

Flexibility in Child Care Services: Discussing quality criteria.¹

Manuscript

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- **Sheet 3: Changing working sphere and the challenges for child care centres**

Topic 1

The demand for child care is rising with the increasing participation of women in the labour market. In Germany, mother's are to a high degree working part time, but recent studies have shown, that his part time is not the traditional one in the morning any more but rather working schedules are characterised by shifts, work on week-ends or at night. To give you a figure: in 2004 85% of **all** employees work in non-standard working schedules. However, due to the changed structure of our knowledge and service based economy, **parents' child care demands**, as for care within the early morning, evenings, nights and week-ends as well as normal hours, have occurred recently.

Topic 2

As for Germany it is obvious that not only more child care services are needed but they are needed during parents' non-standard or flexible working hours. As a consequence, it is obvious that **a flexibilisation of child care** services is a condition for reconciling work and family. For a lot of working parents flexible child care services is even the only way to be able to work.

Topic 3

The changes within the working patterns of parents have increased parents' need for child care. This development poses challenges for child care organisations in their effort to support parents endeavouring to combine work and family demands and to provide a high quality care for children.

Now in our study we wanted to find out, how child care institutions have reacted to the new and changed the more individual care needs of families - with regard to the organisation of their pedagogical schedule, their day structure as well as regarding the content of project and literacy offered for children.

- **Sheet 4: The role of quality criteria in *flexible* child care**

Quality criteria, which are defined on a common level – like within social policy or law – support the development of a certain standard in social services, like child care. Concerning the pedagogical work with children, criteria as for the qualification of the staff, the caregiver-child-ratio or the room-conditions can critically proof the current “state of the art” and even focus further development, f. exp. with regard to educational matters. So quality criteria are very helpful in making the system transparent and the organisation of care clear. Since state expenditures are rising for building up a care system according to the demands of families, quality criteria also support an efficient and adequate use of state money.

Why are quality criteria especially useful in flexible child care?

Topic 1: Difference to 'traditional' child care: complexity of organising schedule

Offering flexible care arrangements goes along with a different (time) organisation of care. But flexibility in child care *does not* and *should not* mean that parents can drop of their child whenever they want to, or that the "rhythm" of the labour market finds its leeway into the pedagogical work of child care centres. Rather the child care centres have to find a definition of flexibility which frames the pedagogical schedule and leads into a reasonable organisation of flexibility, a pedagogical concept in accordance with flexibility and the need for qualified staff. In general, the organisation of flexible care is more complex and differentiated than offering traditional care, where all children arrive and leave at the same time; caregivers all have the same working schedule and work on every day with the same group of children. In contrast, flexible care centres offer different (time) modules and services to parents and every family can choose the care schedule which is needed. To guarantee pedagogical quality, these modules have to be embedded within a clear, reasonable organisational concept which defines the condition of flexible care. Often there's a combination between non-flexible modules, like project-time or meal times, and flexible time modules where parents have more choices.

If the care context is getting more complex, the demands on caregivers are rising. This concerns communicational skills for a more intense cooperation within the team and with parents, and furthermore, it concerns the competences to organise one's own working field according to pedagogical and organisational conditions. Due to these 'new' challenges it gets visible that the qualification of the pedagogical staff is a basic element for a well functioning care system.

Topic 2: Flexibility adjusted to the age of the child

Of course, developing a pedagogical concept also focuses the different age groups of children. Nevertheless, we have to be aware that there is a difference between very young children (U 3) and school children. Offering flexible care, for example, also means that families can use this offer just for a couple of hours during the week. The often mentioned critique here is that the child cannot get used to the surroundings of the care centre and therefore feels less comfortable. To secure some continuity for the child within the care context, it has been helpful to define a minimum number of hours/days that small children should be in a centre. So the child has the chance to get used to its surroundings and to participate in the schedule on a regular basis. Furthermore, the working schedule of the responsible caregiver gets adjusted to the care schedule of the child. So it can be secured that child and caregiver can build up a relationship of trust.

