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'No one listens to us ...' COVID-19 and its socio-spatial impact on children and young people in Germany

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ABSTRACT

The handling of COVID-19 in Germany has shown that children, young people and families are not a top priority. Available studies identify a significant socio-spatial impact in this regard. Limits and conflicts can be discerned due to domestic concentration, which blurs times and spaces and highlights the dependency of families in Germany on social infrastructure. During lockdown, there is a rise in digitalized activities, but homeschooling reveals a digital divide and reinforces the existing lack of equal opportunities for students. While new spatial movements create better spaces for children, young people face an ongoing struggle with the limitations created by the pandemic.

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Children and young people in Germany are increasingly growing up in spaces that are explicitly designed and planned for them and optimized in order to ensure learning success. During their school years, they spend most of their time in protected, controlled and pedagogically designed (indoor) spaces, such as daycare centers, youth centers, schools, sports facilities, and playgrounds. While some older children in urban settings can navigate and expand their spatial practices quite successfully beyond and between those spatial islands by making use of the network of public transport and cyberspace to connect those places and times for meeting peers, there are others who do not have as many opportunities to move around independently, in part due to safety concerns of their parents or due scheduled activities. This has been further reinforced by the expansion of all-day schools over the past decade (Million et al. 2017). In addition, the childcare rate for children over 3 years was 93 percent in 2019 (BMFSFJ 2020), meaning that many children in Germany spent up to 45 h per week in childcare or later in all-day schools. The above-mentioned structured and timed logic of spatiality has been suddenly and remarkably undermined under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This viewpoint on the situation of children and young people in Germany can be based on a number of already published open-access studies of two types: (i) those which rely on comparing existing data sets of past years and reflect on them in view of the unprecedented conditions the lives of children and young people have been suddenly subjected to. And (ii) studies that contains data, which were collected during and after the lockdown in Germany. After going through the latter set of studies, a research gap has to be outright – and straightforwardly pointed out: due to the fact that all studies used online questionnaires in German, participants are primarily limited to German-speaking children and young people and their rather engaged parents. Thus, the data base for

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judging the situation of families in which German is not the predominant language remains limited, but also single-parent households are underrepresented.

From this rather empirically informed perspective, I will first timeline the series of COVID-19 measures in spring 2020 and then discuss the subsequent impacts on children and young people through a socio-spatial lens. Using my own experiences as the mother of two children, stretching between homeschooling, caretaking, and teaching online university courses, I will build my argumentation while incorporating data from the above-mentioned studies, including photos taken mostly by myself, my relatives and colleagues to show children during lockdown (photo permission was sought by the parents and/or children depicted).

The COVID-19 crisis in Germany: flattening the curve at the expense of children, young people and families

Although it was in January 2020 when the first person was diagnosed with COVID-19, the virus mainly started to spread after the winter holidays and carnival season in late February and at the beginning of March 2020. As the number of cases rose, educational institutions started closing their doors after March 16, and a contact ban was introduced by all federal states¹ on 22 March 2020 to slow the spread of the virus and extended gradually until the beginning of May. The contact ban prohibited gatherings of more than two persons in public spaces. The regulation did not apply to family members and persons living in the same household. Nevertheless, people were asked to stay home as much as possible and it was not possible to meet friends at home or in public, while also the use of playgrounds was prohibited. Even though outdoor activities such as walking and cycling were still permitted with family members, most children were usually forced to spend most of the day at home. Emergency childcare was implemented immediately for children between the ages of 4 months and elementary school to help parents working in key jobs (doctors, nurses, police, caretakers, cashiers at grocery stores, etc.).

The strategy of getting the basic reproduction ratio (R_0) of the Covid-19 as low and as fast as feasible had its immediate, far-reaching aftermaths. At the end of April, politicians started to discuss reopening public life. It was decided that each federal state in Germany could do so at its own pace depending on case numbers and spatial structural differences between the cities and regions. Accordingly, after about 8 weeks, depending on the state and region in Germany, playgrounds and schools were allowed to reopen with a high level of hygienic measures in place (including social distancing in school buildings and on school grounds). Because of these (spatial) requirements, classes were split up with the resulting groups of students generally alternating days or weeks on which they come into school. Day care centers, on the other hand, in line with respective reigning circumstances and federal directives, remained close until the end of June. As the summer break arrived, private travel within and outside of Germany was permitted once again. Social distancing and wearing masks in enclosed spaces are now the norm almost everywhere in the country. Currently, lockdowns have been re-enforced for single neighborhoods, cities and regions within Germany if the reproduction rate of the virus rises.

