

Article

Needs-based family support – Perception, structures and challenges in practical implementation

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Abstract

Research into the utilisation of preventive family support relates mainly to structural requirements such as low-threshold access to services. Beside structural framework conditions in context of family support, the question arises as to what extent the subjective perception of preventive family support is one more aspect of utilisation and to what extent preventive family support actually matches the needs of families. This Study asks as well what connotations and attitudes do families have regarding family support services? How important do families consider these offers and what are their needs? Based on a mixed-methods design, the Citizens' Survey on Family Support was conducted by means of a standardised questionnaire in combination with interviews of family support users and non-users in order to elaborate deeper meaning structures through the qualitative analysis method of grounded theory. Summary survey results point out that family support in Germany includes a wide range of offers, which can promote a broad array of familial interests and competences, but not all families, diverse as they are, feel consciously addressed – or else they see obstacles to using family services. Our qualitative results point out that 'family support' as a term is neither clearly identified nor properly understood by many citizens – or else it has different connotations. However, those families who do use the services – within the framework of transitioning to parenthood – feel supported in their psychosocial adaptations and regulatory processes. In relation to results and as compared to other EU countries, practical implications for further developments in family support approaches are discussed.

Keywords: preventive family support services; family-based needs

Introduction

Families usually have miscellaneous needs for orientation and support at their very different family life stages and situations: bringing up children and ensuring their successful development, reconciling family and work, living in a partnership, caring for relatives – all these and more are tasks that take place at different stages of life and in different familial situations. Within that, families come with their own sets of needs and require complex education and versatile skills for all family members to manage familial tasks, situations and transformations as described.

Family support offers are therefore elementary opportunities to contribute to a successful family life. ‘Family support’ within a preventive approach deals with existing problems as individually as possible, for example, in order to avoid danger to child welfare and to health risks (Dunst, 1997). At the same time, the focus of family support is on the strengths of the families and on the recognition of their competence to define their own needs (Pinkerton, Dolan and Canavan, 2004, p. 125). In this promoting approach, the variety of family support services is intended to empower families in their diversity and to promote successful family life. In the context of social work and in terms of problematic living conditions, family support is aimed at parents, children and other family members (Pinkerton et al., 2004). Rupp, Mengel and Smolka (2010) state in this connection that family support both stimulates a reflection on one’s own role and actions, in familial coexistence, while also serving as a point of orientation.

In order to reach people throughout their lifetime and within the heterogeneity of their families, a general family support – in German *Familienbildung* – can be understood as a generic term, one which includes a wide range of preventive family-oriented and supportive services and programmes. However, *Familienbildung* (literally translated as family education) is an ambiguous term and is difficult to translate in an international context. There is no direct translation and it tends to be subsumed under the international terms ‘family support/promotion’ and ‘parenting support/promotion’ (Frost and Dolan, 2012; Pinkerton and Katz, 2003). *Familienbildung* implies that families have to be educated, but families have usually already evolved and in fact do not need to be educated. Nevertheless, families often need balance, stimulation and support in their different life phases and arrangements (Müller, Bräutigam and Lentz-Becker, 2019, S.87). This concept of family support is less focused on education and more on support and service.

International family support services in Belgium, Sweden or Finland, for instance, as well as *Familienbildung* in Germany, have basically the same purpose; they not only are differently organised in these countries but also take into consideration a broader palette with respect to family needs. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the intentions of *Familienbildung* in Germany do not in fact reach all families in their different constellations, needs and social situations. Family support such as preventing, promoting and educating therefore requires constant review and a continuous focus on needs, content, access, equipment and quality. The services have to adapt to the needs for current family realities – not the other way around. This is a challenge because there are very different needs requiring support across all family types and life situations. On the one hand, this article gives an insight into the structures of family support in Germany, Belgium, Sweden and Finland, while also clarifying, based on empirical studies, what families associate with family support offers – and which needs and target groups are addressed. On the other hand, we underline the importance of considering individual needs from the perspective of families. Based on the findings from the international context, and in connection with the empirical results, final recommendations for the further development of family support in Germany are put forward.