Hence, finding the right care arrangement for every family goes along with finding a balance between the demands of parents, the needs of children and the organisation

of the pedagogical schedule of care centres. This often requires the definition of criteria or standards, like the minimum or maximum of care standards.

Topic 3: Definition of standards

As I said in the beginning, defining criteria supports the further development of quality within the social infrastructure. Offering an equal service to every family does not mean that child care centres have to be arranged the same way all over the country, but defining standards at a policy level guarantees that all families do have access to high quality, flexible child care which supports them in combining work and family. Therefore it's more about developing a social system that fits the demand of parents today and at the same time guarantees the well-being of children.

▪ **Sheet 5: The study 'Flexible child care centres' and its objective**

Concerning the current situation of child care supply in Germany, finding innovative, flexible child care services seemed like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Topic 1: Finding and analysing innovative flexible child care services

Nevertheless, finding and analysing existing flexible child care services was one basic intention of the project. In this context, innovative means care offers that go beyond the standard care supply and as a consequence, satisfy the care needs of parents who actually depend on flexible care arrangements. Before we've started the inquiry, we defined criteria which had to be met by the care institutions: length of opening hours to cover early morning and evening care, the possibility for a varying attendance of the child during the day as well as on different (half-) days each week, evening- and week-end care, and offers for care arrangements during school vacations. The last criteria concerned offering care in the case of an emergency.

Topic 2: Cognitive interest

Overall, there's not much we know about the pedagogical schedules, day programs and organisational structures in flexible care arrangements. Rather we found a lot of prejudices concerning everyday life within a flexible care centres (like children come and go constantly, there's no stability and continuity that supports the child's well being, parents come and just drop off their child etc.). This points to the fact that there hasn't been enough research which in fact professionally analyses flexibility within the care context, and makes the **chances** but also **basic conditions for these new arrangements transparent**. Therefore, our cognitive interest has been, e.g. the arrangement of literacy and project work with children, or the individual care contracts with parents up to the caregivers' staffing patterns.

Topic 3: Focal point

Besides these more organisational concerns, the experiences and perspectives of caregivers as well as children played an essential role in our research. We wanted to know how they are aware of flexibility. So in the interviews we were interested in how **caregivers** handle flexibility within their daily work-action – concerning teamwork, co-operation with parents as well as their professional work with children. Furthermore,

we wanted to know which positive/negative aspects had occurred since they have been working within a flexible schedule and, if they do see limits of flexibility within the pedagogical work - with regard to the child, for the caregivers but also considering the organisation of daily work.

Flexible care services are often criticised with regard to the child's well-being. So, we wanted to find out more about the experiences and perspective of **children** themselves. To get a more precise idea of what children experience within a care setting, the following aspects have been questioned:

1. How do children experience flexibility within the care centres?
2. How do they sense flexibility? Do they sense it at all? To figure this out, the children were asked about key situations during the day, like drop off and pick up situations, or with regard to the care schedules of friends. What does the child do, when his/her best buddy is not around?
3. Furthermore, we tried to find out, **if** and **how** children sense and experience the changes in the working patterns of the caregivers?

Therewith, one **objective of this study** has been to clarify the more or less blurry imaginations about flexibility within institutional child care context by analysing the daily experiences of caregivers and children. Through this approach, we wanted to find out, how flexible care offers can be arranged **with a high quality**, also meaning in a pedagogical reasonable manner. The second objective has been to discuss the models of flexible care services and in doing so, to make innovations transparent - concerning the pedagogical work as well as the daily organisation schedule.

▪ **Sheet 7: Consequences of flexibility within the daily care context.**

The interviews were analysed with regard to changes that occurred through the implementation of flexible care modules and the challenges that arose through these changes within daily working process.