As sober as the hitherto description may read and as dramatic, up to limits and even chaotic individual situations in certain places and institutions throughout the country at times actually were, the pandemic in Germany, it did seem to me, was overall most of the time under control (and continues to be at the time of writing these lines). However, looking at the measures taken to stop the spread of the virus and then to return to public life, the interests of children, young people and families were certainly not a priority. This was illustrated by the intensity of the relevant discussions and the timing in which stores, restaurants, and even fitness studios were reopened, while the reopening of playgrounds, childcare facilities, youth centers, and sports clubs was not on the agenda at all. As the summer holidays approached, even commercial offers such as amusement parks were allowed to open early in the face of continuing strict requirements for social and youth work. Reactivating consumption was (and still is), sure enough, vital; however, it continues to be somewhat

inexplicable that authorities, provided that reopening both businesses and schools could potentially correlate to a boost of the reproduction ratio, seem to have (mis)taken only the latter as (direct) causality. As an initial corollary, I would like to cite two voices from the KiCo and JuCo studies – the first one is that of a parent and the second one a teenager. The latter also served as inspiration for the title of this viewpoint:

“As a family, we feel abandoned by politics. All possible measures are being eased, but the decision to reopen daycare centers is constantly being postponed. This leads to great uncertainty and frustration. Children can't stay at home for months; we're slowly getting to a point where things are becoming really critical.” (Andresen et al. 2020a, 10, own translation)

“What fucks many teenagers up is that you are not heard at all, the news talks about pupils though only the opinions of adults are shown and not of those who are in the first place affected (the pupils)” (Andresen et al. 2020b, 14, own translation)

The limits of spatial concentration and blurring times and spaces in domestic spheres

Since March 2020, children and young people's times and spaces for learning and leisure were concentrated within the domestic spheres of their families and households. Studies have pointed out that the housing situation in Germany is quite good at first glance: About 90 percent of the children in the KiCo study had access to an undisturbed space at home. In addition, a study by the German Economic Institute based on socio-economic data from 2018 found that nearly 81 percent of all families have at least one room available per person (Geis-Thöne 2020). However, the same study showed that the situation is much less favorable for families with several children and families with a migratory background, with only around half of them having their own room. Furthermore, access to a private backyard or garden drops significantly for families who are dependent on social security, single-parent households and families with a migratory background. Similar to Sweden, the socio-economic background is reflected in the housing market. However, the availability of space does not confirm its suitability for leisure or learning, or in the case of parents for working from home. Spatial conflicts are reported when siblings play while their parents are working in their home office or when schooling takes over all spaces in the house, blurring defined times and spatial limits of education, work and leisure (Figures 1–3).



Figure 1. Home taken over by schooling. Children completing school work in their rooms, the kitchen and the living room (where a parent has her home office set up at the same table while constantly answering the questions of her children). (Copyright with permission by parents and children and granted to Angela Million).

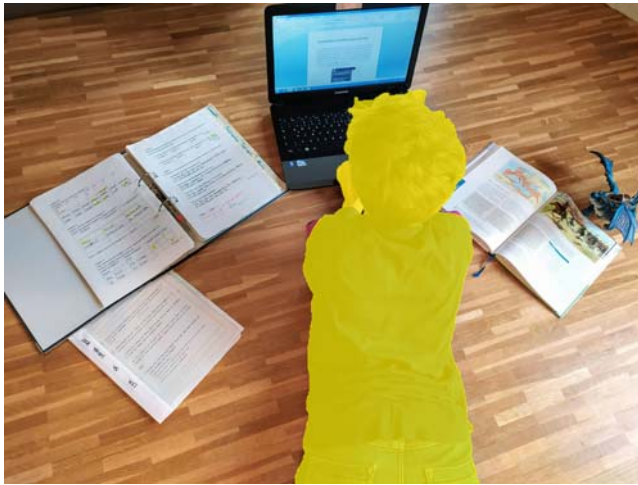


Figure 2. Home taken over by schooling. Children completing school work in their rooms, the kitchen and the living room (where a parent has her home office set up at the same table while constantly answering the questions of her children). (Copyright with permission by parents and children and granted to Angela Million).

