



This fact-sheet provides a summaryFor the research project 'Participation for Protection', the German research team conducted two focus groups with six participants each (Group 1: ages 6-12; two female and four male participants and Group 2: ages 6-12; three female and three male participants). The children attended a child and youth welfare support group which met on a regular basis and was led by a social worker.

## **Introduction**

In Germany and in the context of violence against children, the term 'family violence' is relatively uncommon. Within the legislative and professional discourse strict differentiations between gender based domestic violence and child maltreatment by parents or other persons are made. For example, the German Kinder und Jugendhilferecht (children's and family welfare law) distinguishes domestic violence and child maltreatment.

The international definition of 'family violence' according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is as follows:

Family violence, also known as domestic violence, is defined as any violent act inflicted by one family member on another. It may occur between partners, by parents against children, by children against other children, by children against parents and by adult children against elderly parents. Here we consider violence between partners in an intimate relationship (marriage, cohabitation or dating) and to violence by parents against children. Family violence has many forms including: physical, sexual, emotional or economic abuse. It also includes neglect (passive abuse) which is mainly inflicted on children.

In 2018 an estimated 136 children have died as a result of violence in Germany. There were 4180 reported cases of child maltreatment. In the area of sexual violence, the number of reported child sexual abuse increased by 6.43 percent and the total number of abused children is 14,606. This translates to 40 reported cases a day.

## **Understanding violence**

The children involved in the German focus groups primarily referred to experiences of physical and psychological violence, as well as sexualised violence committed by a male figure (the father) against a female figure (the mother or sister). The children identified **physical violence** as follows:

**'fighting', 'hurt someone', 'murder (someone)', 'punch', 'hurt and hunt', 'getting strangled', 'when two people quarrel, one hits him, so, dead', 'boxing someone and then stupid laugh', 'kick and box', 'threatening: I will kill you' (participant pointing to a knife he drew)**

The children justified violence perpetrated by a family member (beatings, smacking) as a consequence of the child's wrong-doing and as a parental right to discipline children for their own good. Abusive parenting practices had filtered down from previous generations, were normalised and understood to be in the best interest of the child.

**'My mother already beat me', 'many times when I do shit, she beats me', 'And I have often been hit', 'My mom said that she saw her mother my grandma getting drunk and she had to take care of herself and (...) then she was also annoyed by the teachers because she did not have her hair properly (...) And my mom sometimes beats me when I'm not listening (...) then do not talk to my mom for a long time ... and then (...) Once my mom has hit my head on the wall while I was getting dressed...'**

In the context of **psychological/emotional violence**, participants named insults, vulgarities and other offences such as

**'asshole', 'bitch', 'fuck you', 'retard', 'whore', 'wiper' 'son of a bitch', 'nigger', 'zitface' , 'being mean', 'being laughed at', 'blackmailing'**

as a form of violence. Children demonstrated awareness of emotional abuse and were able to distinguish psychological violence from physical violence:

**'so boxing is violence that is physical violence and laughing out is yes through the mouth say something bad is also violence that hurts people in the heart (...).then feeling that you are bad and stupid and you cannot do anything or so'**

**'Expressions insults and expressions and swear words all together are then expressions are feelings to get hurt feels as an assault hurts inside'  
'I wrote dummy because often I am called that... My enemies call me dummy or something like that'**

Participants have also experienced stigmatisation for being labelled 'conspicuous' in school. Describing themselves that they cannot concentrate very well at school due to the violence at home. They also told they hit or bully other children, because -according to their own perspective-they don't want to be the victim any longer.

Similarly, to the findings of other participating countries, German children did not identify neglect as a general concept of violence but rather as an abstract concept. Only after providing specific examples of neglect, they were able to understand it as a form of violence. Subsequently, they came up with their own examples, demonstrating their understanding of neglect as a form of violence:

**'If a mother loses her child in the crowd because she doesn't hold his hand'**

**'A small child is left alone at home and she could fire the house'**

**'That they never get anything to eat'**

**'When a child is sent to the shop in the dark and the police can fine him because he is a minor'**

Additionally, children described situations of not receiving any family support when dealing with problems:

**'yea my father does not take care of me this.... I hate my father, my father was in prison anyway, would I stay with my father I would have drank alcohol, smoked cigarettes'**

**'the father says ehm that is just bullying no one cares it doesn't matter anyway, or the uncle says go get a job or the sister says ehm take care of your shit yourself and the brother says ehm I am taking care of myself and the mother says I want my children do well it is only the mother'**

Many participants reported to have experienced heavy violence amongst peers and to have used violence against other children, especially in school (due to their gender, race, economic status – for example brand of their clothing). The children also described daily verbal humiliations in their family.