Topic 1: Effects on one's own as well as the team work

With the implementation of flexible care services, all researched centres went through a **process of in-house opening**. As a consequence, basically all areas of organisation were restructured, also the caregivers' field of work. There are two aspects which are most relevant: **1.** some care centres **resolved the traditional group** structure by implementing spanning work in-between the existing groups (as for projects with the children). Or, centres have completely resolved the group structure and integrated the so-called "open door policy". This means, children no longer stay with their primary group and their primary caregivers, but can participate in activities all over the centre. Besides specific programs, children are able to decide themselves to which room they want to go and which activity they plan to do. Caregivers are the psychological parent for some children, but basically they work with every child. The difference is that caregivers are not working with a "closed" group of 25-28 children, in one room with two colleagues. Now they're responsible for a certain project or field

of activity, like doing science projects with children or sport and music exercises and work with whole team! **2.** Therefore, the **dynamic of teamwork** has changed profoundly. Time and effort to organise and co-ordinate responsibilities during the day have increased enormously. Moreover, a well going flow of information is now the basis for the teamwork. Caregivers have to inform each other when things have happened, that parents need to know. Since their working schedule varies, and they are not all working at the same time, it is even more important to have all the information needed for working with the child. All the caregivers I've talked to have worked in traditional care institutions before so that they were able to reflect the changes that were caused by implementing flexible care services. They all described these processes as a challenge; without their own willingness to be flexible and open-minded for new ways of pedagogical work, these reorganisations would not have been possible. Though they are already familiar with the changed working context, the "new" complexity still puts a high pressure on them.

Topic 2: Importance of parental involvement (regarding individual care contracts)

Though parental involvement is important in all kinds of child care services, due to the individual care contracts of every family it takes another dimension within the context of flexible child care services. Of course, the contract manages the daily care schedule, but since all institutions offered care in case of an emergency, changes can occur every day. Therefore, a **daily exchange with parents**, when they drop off or pick up their child plays an important role. Besides the parental working schedule, common incidences are a guiding value for the care schedule of children. If caregivers are informed about the family's situation and their living-circumstances, it often facilitates a closer **co-operation in partnership** with parents. However, caregivers describe their exchange with parents as one basic element of their work with children. Therefore, parental involvement is more than just exchanging information; caregivers try to establish a **mutual trust** between care centre and family. Not always it is easy to have a close contact to the family since it has occurred that parents keep increasing their demand – and as a result, the pressure on the caregiver. Again this points to the need of a high professionalism of caregivers who have to be able to balance the sometimes differing demands.

Topic 3: Organisational structure within the course of the day

I've already mentioned that there are a lot of prejudices concerning the arrangement of flexible care services. Most common is the argument, that due to missing structure and an inadequate organisation, there's no stability or reliability for children's. Thus, the general conditions neither satisfy the children's needs nor support the well-being of children. The **results** of the study point out the opposite: **1.** The more open and flexible the care context has been organised, the more structured and systematic was the daily schedule. And this is, **2.**, a result of the **modularised structure**: To advance the chance of fitting the care schedule with the parental working pattern, the organisational structure was unitised: parents have the possibility to choose between dif-

ferent modules, like time modules or extra service modules. Since parents do have a choice, there is a high chance to reconcile care demands with care supply offered by the care centre. The extent and forms of services differ and depend on the resources of the care institution. Nevertheless, the **intention of this modularisation** is to balance parental demands, the child's well-being and the daily schedule within the care institution. Crucial for the child's well-being is the design of the moments of transitions and time slots: e.g. when one child arrives late, caregiver needs to observe closely what the child needs in this situation and offer company when it is needed. So caregivers try to be aware of instability in care and compensate by being more positively oriented towards these children.

One important resource of support is provided by the arrangements of:

→ **Rituals and pedagogical instruments**

These elements mark a significant orientation guide during the day (program), partly the researched care centres have found very individual ways to frame their rituals and pedagogical instruments. E.g. recurrent rituals, like: **morning-meeting**: where caregivers and children start the day together with singing and playing. They also use the chance to plan their day and talk about missing children. Some centres finish the morning with such a group meeting again. (another recurrent ritual are **meals**).