Family and family support in research

Families and family support services are simultaneously subject to social, economic, cultural and ethnic processes of change. And in today’s post-modern Western civilisation, family as a phenomenon is becoming increasingly complex and diverse. This requires an ongoing review of the needs-oriented content, access structures and quality of offers in the field of family support services. At the same time, family and parenting are increasingly at the centre of political, educational and sociological attention (Böllert, 2015). Concerning the theory and empiricism of social science family research, it should be noted that these are widely received, and relate to social pedagogical questions; yet a fundamental examination

of family is still the exception. It is especially the case when it comes to research into specific questions and methodological priorities (Sabla, 2015, p. 221). For the purpose of understanding family on a theoretical level, there are several explanations and perspectives. Family is not a rigid entity but must be generated every day. These generic processes are called ‘doing family’ after Schier and Jurczyk (2008), which refers to family achievements with which the construct of family is permanently re-established as a collective whole in everyday and biographical action. It always takes place where people live within a generational perspective of long-term care relationships (Thiessen, 2009, p. 10). The concept of family can furthermore be viewed from different perspectives (Müller et al., 2019). Nave-Herz (2012), for instance, assumes – as a family sociologist – a biological–social dual nature of family, in which family is defined by reproduction and socialisation. Biological here means the consanguineous relationship within the family, and the social aspect means the constitutive characteristics of the family, which signifies a special relationship of cooperation, socialisation and solidarity within a unique role structure.

With advances in reproductive medicine, however, the biological–social dual nature of the family is sometimes dissolved. The pluralisation of family forms also contributes to the dissolution of the biological–social dual nature of the family (Nave-Herz, 2006). Thus, there are very different familial life situations. For example, families with or without a marriage certificate, single-parent families, rainbow and patchwork families, foster families, families with different migrant backgrounds and countless more. It lies in the individual attribution of each person as to whether family kinship is biologically or/and socially based or even whether pets such as cats and dogs belong to the family. Family support service structures have to adapt to these diverse family realities.

Family-related sociological research literature in different European countries conveys family models and realities, which are diverse, dynamic and colourful (Vaskovics, 1997, p. 20). Besides, research results can prove partly incomplete or contradictory when it comes to mapping the diversity of everyday family realities and needs (Vaskovics, 1997, p. 20). At the same time, there are often transnational generalised theses about processes in family life and about the needs of families, without taking into account family research on country-specific developments and differences in European countries. What families need in order for their family life to succeed, and how families wish to be addressed in their diversity, is also of relevance in the field of general family support services. However, general family support is, at least in Germany, an area insufficiently researched (Buschner, 2019, p. 56) and we do not know much about the diversity of families’ needs. This is certainly also due to the high complexity of the subject area ‘family support’ because in this, as well as in other areas of social work, there are often no simple or linear causal connections between the utilisation of services and the effects these may have on family life (Buschner, 2019, p. 59). Therefore difficulties lie, for example, in the temporal delimitation, since the effort and benefit of preventive measures such as family support usually differ across time. However, international results confirm the positive effects of family support in improving parental psychosocial health – for example, improvements in stress, anxiety, confidence and satisfaction with partner relationships, albeit with a short follow-up (Barlow, Smailagic, Huband, Roloff and Bennett, 2014). To what extent the primarily Anglo-American results can be transferred to other countries is largely unclear. Weiss, Schmucker and Lösel (2015) presented a meta-analysis of German studies on family-based supporting measures with significant positive mean effect on parenting skills and child outcome measures. A recent German study on *Familienbildung* as a support service for families indicates that it is becoming increasingly important in relation to various family-relevant topics such as education issues, health promotion or even dealing with the media (Eurich and Händel, 2019). In this article we investigate how family services are implemented structurally in Germany and in comparison with other EU countries such as Sweden, Belgium and Finland and the methods by which families are reached in their diversity and their various needs by family services.

The approach of *Familienbildung* – Comparing family support in Germany and other European countries

Overall, the aims of the family support approach in Germany are very similar to those in other European countries. In Europe programmes of family support extend well beyond the promotion and

care of children; they also aim at strengthening parental authority in dealing with children, as well as family stability and well-being. Consequently, the range of family support services is extremely wide (Daly, 2012, p. 146).

The main difference can be found in the organisational structures and the access culture of a broad-based family service. In Belgium, Sweden and Finland, families feel addressed in their different needs through social space-oriented access and multifunctional partnership structures. In all federal states of Germany, a wide range of family support services is already in place in many municipalities, often in the form of courses and lectures. However, they are mainly implemented in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and in an institutional, rather passive ‘walk-ins welcome’ approach. Preventive family support services in Germany (*Familienbildung*) are primarily assigned to the remit of social law in terms of child and youth welfare and also to the respective laws of the federal states for adult and further education. Family support is administered in different departments and hardly understood as a cross-sectional task. This makes it very difficult to provide seamless and straightforward support, especially when a family has multiple needs (health problems, conflicts in the partnership, and so on).

Comparing Germany to other EU states, such as Belgium, Sweden and Finland, *Familienbildung* is defined less by sectional thinking, since all support services for families are organised and practised in multifunctional partnership structures. Family support is understood rather as a family service and organises itself in cross-border cooperation among different service sectors, administrative sectors and different organisations. This particularly concerns the integration of health and social sectors.

