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## Resources of families adapting the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany: A mixed-method study of coping strategies and family and child outcomes

Alexandra N. Langmeyer<sup>1</sup>, Angelika Guglhör-Rudan<sup>1</sup>, Ursula Winklhofer<sup>1</sup>, Sophia Chabursky<sup>1</sup>, Thorsten Naab<sup>1</sup>, & Ulrich Pötter<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> German Youth Institute

Address correspondence to: Alexandra N. Langmeyer, German Youth Institute, Department for Children and Child Care, Nockherstr. 2, 81541 Munich (Germany).  
Email: langmeyer@dji.de

### Abstract

**Objective:** The aim of the present work is to analyse families' coping with the COVID-19 pandemic depending on available resources by examining the family as a cohesive system.

**Background:** The COVID-19 pandemic has affected families in several ways, with many studies reporting a decreased well-being of children and parents. How families cope with the new situation is dependent on family resources and personal resources.

**Method:** A mixed-method approach combines data from an online survey (N = 11,512) and complementary qualitative interviews. The study was conducted in spring 2020 during the initial COVID-19 lockdown in Germany. The study analyses how familial and individual resources affect the family climate and child well-being.

**Results:** The study uncovered that although structural conditions, processes within the family, and individual resources, especially the mothers working situation, are relevant for the COVID-19 experience. Family processes are the essential factor for positive family well-being. However, these processes meet their limits if the pre-existing conditions in the families are unfavorable. Nonetheless, children are also capable of developing their coping strategies.

**Conclusion:** Future studies should examine families and their available resources as a whole system and include the children's perspective.

**Key words:** Family Climate, Child Well-Being, Innerfamilial Processes, ABC-X Model, Online Survey, Child Interviews



## 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the spread of the coronavirus in spring 2020, several measures were taken to slow down the rate of transmission of the disease in Germany. This led to comprehensive changes for families, such as varying working conditions of the parents, increase of job insecurity and economic uncertainty, as well as a shift in childcare arrangements and school disruption demanded by home childcare and distance learning. Further effects of the COVID-19 safety measures relate to social isolation and health concerns for self, family, and friends (Feinberg et al., 2021). The social and psychological consequences of pandemic-induced changes in families' daily lives have become the subject of a growing research body. Scholars suggest that the daily challenges of the pandemic are associated with stress experiences for parents (Feinberg et al., 2021; Zinn & Bayer, 2021) and a decline in the psychological well-being of children (The Children's Society, 2020; Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2021; Jiao et al., 2020). However, these challenges do not affect all families equally. Families differ in terms of resources and their capability to mobilize them to adjust their lives to changes. In this paper, we argue that the way families adapt as a whole system has significant consequences for parent's and children's long-term adjustment (Neubauer et al., 2021).

Considering that pandemic-related social distancing and contact restrictions limit family members' activities to their households for extended periods (Behar-Zusman et al., 2020), it is surprising that studies on the family as a cohesive system are an exception (Prime et al., 2020). Our work embraces this perspective and focuses on mechanisms of crisis adjustment at the family level (cf. Chen & Bonanno, 2020) at the time of Germany's first staying at home orders in April/May 2020. The paper highlights the interplay between family adaptive resources (family resources, personal resources) and outcomes of family adaption (family climate, child well-being). Our empirical approach addresses the consequences of inter-family differences in resource availability and living conditions for family well-being. Based on a mixed-method study, we show that families' structural conditions and interfamilial processes are of great importance for family well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, we shed a complementary light on children's experiences with the changed life circumstances due to the pandemic and reveal an alternative perspective on their family's coping strategies. Finally, we conclude that coping strategies at the level of family processes are most important for overcoming the challenges of the current crisis. Considering measures of supporting families during the COVID-19 pandemic, we advocate the inclusion of children's perspectives as they develop coping strategies complementary to coping mechanisms on the family level.