To make transitions easier during the day, care centres have found rituals with parents and children for the **drop off or pick up situations** (like knock at the door, glance in the room, let the child know mum's there and giving him/her the chance to finish her/his day in the care setting). To give children a spacial orientation, two care centres have arranged a **blackboard or magnet tablet** with the scheme of the house and its rooms. Every child either had his/her name as magnet or a picture of herself/himself which he/her has to sort of manage during the day: if one child arrives in the morning he/she can see at one glance where his/her friends are. With putting his/her name/picture into the room/place where he/she will go, children and caregivers have an overview where everyone is. The same procedure counts for the caregivers.

These are just examples that show how caregivers have found ways to support children in handling transitions during the day.

Important condition: is the prior **consultation with parents**, they have to comply with these arrangements of the pedagogical schedule. As a consequence, there are, although care centres offer flexibility, some more or less **binding (time) guidelines**. This is not always easy and caregivers report that at this point they often have to negotiate with parents. Overall, the given instruments are one important condition to support children and caregivers during the day and, at the same time, offer innovations for the pedagogical work with children.

▪ **Sheet 8: Interview Results - Caregivers (2)**

Topic 1: Limits of flexibility

All caregivers have pointed to limits of flexibility – the interesting aspect is, that these limits differed a lot. When talking about limits in general, you'll always get a subjective answer. Of course, caregivers mentioned their personal limits, especially concerning their work load and their willingness to work in extended variable shifts. But the most obvious difference on defining limits of flexibility has been between caregivers from **East and West Germany**. As you might know, due to political-historical roots, in East Germany all-day child care has been the norm, whereas in West Germany mothers cared for their children supported by a half-day kindergarten when the child turned three. So, of course, there is still another perception about child care; one can say that there still are two different "care culture" in the East and West of Germany. Hence, the definition of limits regarding flexibility is still varying. While caregivers in East Germany would offer parents more child care, West German caregivers do still question long care times, especially for small children, or at times like the week end. Based on their own idea of a family model.

But **the focal point** in the debate about limits of child care is **evening and overnight care** services. Again there are two groups of caregivers: one that does have experiences with these care services and the other one who does not have these work experience. The latter one mostly expressed insecurity since they cannot imagine to work overnight. They see their principal working task within day care and since most of them are already working to full capacity, they can't imagine to also work during these hours. Due to the increased complexity and the raising demands in their job, they have already reached their maximum capacity. So working in the evening or at night is mostly refused out of a subjective, and not a objective perspective. Because at the same time, caregivers acknowledged the demand of parents who work, e.g. in an hospital.

That these needs require new conceptual ideas is shown by those caregivers who already have experiences with care services in the evening and at night. Three of the researched care centres offered care during these hours: one of them implemented evening and night care in their house, one co-operated with childminders and the third one offered parents, that the caregivers working in their house cared for their children at home. So the child is in his/her used environment and can have a more or less normal "evening-procedure".

This points up to a basic aspect: If child care centres offer these extended services they have to bear the **child-well being** in mind. Regardless if child care is offered during the day or at night: care centres the child's well-being should be the basis of their schedule and program planning. House-concepts have to acknowledge the needs and interests of children because independently of the time when it is cared for children, it is important that they to feel comfortable within the care setting. So, offering care at night is not the problem, but the framework of this service is determining. Offering week-end care at a child's house while friends can come around or night

care at a child's home so that children still have the chance to follow their interests, seems as an intelligent concept.

One **objective** of flexible child care services, which were named by the interviewed caregivers, is to strengthen the social competencies of children, which help them to successfully cope with transitions and changes in life. So overall, children who are cared for in a flexible setting, learn how to handle changing conditions that occur in daily life. Nevertheless, caregivers describe it as a **tight-rope walk** to always give considerations to the parents' needs for flexibility and the child's need to a certain degree of stability. E.g. when a child is always coming in late and therefore always misses the offered projects he/she does miss an important part of the day program. Often caregivers see themselves as **the child's advocate** in demanding more continuity in the attendance time. Concerning this matter, areas of conflict between parents, caregivers and the child's interest arise from time to time.