For example, let us consider the ‘family centre’ and the ‘parenting shop’ in Flanders and Brussels (Belgium). The Flemish government describes by law what kind of ‘parenting support’ should be offered in a ‘family centre’ (Blondeel, De Schuymer, Strynckx and Travers, 2012, p. 1). The minimum is (1) health care, (2) educational aids and (3) activities designed to promote social cohesion. Health care involves preventive health services for pregnant women, children and families. This includes, among other things, vaccination, early detection of risks and health problems and general health promotion. In Germany, however, the departments for family promotion and health care are divided into different spheres of responsibility. While in Germany family service is mainly organised in a ‘walk-ins welcome’ approach for families, which is often a hurdle – for example, because of long journeys or because concerns and fears can arise even before the services are used, especially among people in precarious life situations – in Belgium a rather active principle of reaching out to families applies, in that the differentiated services are brought integratively to families in their community (social space-oriented family services).

In Sweden, the goal is the mental and physical health of children, adolescents and parents. In this context a model called ‘family’s house’ was developed as part of the Plan for Advancing Mental Healthcare (1999–2008) (Adolfson, Martinussen, Thyraug and Vedeler, 2012, p. 12). This is essentially an interdisciplinary community service that coordinates the primary health care of children and young people, as well as the social services working with – and within – communities with the goal of supporting families. In order to make all services easily accessible, they are offered in a ‘family’s house’ and therefore under one roof in order to provide comprehensive and supportive services for families as appropriately and as early as possible. The specialists from the various fields form interdisciplinary and flexible teams, which orient their work towards the recommended guidelines as well as the needs and wishes of the family members (Barry and Jenkins, 2007).

In Finland too, family services aim at promoting the health and well-being of children and their families from a psychological, medical and social perspective. It is common in Finland for almost all parents to participate in the standard offers of prenatal and child health services. In this context, they are also involved in the family service with all its provisions at an early stage because these are standard services and part of a self-evident infrastructure (Gärdsmo Pettersson and Zeime, 2000, p. 98).

This article clarifies the situation in Germany. Comparing the different structures of Germany and the three other European countries, the question arises as to what, from citizens’ point of view, is important in terms of family support and how it relates to the accessibility of services for all families in Germany.

Aim of this study

On the one hand, this empirical article analyses structural issues in Germany in comparison with other European countries. On the other, it focuses on the subjective views of individual citizens and what they expect from family support. Structure-related perspectives are furthermore supplemented by a systematic recording of dimensions of meaning and needs of people in familial involvement as a basis for new recommendations. This article examines how families nowadays feel addressed by offers of family support in Germany, what their needs and barriers to access are, what connotations and attitudes families have about family support services and what degree of importance families ascribe to these services. Based on an empirical mixed-methods design (Schoonenboom and Johnson, 2017), a Citizens' Survey on Family Support was conducted by means of a standardised questionnaire in combination with interviews of family support users and non-users. The quantitative citizens' survey is first presented methodically, including the results. The qualitative method and the results of the analysis thereof are then analysed. The survey design used corresponds to a non-probabilistic occasional sample, so it is not permissible to generalise the results of the present sample to the entire population. However, certain tendencies can be observed in this.

Quantitative method – Citizens' Survey on Family Support

Within the quantitative approach of the chosen mixed-method design, the Citizens' Survey on Family Support (both online-based and paper and pencil) took place between November 2015 and January 2016. The survey reflected the then-current state of the family support landscape in rural areas of north-eastern Germany from the perspective of citizens in their familial involvement. An extensive, partially standardised questionnaire was developed, based on the research priorities of the State Institute for Family Research at the University of Bamberg, because it was the only German-language questionnaire previously available in this field. In order to address the questions raised in this article, the Parents' Survey on Family Support of the Staatsinstitut für Familienforschung an der Universität Bamberg (Rupp et al., 2010) was modified and partly supplemented. The results introduced in this article are a small sample taken from an extensive study. The data was evaluated using an SPSS programme descriptively and by means of regression analysis. In the course of the survey, a broad list of topics for family support was elaborated, together with the question of the interest in these topics and the availability of information on family support services. In addition, questions were asked about respondents' awareness of the family support structure in place of residence, which types of offers would be preferred and which type of offers led the users to feel empowered. They were also asked about possible barriers that would inhibit or make it more difficult to use family support services (for example, participation fees). With regard to the interpretation of the results, a weighting of the data by county and gender was carried out. This weighting was based on the figures of the Federal State Statistical Office of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in 2015. The data was also filtered so as to limit the calculations to persons who chose a district from the federal state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern as their place of residence and who reported being over 18 years of age.