## 2. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family well-being and the role of resources

### 2.1 *Family well-being in times of COVID-19: Theoretical approaches*

#### 2.1.1 Impact of the pandemic on families

Several cross-sectional and longitudinal studies examined the impact of the pandemic on family well-being. Feinberg and colleagues (2021) describe an increase in parent depression during the pandemic, depending on the gender of the parent, education, and family income: Especially women in middle-income groups with lower education experience a substantial increase in depressiveness. Other studies report increasing behavioral problems of children, both internalizing and externalizing (Feinberg et al., 2021; Spinelli et al., 2020). The Austrian Corona Panel Project (ACPP, Schiestl & Pinkert, 2021), finds higher shares of loneliness within the group of students and school-aged children than in general. Likely, due to persistent school closures, these groups have been isolated at home from their peers even longer than adults, and appear to suffer more under the lack of social contacts. Furthermore, low subjective well-being of children and problematic mental health conditions like anxiety and depression seem to be linked with the pandemic (The Children's Society 2020; Köhler-Dauner et al., 2020). Younger children between the ages of three and six are more likely to show excessive clinging to one parent and increased anxiety. In contrast, older children's (six to 18 years) exposure to stress manifests in increased inattention and anxiety (Singh et al., 2020). Pre-pandemic problems lead to an aggravation of the stress situation as Zhang and colleagues (2020) demonstrate with the exacerbation of ADHD problems during the pandemic. For Germany, Ravens-Sieberer and colleagues (2021) highlight the effect of the current situation on children in particular: Two-thirds of the children report high burdens due to the pandemic, experiencing lower life satisfaction, more mental health problems, and higher levels of anxiety. The study indicates that children with low socioeconomic status and limited living space are impacted significantly more (Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2021). Idoiaga and colleagues (2020) highlight the ambivalence in children's perception of the pandemic: While they feel lonely, sad and scared on the one hand, they feel safe, calm and happy in their families on the other. Overall, it should be noted that while there are a large number of studies examining the impact of the pandemic on children, it is rare for children themselves to have their say in these studies and for them to be questioned directly.

#### 2.1.2 The ABC-X Model among families in crises (Hill 1958)

Considering the underlying psychological mechanisms, we use the ABC-X family crises model (Hill, 1958) as a theoretical framework to understand how the coronavirus pandemic impacts family well-being. The model builds on the assumption that significant life events (A) influence overall family functioning. The family's ability to adapt to the new situation (X) depends on family resources (B), but also on stressors, and prevents the family from turning the situation into a crisis (McCubbin & Patterson, 2008). In this process, the resources mitigate the effects of stressors on the family and individuals.

McCubbin and Patterson (2008) distinguish between resources of the family system (family resources, e.g. economic situation, relations between family members, family cohesion) and individual resources of children (e.g. age of the children) and parents (e.g. their working situation). The extent to which resources contribute to the impact of the stressor event on the family also depends on family's perception (C).

### 2.1.3 The Theory of stress and resilience in times of COVID-19 (Prime et al., 2020)

Analogously to the ABC-X family crises model, Prime and colleagues (2020) developed a theoretical model of risk and resilience in family well-being for the COVID-19 context that focuses on the children in addition to the effects on the family. They describe the pandemic influencing child well-being in a cascading way by distal and proximal processes: Social disruptions associated with the pandemic increase the level of psychological distress of parents and impact relationships in the family. Thus, the parental partnership, the parent-child relationship, the parenting behaviour, and indirectly the sibling relationship are affected. In turn, these changes are crucial for child adjustment, as family processes are relevant for children's development. However, the processes are not unidirectional but rather as a mutual reinforcing system. Therefore the role of family functioning can be considered as a source of stress, as a proximal outcome, and as a resource (Behar-Zusman et al., 2020). Family resilience is defined by three overarching processes (Prime et al., 2020): communication (e.g. sharing about emotions, family coping), organization (e.g. access to social and economic resources), and belief systems (e.g. hope). In the present study, we focus on the first two processes. We assume that parents' ability to "maintain some semblance of normality, or create a 'new normal' during the pandemic" (Prime et al., 2020: 638) is a process to cope with the pandemic. Accordingly, families' maladaptation to stressful situations can manifest, for example, in rigidity or chaos. How well the family as a whole, and thus the children, cope with the crisis depends on resources.

## 2.2 Risks and resources for families

### 2.2.1 Structural conditions of families

Poverty and unemployment are structural conditions, which can obstruct families' successful crisis coping. In addition to existing disadvantages, the restriction of public life during the COVID-19 crisis has led to a loss of employment or substantial income decreases for many people. *Financial difficulties and economic pressure* put a strain on parents and their children (cf. Family Stress Model, FSM, Conger et al., 2010; Heintz-Martin & Langmeyer, 2020). Respectively, a worse financial situation before COVID-19 leads to a higher risk of experiencing a decline in the well-being of parents and children (Feinberg et al., 2021).