▪ **Sheet 9: Children's perspective on the day-care context**

First of all, the overall result of the interviews with the children is that they are happy and content with their care setting. The question addressed to them focused key situations during the day, especially concerning the changing group and staffing pattern. Since I couldn't really figure out a problem, the interview data was analysed with the focus on what aspects seemed important to children concerning the basic condition of care.

Topic 1: Attendance of friends and participation in projects

Of course, children want their best buddies to be around with whom they can do interesting projects and games during the time they stay at the centre. Interestingly, all of them named best friends, but they did not criticise when they did not have the same scheduling. Due to the "open door policy", children are used to variable children in their group, so they're not that fixed on certain children and act more autonomous. They are able to integrate into smaller groups where they always find someone or something to play. Anyhow, the most cited aspect has been "here's always someone to go to", "here's always sth. going on". One reason why children don't seem to have a problem with the situations of transition during the day might also be the professional attendance of the caregivers who observe what the individual child needs. It seems like there is a greater sensibility of caregivers who try to strengthen the child in handling situations of transformation and change.

Topic 2: Reliable agreements

Changes and shifting situations during the day are not the problem for children. Problematic is the fact when children cannot rely on what was agreed with parents or caregivers. Children need to have the chance to be prepared for what expects them. Reliability has a great importance for children. This concerns the planning of the day (program) in the care centres as well as the agreements with parents about, e.g. the pick up time. Of course, it can happen that parents might be late due to traffic or a

meeting that took longer. But in general kids want to be informed about what expects them. In a way this reflects their claim on autonomy about their time.

Topic 3: Opportunities/chances to have a choice and to participate

Having a choice and being able to participate in exciting things during the day, also emphasis the children's wish to have an influence on their daily schedule. So as a consequence of the "open-door"- policy, children can change the room and fields of activity as well as the caregiver during the day. Another thing that was mentioned quite often was the ritual of the morning meeting where children and caregivers come together to play and plan the day. Depending on how caregivers arrange this ritual "play-circle" children have the chance to bring in their wishes and ideas for the day. Moreover, they can see who's there today or whom of the kids is missing.

Furthermore, some care centres implemented a "**god-child**"-arrangement where one child is the "godfather/-mother" who has the role to attend a child that's new in a centre, explain him/her house-rules, acquaint him/her with the house and the other children and just be another contact person to go to when the "god-child" needs support during the day. Kids, especially the ones who are godfathers, love these arrangements since they are proud to take over responsibility similar like the adult caregiver.

The other arrangements care centres established are **child-conferences**, where kids meet once a week to discuss things that happened during the week, things that they want to complain about or experiences they want to report about within this group. Of course, caregivers are there to moderate and support the (younger) children. But these arenas are the optimal chance to bring in their perspective in the care setting. Also **surveys** for children follow this idea. These instruments are not just for barely asking children about their opinion, but they are innovative, child-friendly methods to develop common ideas with children and accordingly, arrange the care setting.

Topic 4: Balance between family time and day care time

The next topic tells its own tale. On the one hand children told me that they like to be in the child care centre since they can meet their friends there and do interesting stuff, which they are not able to do at home. But at the same time they aren't sad if there's a day when they don't have to go into the centre. This time-off is mostly related to their times with parents! The week-end still plays an important role because the majority of children associate it with their family time. Therefore it can be said that the care centre does take an important role within the daily life of children but nevertheless children favour a reasonable care arrangement between family and care centre. This doesn't always work out because the labour market often has its own dynamic and forces.

All in all, flexibility in child care services and the child's well-being are not mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, certain **basic conditions** and **standards** are needed to safeguard stability and an optimal care schedule for children. The mentioned rituals and pedagogical instruments offer an important orientation for children, especially with regard to the shifting care patterns and a more flexible time-schedule

organisation. In turn, this means that the well-being of children is linked closely to the arrangements and the organisation of the pedagogical schedule as well as the high professionalism of caregivers.