Sample description in quantitative Citizens' Survey on Family Support

The total sample size was $N = 1742$, of which 455 were conducted online and 1287 were carried out via paper-and-pencil questionnaire (see Figure 1).

In the overall sample, 17 people did not provide information on their gender and age, so the data set consists of the total number of 1742 respondents. At the time of the survey, 397 respondents out of the total number ($N = 1742$) were childless. One thousand one hundred and seventy-eight respondents indicated custody of at least one child, with the ages of the children ranging from one to nine. The survey involved 5.5 per cent parents and 14 per cent grandparents. As regards level of education, about 25 per cent had a degree, 18 per cent had completed a programme of education, about 16 per cent had a high school diploma and around 1 per cent did not have a school-leaving certificate.

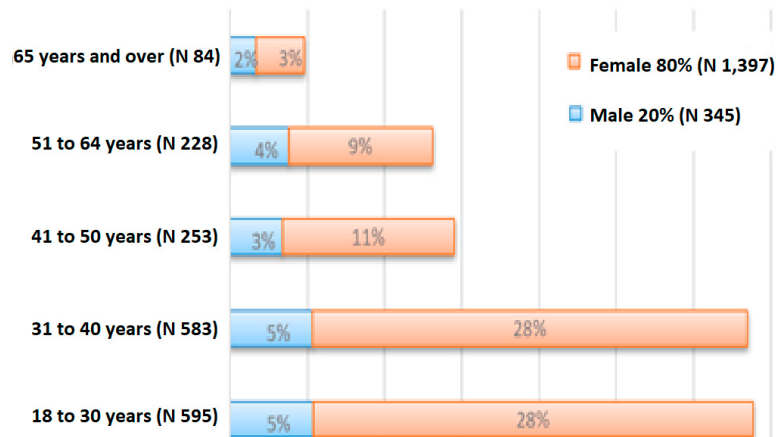


Figure 1. Overall sample of the citizens' survey (percentage and number, divided into ages between 18 and 65 years as well as gender). (Source: Authors, 2020).

The average age was 37.8 years, and three-quarters of all respondents were 45 years old or younger at the time of the survey. In terms of employment, 44.1 per cent worked full-time, 20.5 per cent worked part-time, 7 per cent worked in casual jobs and 28 per cent were no longer working. The family income of the respondents was distributed similarly to the figures of the Federal Statistical Office of 2015 for the state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Most respondents reported 2000–2999 euros/month as family net income.

Results

In the survey it was asked which of the following offerings citizens feel addressed by (submenu items with multiple answers were possible). Results of the evaluation (see Figure 2) show that 37 per cent felt attracted to family support in particular with regard to offers for adults (17 per cent), children (17 per cent), infants (14 per cent) and babies (14 per cent), but over half of those surveyed (53 per cent) said they did not feel attracted to family support. These include, in particular, men, younger people (18–30 years), childless people and people from low-income families.

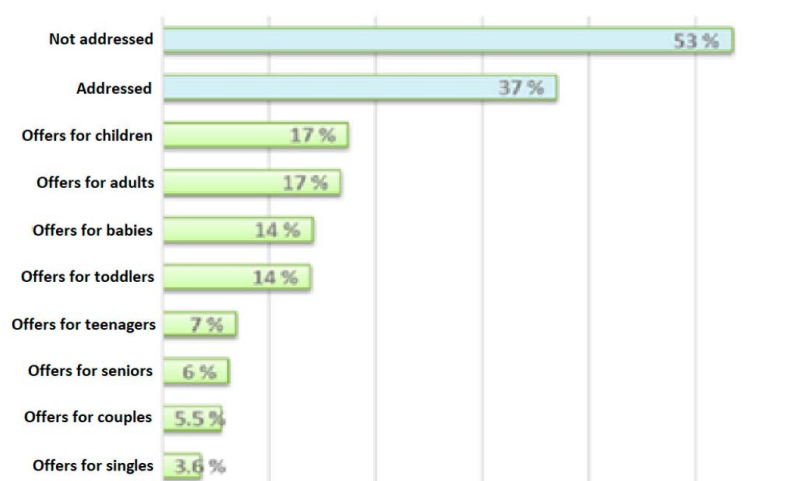


Figure 2. Attractiveness of family support offers to citizens (percentage data). (Source: Authors, 2020).

In addition, regression analyses were performed to model relationships between various factors that affect the extent to which respondents feel or do not feel attracted to family support offerings. This is mainly due to the following influencing factors:

1. Age: respondents between the ages of 18 and 30 felt the least likely to be attracted to family support. Conversely, 31–40-year-olds and the over-65s felt most attracted by family support offers. Offers for toddlers are particularly appealing for 31–40-year-olds. However, interest decreases significantly with older children’s age.
2. Parenthood: respondents with children felt significantly more attracted to family support services than respondents without.
3. Family structures: smaller families were more likely to be attracted to family support than larger families. In the case of adult services, single-person and single-parent respondents were particularly attracted. Senior respondents (65-year-olds and older) were most likely to feel addressed.
4. Economic aspects: part-time workers were more interested in family support services than full-time employees. Families with higher incomes were more likely to feel targeted.