Moreover, a decline in income due to the pandemic is accompanied by emotional distress for children (Köhler-Dauner et al., 2020). The difficult economic situation also has an indirect burdening effect on families, leading to planning uncertainties and uncertainty about the national economy situation (Fegert et al., 2020). The more COVID-19 specific hardships families experience, such as unemployment, loss of income, caregiving

burden, and illness, the poorer the parent's and children's psychological well-being (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020). It is well known that *single parents* often find themselves in difficult financial situations (Hübgen, 2020), which can worsen even more with the current situation. Mata and colleagues (2021) report that in Germany the levels of anxiety and loneliness among single parents are often twice as high than among couples with children.

Neubauer and colleagues (2021) show by a German sample that the *number of children* in the household is negatively related to a positive family climate. In contrast, studies on parental stress and interparental conflict indicate that children with good *sibling* relationships cope better with this stressor (Prime et al., 2020; Davies et al., 2019).

Several pre-pandemic studies demonstrated the importance of *housing conditions*, such as adequate housing space and green spaces for children's and families' well-being (Feng & Astell-Burt, 2017; Clair, 2019; Foye, 2017). This connection is all the more prevalent during the corona pandemic (Lehberger et al., 2021; Pesce & Sanna, 2020). Lehberger and colleagues (2021) highlight that persons in Germany with access to a private garden expressed greater levels of subjective well-being than non-garden owners. Examining the effects of the initial lockdowns in Italy, Spain, and Portugal, Francisco and colleagues (2020) found that families without access to a private garden or terrace reported significantly worse psychological health outcomes for their children.

Furthermore, *external support* of the family can mitigate families' stress experiences. At best, families could utilize institutional emergency childcare and private childcare support by family and friends (Prime et al., 2020). LaBrenz and colleagues (2020) indicate by a U.S. sample that childcare concerns are associated with less parenting resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents with continuous pre-pandemic childcare arrangements have enhanced parental protective factors (LaBrenz et al., 2020). The childcare situation affects also children provided that children who cannot attend their day-care centre due to COVID have the lowest well-being scores (Autorengruppe Corona-KiTa-Studie, 2021).

### 2.2.2 Family process level

The family process level acknowledges the functioning of families as a complex social system of interpersonal interactions. Studies demonstrated that negative *parenting behavior* (Karreman et al., 2006; Pinquart, 2017) and family conflicts (Cummings et al., 2015) have a negative impact on children's well-being even before COVID-19. An authoritative parenting style accompanied with a positive communication climate proved to be the best condition for positive child development (Pinquart, 2017). The same applies to, *family cohesion* which furthermore protects children from negative stress experiences (Hobfoll & Spielberger, 1992). Previous studies (Conger et al., 2010) show that stress strains parents psychologically and thus negatively influences their parenting behaviour, which in turn affects child well-being. Yet, recent studies conducted during COVID-19 illustrate the significant role of family functioning for children's well-being. A diary study showed that autonomy-supportive parenting is positively associated with better child well-being of school-aged children in Germany, measured by positive and negative affect. This daily child well-being is associated with longitudinal increase in externalizing and internalizing behaviour problems of the child (Neubauer et al., 2021). Whittle and

colleagues (2021) indicate that parental warmth and high family cohesion (measurement: Family Environment Scale, Moos & Moos, 1981) prevent trauma symptoms. Harmful parenting practices go along with increased children's conduct problems (measurement: SDQ; Goodman, 1997) with high baseline problems (Whittle et al., 2021). Besides positive parenting behavior, *family rituals* are also generally related to a positive *family climate* (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). Mainly due to the measures taken to contain the pandemic, children are more often at home, which is why family rituals have a special significance. Parents face the challenge of implementing new routines and rules (Prime et al., 2020). Accordingly, Zartler and colleagues (2021) argue that parents employ four strategies (structure, cohesion, information and independence) to adapt to the changes of the living conditions due to COVID-19.

### 2.2.3 Individual resources

On the side of the individual resources of the family members, the *burden on the parents* has a significant role. Thus, the double duty of work and childcare and distance learning is a specific challenge of the COVID-19 period (Goldberg et al., 2021; Zinn & Bayer, 2021). Scholars point out that parents' psychological stress affects their children (Köhler-Dauner et al., 2020; Spinelli et al., 2020). A stable family environment is a potent protective factor for children's emotional distress during the pandemic. It has turned out that parent's psychological distress decreases in line with increasing child age (Mazza et al., 2020).