The concept of violence and the recognition of different forms of violence children experienced in their daily life proved very important for them. Some participants reported having researched the different forms of violence after the dialogue in the working groups. The children were able to provide numerous examples of forms of violence perpetrated by family members, classmates and teachers. Additionally, they described the lack of intervention, support and protection from teachers and other adults when children are being beaten, threatened, insulted or exposed on social media by other children.

It is important to note that during the interaction between the children of the focus groups, certain aspects of reproducing and acting out gender norms and stereotypes became apparent. While drawing people on paper, children attributed stereotypical characteristics to female and male/ boys and girls

**‘short hair, that's not a girl’**

**‘they have girl’s hair’**

**‘but it's a girl because she has dress’**

During the interaction, some boys repeatedly verbally attacked and degraded girls - collectively or individually. This way of taking on the dominant social role within gender relationships may indicate an internalization of patriarchal orders in family and society - and point to the social injustice in gender relations as being the cause against women (domestic violence).

**‘girls are stupid’**

**‘why would we wanna draw girl’s hair’**

**‘what’s with that stupid look on your face?’ (boy to girl)**

Beyond these examples, **gender issues** constantly played a role in the focus group’s discussions about violence and experiences of violence. Seemingly boys were able to easily talk about violence in the family, whereas girls were more reserved/guarded. In addition, boys repeatedly and voluntarily brought up topics such as rape or genitals, while girls rarely mentioned terms in the context of sexuality and sexual violence.

Children in the group reproduced verbal violence and swear words during the interactions with the facilitators and peers. This form of communication demonstrated their familiarisation with a communicative style that uses swearing as normalised behaviour.

## **Support by service providers and institutions**

During the focus groups, the children emphasised that they would turn to the police as a primary authority for support and help if they experienced violence, in particular when experiencing violence in the family by a family member. Children expressed that they expected the police to help the family by removing the perpetrator from the situation and putting him away from the family. Above all, children underlined that the police could - and should - stop violence! - and that those who perpetrate violence against children should and will be punished. When asked about the most effective ways a police officer could help, children replied that they should sort out the situation on the spot, react quickly, be trustful and be friendly.

**'and the police can also clarify, they can also clarify mhm by asking questions or by, yes, the policeman can clarify a lot that he should testify that they're going to jail'**

Furthermore, children responded that listening and taking the child's point of view seriously should be a priority:

**'I would explain to the police who I am (...) why I am actually calling 1 (...) then you could say that (...) my daddy (...) threatened me and has been beating me and (...) does not care well for me and then could (...) and then the police could first ask the child questions and then the father (...) how come and why he does that? and (...) then with the dad (...) and if the dad (...) still does not stop then (...) then the police could put the dad (...) somewhere else, where he cannot beat children or so ... (...) they could - they have to for example ask questions like ehm because what what ehm if the child - if the child can remain there (...)) it would also be important ehm that he is able to understand the child (..) and ehm that it is my language'**

Contrary to the expectation of the police to support and stop violence in the family, all participants agreed that this authority couldn't help with bullying. Instead, children mentioned teachers and social workers as professionals, who could provide support.

**'with bullying (...) the police can do nothing, hey the police can say yes thousand times, the children do it nevertheless, yes to the children is to them nevertheless the think yes lick your ass, think and simply go on'**

**'but a police officer doesn't help with bullying yea cause bullying is a normal thing that happens in life the police doesn't help with bullying unless it's extreme bullying like pushing someone's head into the toilet or burning their clothes but they don't move out for bullying like pushing the police doesn't move out for that in that case they would say yea it's pushing it's not it's almost not even serious'**

Participants brought up their own experiences of staying at a children's home and youth mental health clinic and noted that it didn't help them, indicating that they felt helpless and at the mercy of others, which could point to the children's experiences of being treated as 'abnormal' diagnosed as 'ill' as their behaviour was pathologised and medicalised.