Areas of interest in family support were also examined and classified as interest in entertainment offers and general competences, as well as parenting or relationship issues.

Figure 3 represents a summary of the previously mentioned areas of interest and shows that entertainment (29 per cent) as well as competence promotion (27 per cent) and parenting (25 per cent) seem almost equally of most interest to respondents.

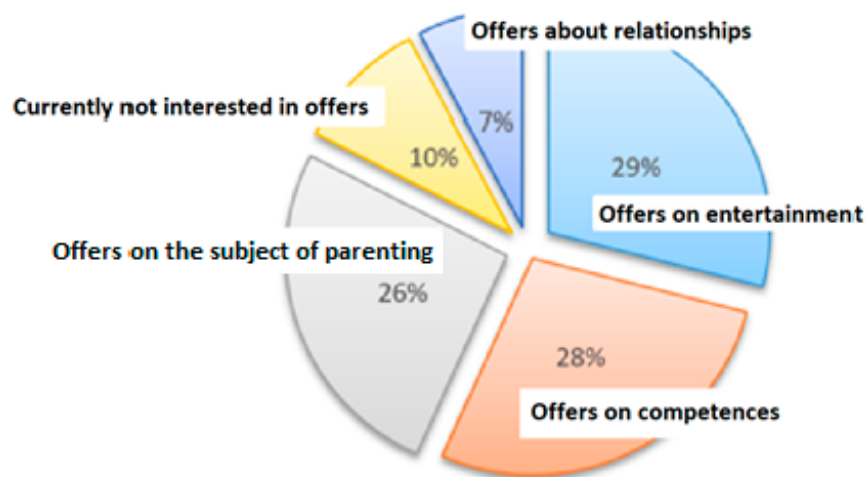


Figure 3. Areas of interest in family support (percentage data). (Source: Authors, 2020).

With the focus on the description of the category ‘offers on competences’ (as seen in Figure 3), the following subcategories have been established (see Figure 4).

In ‘promotion of competences’ (see Figure 4), most frequently chosen aspects are ‘coping with conflict’ (57 per cent), ‘language education or promotion’ (52 per cent) and clarification of financial issues (42 per cent).

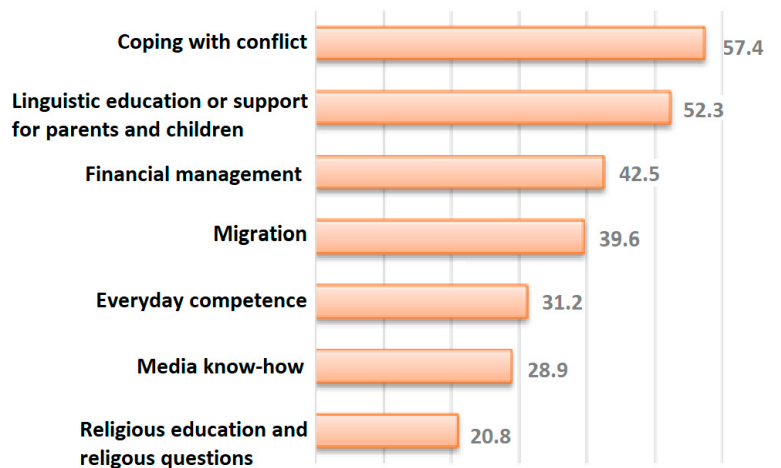


Figure 4. Subcategories of interest in offers for promoting competences (percentage of all valid answers, multiple nominations; percentage data). (Source: Authors, 2020).

With the focus on the description of the category ‘offers on the subject of parenting’ (as seen in Figure 3), the following subcategories were established (see Figure 5).

