless, they often fail to seek further public assistance to the same extent fearing that homelessness could lead to the removal of a child by the youth welfare office. Legal clarification and sensitive support services are necessary here.

The National Action Plan should ensure the requirement of the Child Guarantee nationwide 'that homeless children and their families receive adequate accommodation, prompt transfer from temporary accommodation to permanent housing and provision of relevant social and advisory services'. In particular, women with children in women's shelters who have fled domestic violence are often in dire need of housing. In the transition from the women's shelter to the housing market, as well as from other transitional forms of social housing, good support and accompaniment are needed for these women and their children. In addition, in areas with restricted housing markets, large housing providers should be obliged to maintain quotas for clients of social agencies.

Expand counselling

In the national action plan, prevention chains should be considered, as they are already known from child protection. An important contribution can thus be made to early recognition of the housing problems of families and measures to counter them at an early stage. Supporting families at risk of homelessness through counselling and personal support is an important element. In addition, emergency housing assistance must be more conceptually oriented towards the needs of families at risk of homelessness or already affected by it.

Counselling centres should also be able to provide multilingual counselling or to call in interpreters. Anti-discrimination offices provide low-threshold and free support to those seeking advice if there is a suspicion of discrimination in the housing market.



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