**'Yeaaa I've been to a day clinic before, didn't help at all...ey they do they bring children up'**

**'Yeah, but children's home sucks too'**

## **Issues**

### **What would children and young people do if they experienced violence or harm?**

When asked what they would do if they ever experienced violence, participants underlined that they would defend themselves physically. This goes in line with the results of the survey conducted in the framework of the project which shows that 42% of children and young people in Germany reported that they would defend themselves physically if experiencing violence, with more boys than girls saying they would do so.

**'Children could help teaching so that they can defend themselves better (...) so that if now attacked for example by the opposing side (...) so that they can implement (..) how they should behave now and how they are can fight back now (...) because if (...) they just make a wrong move (...) then they can (...) hurt themselves very very hard (...) and that's why teaching helps because then they are taught how to fight back and how (...) they should react now, teaching how to fight back, learn (...) how to properly defend against it'**

This response indicates the desire for 'strength/ power' within relationships among peers. Especially boys but also girls live throughout their lives within these patterns of power structures and retaliation as a part of it. It could also be a sign for children being left alone in a violent occasion.

### **Teachers are important when bullying happens**

Children have high expectations towards teachers and their response when bullying happens. Children hope to receive support and intervention from teachers when physical and psychological violence, bullying and discrimination occur. According to the children's opinions, teachers should:

**'take time to speak with all children, (...) be transparent, friendly as well as strict (towards the perpetrators)'**

Participants mentioned their reasons for asking certain teachers for help:

**'After that I went to the teacher (...) to the strictest teacher, I did that on purpose (..)I went directly to the teacher who always punishes / gives the penalties (...) then (...) we went to him (referring to the strictest teacher) and then he has (...) punished, because (...) if he hurts me like that, he has bad luck, he is hard and I like that'**

**'where I used to be (...) they insulted me because of my skin colour (...) and then (...) I went to (...) the strictest supervisor because she likes me (too). and it is often so, that someone insults me because of my skin colour//why did you go to her to the strictest?// because she also said (...) that if it happens again, I should always come to her (...)because she is also my caregiver'**

### **Professional Communication and Interaction**

Children reported that adults should not be afraid to speak with them about consequences and the realities of the harmful situations, as they needed someone to step in, act on their behalf, and keep them informed about the pros and cons and what exactly would happen.

**'give information about law and rights'**

Children gave advice on a wide arrange of professionals who work with children across many disciplines, e.g., police, social work, doctor, teacher, and psychologists. Overall, children's main expectations toward a helpful professional is having the skill to understand children's issues, their pain and abuse:

**'speak gently, have patience and be more nurturing...calm us...talk to us...be more like a child....and more reasonable'**

Children talked about appreciating opportunities to strengthen their life skills by learning through informally framed conversations with social workers. Not only by receiving information and knowledge, but rather by being invited into a dialog on issues concerning their life and knowing that their experiences and opinions are being valued. By this, their life competence and ability to understand themselves better is strengthening.

**'The social worker can help, if she resolves the conflict, if she says: quit it now, but I think they won't stop so she has to be a bit more strict (...) mhh well she shouldn't be thaaaaat strict, like a teacher, the social workers do something different, they talk, because then you can personally learn what went on, when you talk to them'**

### **Taking action**

Children ask for immediate response and help when they experience violence from parents, due to intimate partner violence or against the mother or sister:

**'An anti-rape man will stop a rape, if a rape happens, he will immediately know, will go there and will take him to the police and he will put him in jail and so on'**

When experiencing violence against them or their mother (father) by another family, children wish for immediate and fast help:

**'I would call a police officers, at least if it is an emergency, so he can get here immediately, as fast as possible'**

### **Understanding children's rights**

**'Well rights, a right, right is if, for example if, if for example I am allowed if others tell me, that I am not allowed to leave the room, that I am not allowed to sleep at home (.) then I am allowed to say yes, I am allowed to sleep there, because it is my right, that I am allowed to eat and that others do not rule my life, I can decide for myself, what I would do now'**