Considering *parents' work situation*, the possibility of working from home can improve the compatibility of work and childcare, however, it does not reduce work-family stress (Goldberg et al., 2021), in particular if there are more children in the household, or parents have an academic background (Fuchs-Schündeln & Stephan, 2020). Especially mothers seem to suffer from the tensions between care work for their families and employment-related obligations (Hilbrecht et al., 2008; Buschmeyer et al., 2021; Hövermann, 2021; Meyer et al., 2021). Parents utilize flexible working hours or working hour reductions as further resources (Hipp & Bünning, 2021). Likewise, parents had to increase the time for childcare, especially parents of younger children. A study in Great Britain revealed additional 40 hours a week for childcare duties for children aged twelve or below in the first lock down (Sevilla & Smith, 2020), which gives a hint at the enormous additional burden for parents.

Until the first lockdown situation in Germany, mothers have traditionally still been working less hours whilst taking over more time for child care than fathers (Boll & Schüller, 2020). Under the specific circumstances of the first lockdown, fathers increased the time for child care as well as mothers did, in relative terms even more, especially fathers with less work obligations (Kohlrausch & Zucco, 2020; Kreyenfeld & Zinn, 2021). Nevertheless, mothers performed the essential share of care work in most families and were more likely to reduce working hours (Knize et al., 2021; Hipp & Bünning, 2021). The increased strain of care work is accompanied by lower satisfaction with their work, their family life, and life in general (Collins et al., 2020; Huebener et al., 2020; Möhring et al., 2021). On the other hand, people who work in system-relevant professions were less likely to have reduced working hours. In Germany, it is mostly women who work in such occupations (Koebe et al., 2020).

Considering the pandemic context, recent studies warn about the heightened risk of child maltreatment caused by increased parental stress due to difficult working situations and economic hardships (Brown et al., 2020; Griffith, 2020). Pre-pandemic studies argue that long working hours and shift work harm children's well-being, specifically leading to increased problem internalization (Arlinghaus et al., 2019; Rönkä et al., 2017).

Finally, *children's resources* for coping with the corona situation in the family come into play: They develop better coping strategies and show more autonomous action with increased age. Furthermore, children develop primarily problem-centred coping strategies (Jean-Baptiste et al., 2020): Participants reported positive experiences with children's virtual playdates and meetings with parents' friends, which the researchers interpreted as a social coping resource. In general, the possession of social capital and social interaction of social capital leads to less perceived stress.

### 3. The present study

In previous sections, we have argued that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant changes in the daily lives of families. It became clear that coping with this societal crisis can lead to a reduction in well-being for families. The COVID-19-related restrictions have been a challenge for families. It also challenged established theories about inner-family processes. Several studies illustrate the changes of familial well-being from before COVID-19 to after the initial staying at home orders. Rather sparse information is available on what family adjustment processes occurred during the period of the initial lockdown and to what extent the assumptions of the ABC-X Model can describe and explain them. This is where the present study came in, by examining family processes during the first stay at home orders. It is assumed that familial coping depends on available resources (McCubbin & Patterson, 2008) at the familial level (background conditions and resources at the family process level) and the individual level (parents and children). Coping success at the family level is indicated by absence of a chaotic and conflictual family climate. At the individual level of the children, successful coping is reflected in a high level of well-being.

The following theoretical assumptions will be tested in this study:

1. Structural conditions are crucial for family well-being (family climate and child well-being) during the initial COVID-19 lockdown. On the basis of existing literature, we assume that economic and educational disadvantages of the family as well as disadvantages in the housing situation and single parenthood reduce family well-being. On the other hand, childcare support should improve family well-being and the existence of siblings should in particular enhance child well-being. In particular, disadvantages already existing before COVID-19 should be relevant for current well-being as well.

2. Individual resources of parents and children are important for family well-being (family climate and child well-being) during the initial COVID-19 lockdown. We assume that the parents' actual work situation is important for family well-being. Accordingly, a parental home office should be conducive to family well-being. In addition, we assume that younger children in particular suffer more from the crisis. Thus, child-well being should be lower the younger the child.