Younger children and their parents experience blurriness of known routines from childcare, workdays and weekends are likely not differentiated from one another anymore (Andresen et al. 2020a). As the general public celebrated the new possibilities offered by home office, parents in the online survey pointed out the challenges of simultaneously doing caretaking, homeschooling, home office, and household chores. This is the cause of stress and exhaustion, accompanied by feelings of guilt for not being able to satisfy the children and their needs or ‘parking them’ in front of the TV. At the same time, other parents continue to work at their regular workplaces, dealing with short-time work or fearing unemployment and dealing with limited emergency childcare services (Andresen et al. 2020a). It is also noteworthy that mostly women are responsible for caretaking and homeschooling (sometimes parallel to working) in Germany (Dahlinger, Flamm, and Levy 2020). Cases of domestic violence increased during the lockdown (tagesschau.de 17 August 2020b). Although there is no data to corroborate this assertion, there is evidence that the burden on women spanned across all socio-economic strata.



Figure 3. Home taken over by schooling. Children completing school work in their rooms, the kitchen and the living room (where a parent has her home office set up at the same table while constantly answering the questions of her children). (Copyright with permission by parents and children and granted to Angela Million).

Although the percentage of participants with their own backyards and gardens was quite high, a total of 65 percent of families still used public spaces during the lockdown (Langmeyer et al. 2020). It is attributed by the authors of the study to the potentially limited quality of the private outdoor space and the size or suitability of that space for spatial practices like playing. However, I also see this as a spatial practice that compensates for stressful situations at home and the need for redefining times and spaces for the above-mentioned activities. At a micro-space level, it becomes clear that many houses and apartments do not provide an adequate socio-spatial setting as concentrated place of living, learning and working. One in five families often or very often experienced a conflict-ridden or chaotic environment at home during the crisis (Langmeyer et al. 2020). Medical experts have reported an increase in violence, especially towards young children (Tagesspiegel 2020). Many youth welfare offices received significantly less concrete evidence of maltreatment or neglect of children during corona restrictions in mid-March, mainly because schools and childcare centers were closed and could no longer issue reports (tagesschau.de 6.5.2020a).

During the lockdown, schooling in particular invaded homes more than ever before. As pupils increasingly see the limits – both space – and timewise – between schoolwork, domestic chores, their own leisure activities, etc. become fuzzier and fuzzier; they began, exhibiting a pronounced capacity to adapt themselves as well as the home environment, to progressively spatialize themselves in novel ways to, for instance, cope with the increase in their learning tasks – from simply lying on the floor to ‘conquering’ the kitchen table or balcony, amid others (see again Figure 1–3). Yet, such process of ‘alternative spatialization at home’ also comes accompanied by restrictions (see next chapter on digital gaps). As times of ‘uncertainty, excessive demands and worries’ (Andresen et al. 2020b, 14, own translation), COVID-19 is felt by young people, especially those who were in the phase transitioning between secondary school and an apprenticeship or higher education. While many young people feel head-on defied and sometimes overburdened with home-schooling and do not know how to teach themselves the contents, there are (a few) others that can indeed now concentrate better on learning.

With regard to the very much institutionally programmed life of children and young people, 42 percent of elementary school children and 55 percent of older children and young people up to the age of 16 spent more time doing nothing and chilling during the lockdown, which was interpreted by the authors of the study as a problem (Langmeyer et al. 2020). The findings of the JuCo study suggest that some young people felt better within the limited spatial confines of the lockdown, where it was socially acceptable among young people not to meet friends, not to party, and to feel simply lonely. Especially young people who are less social, or who suffer from disorders such as depression or social phobias, felt less pressured, as they did not have to expose themselves to everyday life (Andresen et al. 2020b). Additionally, some parents in the KiCo study (Andresen et al. 2020a) reported positive effects resulting from eliminating extracurricular activities, hobbies and transportation services for their children, giving them the opportunity to refocus on family relationships and re-evaluate their former everyday routines. Whether or not this will result in changing socio-spatial practices remains to be seen.