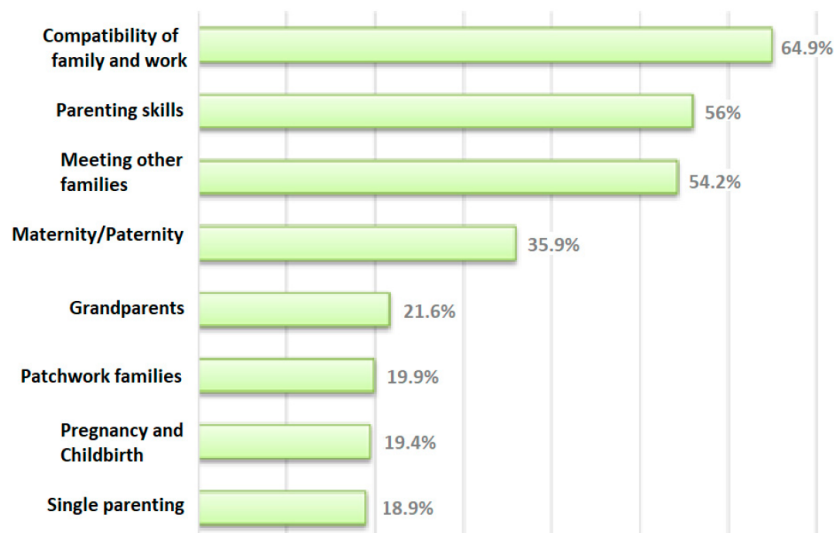


Figure 5. Subcategories of interest in parenting offers (percentage of all valid answers, multiple nominations). (Source: Authors, 2020).

In the area of offerings on parenthood, the main topics are ‘compatibility of family and work’ (65 per cent), ‘parental skills’ (56 per cent) and ‘meeting with other families’ (54 per cent). Nevertheless, the multifaceted interests show that in addition to classic mother–child assistance, services on offer for other family constellations are also interesting and extend over different family phases and situations.

Regression analyses point out that partnership assistance strategies are interesting for men, respondents with adult children, expectant parents, medium and large families as well as for respondents in education. In summary, with regard to the preference for certain services, the following tendency can be stated: young respondents and men are generally uninterested. Parents of underage children (<18 year-olds) prefer a wide range of types of help. Parents of adult children (>18 year-olds) prefer services that are clearly tailored to adults, which are rather non-binding (‘one-off lectures’). Older people prefer self-organised

groups that meet regularly and that are open to new participants. Economic circumstances do not have a particularly strong influence on the decision to favour a particular type of event.

In the survey it was of interest which personal relevance family support offers have. A total of 96 per cent of respondents considered the offers to be important, regardless of whether these offers were currently being used or not. Women, in particular, were more likely than men to use the services and found them more important than many men did. Where services were used in the context of family support, the question was in which areas the respondents felt empowered. The following areas were covered (see Figure 6).

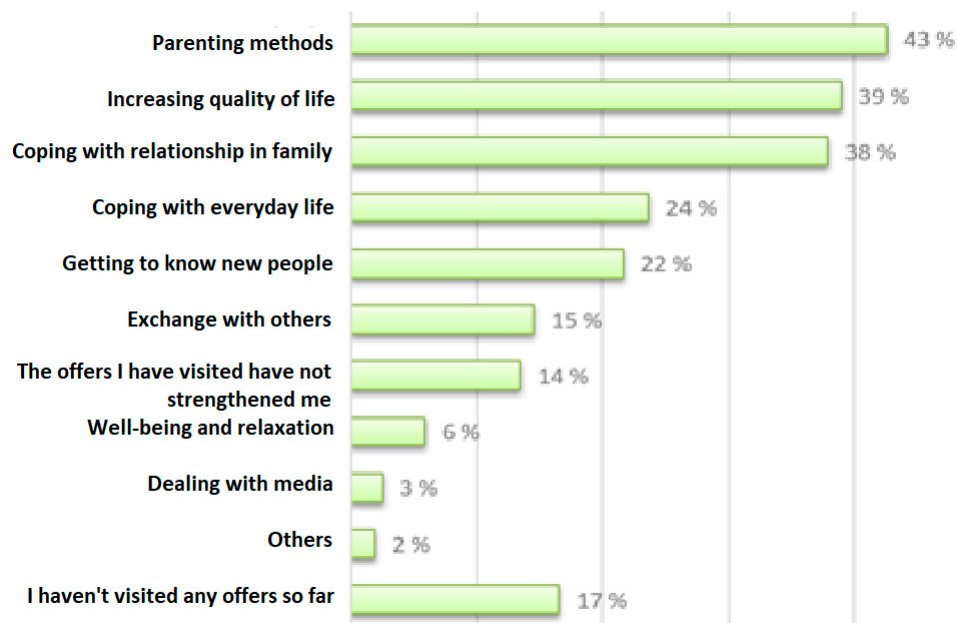


Figure 6. Variables of empowerment for users in family support offers (percentage of all valid multiple answers). (Source: Authors, 2020).

Figure 6 shows that 17 per cent of respondents had not yet used family support at the time of the survey and did not make any statements neither about acceptance of family support offers nor about direct experiences of empowerment. However, a total of 83 per cent of respondents used family support services. Of the users, 43 per cent felt empowered in their 'parenting methods', in 'increasing quality of life' (39 per cent) and in their 'coping with relationship in family' (38 per cent), and 14 per cent did not feel empowered.