3. Resources at the family process level are important for family well-being (family climate and child well-being) during the initial COVID-19 lockdown and mediate the connections between structural conditions and individual resources and family well-being. Here we expect that a structured daily routine in particular helps families during the pandemic. In addition, child-centred parent-child communication should help the children in particular to cope with the situation. It can be assumed that structural conditions and individual resources primarily condition the family as a whole and thus the family climate. This in turn should be important for the child. Therefore, mediation effects of the family climate are supposed in the relationship between structural conditions and individual resources and child-well being.

The current work uses a mixed-method design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) to test our theoretical arguments: The quantitative study looks at a more global level at the context in which the familial adjustment processes to overcome the crisis are taking place. For this purpose, the study identifies factors that affect parents' perceptions of chaotic and conflictual family climate and child well-being. Here, individual and family resources are taken into account in the analysis and set in relation to each other. Furthermore, we examine to what extent factors at the family process level mediate the linkages between resources and both outcomes at the family and child level.

In addition, the qualitative study takes a descriptive look at the processes with an individual perspective at the micro level of individual families. We reconstruct the specific changes in everyday life of individual families with regard to their resources and the subjective adaptation practices of children and parents. It complements the results of the quantitative study by illustrating the changes observed in the aggregate within the subjective contexts of individual families. In addition to the parents' point of view, the qualitative study recognizes children's perspective by letting them express their experiences and coping strategies.

## 4. Methods

### 4.1 *Quantitative study*

#### 4.1.1 Design & sample

We conducted an online survey with a convenience sample using the snowball method. Parents with at least one child in the household aged 3-15 years were invited to participate in the study through a broad call via social media, e-mail distribution lists and youth welfare offices. In sum, 12,628 families completed the study between April 22<sup>nd</sup> and May 21<sup>st</sup> 2020. At this time, the first COVID-19 lockdown took place in Germany. In most of the federal states, kindergartens, schools, shops, hairdressers, etc. were closed. Towards the end of the survey period, the first relaxations of restrictions took place (Bujard et al., 2021). In 1,116 cases, relevant information was missing, which is why these families were excluded from the analyses. 1,247 fathers participated in the study. These were excluded from the following analyses due to their particular selectivity. The final sample comprises

10,265 families. For each household, the mother provided information on themselves, their households, and one child (namely the one who will celebrate their birthday next). As expected with convenience sampling, our sample exhibits significant biases relative to the population. In particular, the number of families with a low or medium educational background (10 percent) is clearly underrepresented. As data constitute a non-probability sample, there are no design weights. We used post-stratification weights to amend obvious effects from self-selection into the sample. On the level of the household, we used place of residence (federal state), number of children aged less than 18 years in the household and highest educational level in the household (at least university entrance diploma vs. less). We use population projections of the joint distribution of these variables from the latest scientific use file of the Mikrozensus<sup>1</sup> of the year 2015. On the level of children, we first used a weight proportional to the number of children aged 3 to 15 in the household, since information was gathered for only one child per household. Next, we used post-stratification weights on the joint distribution of federal state and educational background similar to the post-stratification for the household level, except that we used the distribution of the child subsample of the Mikrozensus. Table 1 provides an overview of the weighted distribution of key characteristics in our sample, for more information about the unweighted sample, see Langmeyer and colleagues (2020).

#### 4.1.2 Measures

Measures include outcomes, structural and familial process resources, and individual resources of parents and children. The instruments will be described below; for information on mean values or distribution, see table 2.

##### *Familial well-being: chaotic and conflictual family climate & child well-being*

A three-item scale measured the chaotic and conflictual family climate within the past two weeks (“In our family, there’s friction”, “Things go haywire at home” and “In the family, disputes are settled with scolding and shouting”); answers: 1 = never to 5 = very frequently; Cronbachs Alpha = .82, adapted from Moos and Moos (1981).

The child's current well-being is measured by one item (“Overall, how well is your child getting along with the current situation?”; answers: 1 = not good at all to 10 = very good). With this global item, it is possible to record the psychological consequences of the pandemic on children, as it takes into account both behavioural difficulties and the emotional situation.