Digitalized practices and its twofold dividing digital gap

One of the most arresting situations with which children and young people have been confronted during the pandemic are the digitalization of their spatial practices – not only within the private sphere of their homes (as hitherto addressed) but also by and in interaction with educational institutions in Germany. Sorting the DJi data by age (Langmeyer et al. 2020) shows that during the lockdown younger children spent more time using traditional media, such as watching TV, listening to the radio or audio books (61%), while digital media dominated the activities of older children (10 years and up). They played more video games and spent more time surfing the Internet. This is also true for nearly two thirds of adolescents, who used television, streaming services or YouTube and the Internet, or played on a computer, tablet or smartphone more frequently (68%). It is worth

noting that smartphones often serve as the platform for these digitalized activities, with one third of all children in Germany aged 8–9, 76 percent of all children from 10–11, and up to 95 percent of all young people aged 12–18 owning a smartphone (statistica 2020).

As early as two weeks after the lockdown, many institutions (sports clubs, music schools, etc. – [Figure 4](#)) began offering online courses to their students, while schools provided tasks, worksheets and sometimes weekly schedules for their students to work on at home via email or to download. Sometimes, the work was returned to the teacher for checking or had to be checked by the parents. Only a few schools managed to hold online meetings with their students, and online classes were a very rare exception. However, in many cases switching to homeschooling also meant that the household would need WiFi, a computer (or at least a tablet), a printer, and dedicated parents who could help or motivate. A 2018 IW report found that about 28 percent of twelve-year-olds and 42 percent of fourteen-year-olds have a computer of their own (Geis-Thöne 2020). These percentages are likely to be ten times lower for children on social welfare (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020). Even before the corona crisis, Germany registered regressions in educational equity as young people’s digital literacy varied greatly according to their socio-economic background (Eickelmann et al., 2019 cited in Anger and Plünnecke 2020). This twofold digital divide in German society – access to equipment and digital literacy – was and is clearly shown during the COVID-19 crisis. While engaged teachers went back to paper and postal service, other students hardly received any help; from neither their teacher nor their parents.

Ongoing spatial limitations and new spatial movements

With the gradual reopening of schools, libraries, youth and sports clubs, etc., children and young people are introduced to new ways of using and interacting with them. An apparent pedagogising system of institutional educational spaces is at full display. On the one hand, childcare facilities have implemented spatial divisions on playgrounds and rules for using certain toys, which are often puzzling and enticing to small children. On the other hand, school yards and halls are today awash with markings for walking directions; open-air courtyards have been dissected into specific zones; and seating positions as well as mask wearing regulations are displayed all over. Many schools have gone back to frontal seating and teaching with limited group work. In some federal states, masks also have to be worn in the classroom. In contrast, the spatial adaptation of other institutions like sports clubs, art or music schools, which are often rather extracurricular, seems to have been

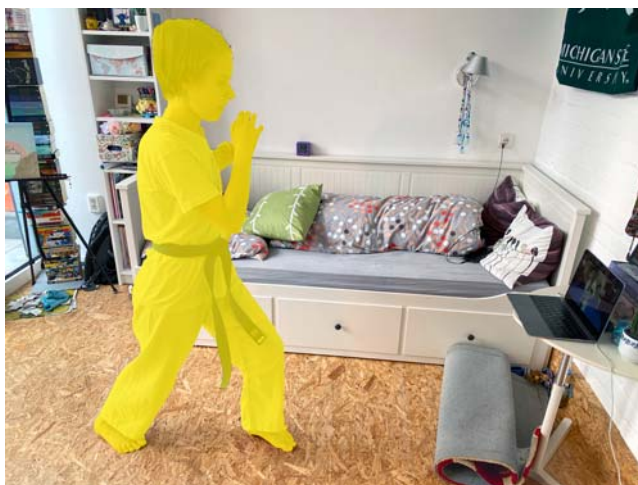


Figure 4. Karate training moved to online sessions after lockdown. (Copyright by Angela Million).

more flexible and adaptable – they have expanded their activities much more than before by, for instance, using outdoor spaces (plazas, parks, etc.).