Additional analyses point out that men mostly felt empowered in 'increasing quality of life' (49.5 per cent), 'parenting methods' (34.4 per cent) and 'coping with relationship in family' (25.2 per cent), while women felt mostly empowered in 'parenting methods' (48.9 per cent), 'coping with relationship in family' (45.5 per cent) and 'increase in quality of life' (32.6 per cent). These top three are found in all independent variables. There are no significant differences in age, parenthood, family structure and economic circumstances.

In the access to and in the claim for assistance, many different conditions can either be conducive or obstructive. Therefore, in the survey, barriers and obstacles to the use of family support services were enquired about (see Figure 7).

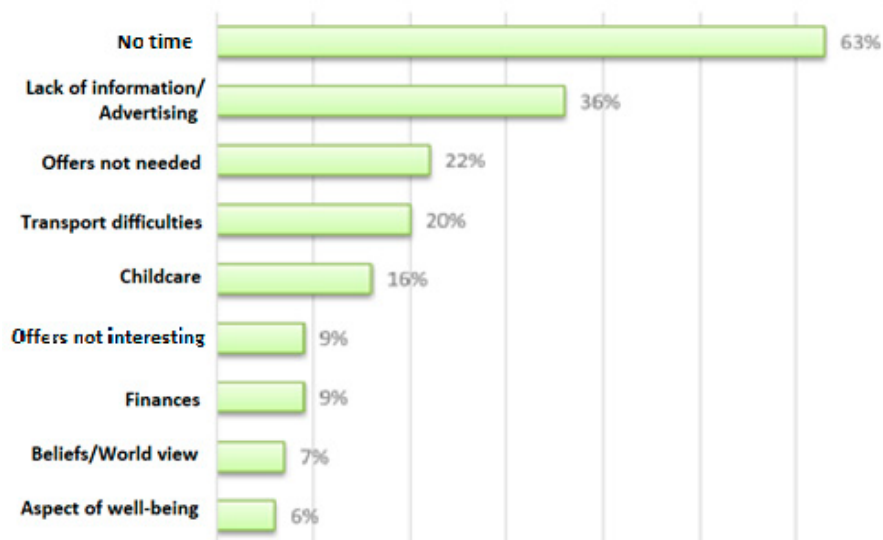


Figure 7. Obstacles to the use of family support services (percentage of all valid, multiple answers; percentage data). (Source: Authors, 2020).

More than half of respondents said the primary obstacle is ‘No time’ (63 per cent) as seen in Figure 7; this applies in particular to full-time employees; the time of day at which family support events take place can also be a hindrance to access. Younger respondents often cited the ‘lack of information’ as a reason. For large families, transport difficulties seem to be an obstacle to participating in family support services. For respondents who mainly care for the children themselves and for single parents, ‘Childcare’ appears to be a major obstacle.

Qualitative research in family support – Method

As discussed earlier, *Familienbildung* as a term is not clearly identified and understood by many citizens, or that it has different connotations for different people. In particular, during the pre-test phase of questionnaire development for the Citizens’ Survey, it was found that the concept of family support seemed to be inconsistent in empiricism. Empirically assured explanations and reflections on perception as well as utilisation of family services in different structures and in adaption to family needs, topics and problems are essential for professional action in the family support service (Otto, Polutta and Ziegler, 2010). From these contexts, in addition to the quantitative survey design, accompanying qualitative empirical studies with individuals and focus groups were elected in order to elaborate deeper meaning structures of family support. On the basis of semi-structured interviews, citizens over the age of 18 were questioned, as well as experts from the field of practice. Viewed from different perspectives, the data analysis and the theory formation were based on the grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Schröder and Schulze, 2010) and content analysis (Mayring, 2010). The collected data was analysed with MAX QDA software. The purpose of this study was to gain more differentiated and profound approaches to the current understanding of family support of different actors. It was also necessary to reconstruct successful aspects and perceived problems in the field of family support in eastern Germany and to identify other possible topics and needs relevant to families.

Results of interviews

The qualitative research was to focus on different meanings of family support that emerged in the evaluation of the interviews. In the interviews it became clear that the term ‘family support’ is either unknown to addressees or is understood in a wide range of references – sometimes overly broad, and at other times overly narrow. It is often conceived of as a support on offer especially in relation to pregnancy

and early motherhood. Family support is often poorly understood as a multifaceted offer for all family members from cradle to grave.

From the perspective of users, family support in the transition to parenthood and early parenthood is seen as a support, especially if there is a lack of family-related social structures, that is, if there are no grandparents, other families in the neighbourhood or other supportive networks within the social living space.