It is important to mention that all the named strategies, instruments and organisational forms can be integrated in every kind of child care services. But it seems especially reasonable to do so within care centres which offer flexible care modules.

▪ **Sheet 11: Quality standards in flexible child care - to secure “flexicurity”**

We always have to remember that there are different actors and participants within the context of flexible child care institutions:

+ **parents:** who do need child care arrangements which fit their working schedule. So their foremost interest is to use child care services according to their work demands. But parents – usually – want their children do be in a place where the staff cares well for them. So the quality of the pedagogical work as well as the flexibility of the care arrangements is the main interests.

+ **children:** are the ones who have to feel comfortable and who in a way depend on the circumstances the systems offers to them. The experiences in practice as well as in science are that children need a certain degree of stability and continuity as well as reliability. Hence, the pedagogical context needs to define conditions, like the arrangement of modules und services within a timetable.

+ **caregiver:** have to plan the pedagogical schedule and meet the needs of the children in their pedagogical work. For this they do need resources: with regard to time resources as well as staff resources. As the results of the study show, caregivers often have to negotiate between the demands of parents, the needs of children and their own interests and needs. This does also point to their private matters, for example, their balance between working schedule and private life.

The **concept of ‘flexicurity’** defines the connection of reliability and flexibility as well as a guaranteed ‘chance of choices’. Hence, in accordance to the changed needs and living conditions of family, policies in general, but care policies specifically have to find answers which offer new time patterns. These have to be equally adjusted to the needs and demands of the ones who are actually within a care centre: caregivers and children. So offering more flexibility within the care context does not mean that these perspectives will be ignored, rather an integrative concept, like the one of ‘flexicurity’ needs to defined to make sure that the system in the end works well.

(...further conditions for this are, see next sheet ...)

- **Sheet 12: Flexible child care – Conditions for saving pedagogical quality**

The appreciating of the different perspectives and interests can also help to avoid conflicts and tensions which do arise! This points to the structural conditions that save the quality of flexible child care arrangements.

Topic 1: Important conditions for balancing differing interests

As I said in the beginning, a reasonable organisation and definition of flexibility is a basic framework for securing a demand-orientated child care service as well as the needs of children. The more **structural conditions** focus the aspect of resources: Flexibility is not for free or even more, it is not a concept to reduce expenditures. Rather it needs to be calculated that financial as well as staff resources are needed to build up a well-functioning system. There also can be the option of integrating staff without or a different diploma. But when doing so, these people need to be qualified for their work within a child care centre. This points to the **internal system** within a care centre: In general, the study has shown that child care centres which want to change their structures and offer more flexible child care, need professional consultation and supervising! Often teams and caregivers are insecure and critical about changes within the care structure and therefore, it is essential to accompany them and discuss the conditions of change. This coaching does not just mean more education and training, but it also encourages caregivers to actually form the circumstances of change.

Topic 2: Multiple Flexibilisation

However, I do believe that it is crucial for the further development of the (German) child care system that centres 'open-up' for the changed needs of families. At this point it is important to not just acknowledge the need of working parents which arose due to the consequences of a changed labour market but to implement a broadly based family (parents + child) orientation in social services like child care. Thomas Rauschenbach (2000) has centralised the idea of a family and child friendly child care system with the term of „**multiple flexibilisation**“ of child care. On the one hand, child care centres have to put more effort in opening up for the changed temporarily demands of families. Another essential claim of the author is the fact that the over-all assignment as well as the entire concept of institutional care, education and up-bringing has to open up to a greater extend for new, spanning fields of responsibilities concerning services for children and their families. The intention has to be the build up of a **social infrastructure** for families, which satisfies the differentiated needs. Thereby, it is necessary to fulfil the children's needs for stability and reliability as well as the parents demand for a reliable, flexible and quality child care.