Together with these ‘adjustments’ in formal-institutionalized spaces of learning, fairly spontaneous and ‘localized’ initiatives to attend to the adaptation of other spaces children and young people were (are) in need of started to flourish. Overall, the quantitative lack of public space in densely built up neighborhoods of any kind became very obvious during and after the lockdown. This obvious shortage also created new spatial movements, leading to spaces being reorganized in favor of children. One example is temporary play streets in Berlin (Figure 5), created in order to relieve overcrowded playgrounds. They were created in cooperation with citizen and city administration of Berlin Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg in a very short time and with the commitment and voluntary work of local residents (Aster 2020).

While children welcomed this newly won play space, young people are still struggling with adapting their spatial practices to the given hygienic guidelines. Further, comments of young people in the JuCo study also suggest that they are aware that they are, effectively, missing out important experiences of what it means to be an adolescent and growing up in general. It is evident that the ongoing measures have made some spatial practices and activities for young people limited or non-existent, such as dancing at clubs, attending concerts, parties, internships or study and work abroad programs, meeting fellow students at universities, etc. (Nürnberger 2020). In June 2020, spontaneous parties organized by young people escalated and police were attacked in major cities (e.g. Berlin, see [Morgenpost 15.6.2020](#); Stuttgart, see [Manz in ZEIT 28.6.2020](#)). While these clashes can be seen as reminders of the underlying and taken-for-granted perception that young people are deviant and troublemakers (with which media and police campaigns are infused), they could very much also be seen as means whereby youngsters are fighting back superimposed regulations and enforced supervision in these ‘pandemic times’ – or, to put in another way, as ‘daring to bite the hand pulling the strings’.



Figure 5. Children taking over streets as playspace (Copyright by Agnes Müller).

Conclusion: research blind spots and a lack of decision-making space for young people

As of 26 March 2020, over 1.8 million confirmed cases were reported in Germany, along with 36,537 deaths. So far, mastering the crisis in Germany has depended a lot on families. It is related to socio-economic factors as it affords some children, for example, access to the digital world, private space for learning and playing, and support and motivation from their parents that other families are denied or cannot offer. To a large extent, the reviewed studies suggest, neither children and young people nor their parents are buffered from the profound impacts the ‘exceptional (spatial) conditions’ the Covid-19 pandemic has caused. The crisis has shown how much German families of all strata depend on the functioning of social infrastructure, while simultaneously reinforcing the lack of equal opportunities for pupils, which already exists in the German education system and is exacerbated by the problems of children from socially disadvantaged families. At the same time, children and young people seem to be very aware of the downturn in the pandemic and how it limits their activities and spatial outreach, even if their lives are financially secured by their parents.

Aside from the solid database presented here, there are a number of blind spots, including firsthand data on socially disadvantaged families and their experiences of the crisis. This also urges researchers to develop more inclusive research designs – even if the context for research is challenged by lockdowns and social distancing. In my opinion, a critical analysis of the experiences and everyday practices of contemporary youth would be of interest in relation to representation and resistance or negotiating the limited spatial outreach and the socio-spatial role of cyberspace. By the same token, the processes of non-formal learning of children and young people ought to be explored – especially when it is considered that playgrounds, parks, plazas and other public spaces constitute integral domains of children and youngsters non-institutional learning processes, for that is where they negotiate their fears, dealt with conflicts with older children and adults, socialize in their ‘often misinterpreted’ ways and are able to produce their own spaces and therewith forge their convoluted identities.

Overall, the measures taken during the pandemic have clearly shown that the interest of families, children and youth in Germany have been secondary. In times of crisis, even established routines of children and youth participation were and are being ignored. And to come back to the title of this viewpoint: Up to now children and young people have not and are likely still not to be included in any concept making of responses to this crisis. As the study by the Bertelsmann-Stiftung (2020) concluded: In public debates children and young people have been reduced almost exclusively to their role as pupils who are supposed to function. They are not questioned; they are rather talked about.

Note

1. Note: Germany, akin the USA, is a federal state system in which 16 states are in charge of health and educational policies and regulations. This includes all measures regarding Covid-19. While there is general agreement on the most important directives, individual adaption happen on state and regional level.

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