Because there are no extended family structures or even a traditional village structure, this is simply not there. Somehow, where you have grandparents, relatives or a friend with experience in family things next door. Moreover, that's what a family centre has to do. (Interview with a family support user)

To close the circle, such courses are, of course, not bad. (Interview with a family support user)

That 'circle', as it was defined by the interviewee, was seen in the context of it being completed within the realm of family support services, and refers to the thesis of cybernetic regulatory circuits (Küppers, 2019). In the beginning of the transition to parenthood, feelings of insecurity and tension were described by interviewed parents, which are often associated with the need for social connection with other persons in a similar phase of life (reference group). Family supports not only offer opportunities for this but also meet the need for orientation, belonging and strengthening of parental competences. Interviews pointed out that family support is characterised by salutogenetic dynamics (McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson and Fromer, 1988), that is, strengthening of resources that are important for an individual and family life design and management. This includes everyday action skills as well as examination of familial relationship-building possibilities and promotion of social resources beyond family. Consequently, family support as a personal or behaviour-oriented service can be understood as a stimulus and catalyst for psychosocial regulation processes, to strengthen intrapersonal resources of users in coping with transitions to parenthood (Müller et al., 2019, p. 68). These resources mean not only parental and partnership knowledge as well as parental competences, but also active engagement with the shaping of relationships within the family and the development of social networks around family life (Müller et al., 2019, p. 68).

Conclusion and recommendation of the study

The aim of the survey was to identify structural, objective characteristics of family support and subjective data as to how/whether citizens feel addressed and how important these family support services are to them. People who have used family support as services felt empowered, especially when it comes to parenting methods and parental quality of life, as well as in coping with everyday life circumstances and relationships within the family. In this way, it can be assumed that these services have left a constructive impression on people who have used them and can be understood as a strength-oriented catalyst for psychosocial regulation processes, which could be clarified in more depth in the qualitative empirical study. However, attitudes to the importance of – and use of – family support services depend primarily on whether respondents themselves have children. This shows that family service is often either simply not known about, or else seen as being reduced to something only for mothers with young children, and not as an attractive support for all people in different familial involvements, or one in which the respondents felt that they would be able to justify investing their time.

Since just over half of the respondents answered that they were not interested in family support services, it is highly recommended that suitable family support service structures should be acquired and implemented not only for mothers with children but also for all family members, in particular for men, younger people (18–30 years), people without children and families on low incomes. The task is to consider family realities in their diversity as well as the needs of families in their different life stages and situations. For this reason, the survey included a broad list of topics, needs and interests related to families, in which the respondents could also see a need for themselves. In order to better address the needs and interests of families, it is advisable to think about new formats and access opportunities as well as structures in Germany. Professionals could think more about family-support benefits of structures in

everyday learning arrangements within a social space-oriented approach for families in municipalities (for example, sports clubs, family meeting points or libraries), as is the case in Belgium. There, family services are organised and practised in multifunctional partnership structures. Comparing Germany's family support to other EU states such as Belgium, Sweden and Finland, the main difference can be found in organisational structures. It is suggested that in Germany the access culture of a broad-based family service has to be more clearly discernible to people in everyday life as being a network service designed to reach such a wide diversity of families with their different needs. This kind of family service approach network might, for example, link prenatal health care, child health care, open kindergarten and family-related activities, interventions and counselling to a whole range of actors in social work, health and early development, and state and non-governmental institutions into a multidisciplinary network within a community. Such a social space-oriented structure provides better access and reduces obstacles to a region's family-related services (Bing, 2012; Kekkonen, Montonen and Viitala, 2012; Lundqvist, 2014). This networking family service approach can also be very attractive for the German family support landscape, and as an impetus for the revision of offer and service structure in which all family-relevant actors work, and could provide an opportunity to reach greater numbers of diverse families with their wide variety of needs.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, the sample of the Citizens' Survey does not fully represent the population of the federal state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. The survey design used corresponds to a non-probabilistic occasional sample, making it impossible to use the results to accurately represent the entire population. However, certain tendencies can be seen in this. In the interview analysis, a theoretical saturation in the sense of grounded theory was not achieved because research-pragmatic reasons precluded this. Further investigations on psychosocial regulation processes in the family support system are recommended.

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Declarations and conflict of interests

The authors declare that consent has been given from all authors for publication and their contributions to the article. No potential conflict of interest or competing interests was reported by the authors. Our research is carried out in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation of the European Union. The data was collected and analysed in co-ordination with the data protection officer from Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and in accordance with the code of ethics of the German Society for Educational Science. (https://www.dgfe.de/fileadmin/OrdnerRedakteure/Satzung_etc/Ethikkodex_2016.pdf).

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