##### *Resources on the family process level*

The aspect structure and daily routines consists of one item with information on the last two weeks (“How often did the following happen in your family in the last two weeks: In our family, everyday life is carefully planned”, answers: 1 = “very often” to 5 = “never” (cf. Moos & Moos, 1981). Furthermore, three items are asking for information regarding child-centered communication in the last two weeks as parenting behaviour (“I talk to my

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1 The Mikrozensus is a 1% sample of the resident population of Germany, run annually by the statistical office of Germany.

child about what he or she has experienced”, “I talk to my child about things that annoy or bother him or her”, “I ask my child for his/her opinion before deciding something that concerns him/her”; answers: 1 = never to 5 = very frequently; Cronbachs Alpha = .73, adapted from Richter and colleagues (2017).

*Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of mothers, families, and children*

	n	%
Age of mothers		
20 to 29 years	338	3.3
30 to 39 years	5,088	49.6
40 to 49 years	4,156	40.5
50 years or older	684	6.3
Family type		
Single mothers	1,006	9.8
Married or cohabiting	9,259	90.2
Highest educational level in household		
Middle school or vocational qualification	2,743	26.7
High school or upper vocational qualification	2,259	22.0
University or postgraduate degree	5,263	51.3
Financial situation of household		
Easy to manage	4,464	43.5
We can manage	4,557	44.4
Difficult to manage	991	9.7
Very difficult to manage	253	2.5
Age of child		
Kindergarten: 3 to 6 years	4,069	39.6
Primary school: 7 to 10 years	3,469	33.8
Lower secondary school: 11 to 14 years	2,225	20.6
Upper secondary school: 15 to 18 years	613	6.0
Gender of child		
Female	5,043	49.1
Male	5,222	50.9
Number of siblings		
Single child	3,980	38.8
Two children	4,853	47.3
Three or more children	1,432	13.9

*Note:* N = 10,265; weighted data

### *Structural conditions of the family*

First of all, we considered the educational and economic situation of families, for which three items were combined: one item focuses on the highest educational qualification as well as the highest professional qualification of the respondent and one item on the partner if living in the same household (see table 1). We measured the household's economic situation by one item ("How would you rate your current household income? With the current income..."; answers: 1 = "we can manage well", 2 = "we can manage", 3 = "it's difficult to manage", 4 = "it's very difficult to manage", adapted from the WZB Corona-study (Bünning et al., 2020). If it's difficult or very difficult for the families to manage economically, or if there is no parent with an educational level higher than middle school or some vocational qualification, or if both are true, we categorized the family as disadvantaged (0 = "not economically or educationally disadvantaged", 1 = "economically or educationally disadvantaged").

Furthermore, we gathered information about different aspects of the housing situation, i.e. if there are separate rooms for each of the children ("Is there a separate children's room available for each child in the flat or house where you currently live?", answers: 1 = "yes", 2 = "no") and if there are private outdoor areas like gardens or a terrace ("Do you have a private garden or another outdoor area in the immediate vicinity, that you and your children can use at any time without contact with others?" answers: 1 = "We have a private garden", 2 = "We have a private terrace"). We categorized a housing disadvantage if neither a separate children's room for each child nor a private outdoor area are available.

Further aspects regarding the structural conditions (sibling in the household, children's ages, single parents) are listed in table 1.

### *Childcare support*

Childcare support includes institutional emergency day childcare as well as other forms of childcare support, for example, by relatives, nannies, friends, or childminders, and was measured by six items ("How was your child cared for during the Corona crisis in the past 14 days", items: 1 = "in a day care centre (e.g., nursery, kindergarten)", 2 = "in a school or a day care for school children", 3 = "by grandparents", 4 = "by an unpaid helper (e.g., relatives, neighbors, friends)", 5 = "by a paid helper (e.g., nanny, au pair)", 6 = "by a childminder"; answers: 1 = "yes"). Responses were combined into one item (childcare support, 1 = yes, 0 = no).

### *Working situation of the parents*

There are three items to measure three different aspects of the working situation of the respondents (and their partners). The first aspect refers to employment and whether the parents work at all. Further the possibility of more work-related flexibility than before was taken into account; this aspect includes working from home or having more time flexibility ("Because of the measures taken to contain the spread of the coronavirus, do you now work at least some of the time in a home office or at more flexible working hours?", answers: 1 = "yes", 2 = "no", asked for respondent and partner separately). For the third aspect, the question was, if the respondent or the partner is an essential worker, meaning if the job is categorized as significant for the system ("In the Corona crisis, the

professional situation has also changed for many parents, as many companies have also reacted to the changed situation. How is this in your family? Are you professionally active in an area that is considered important for the community (such as health and care, energy, transport and traffic, water, food, etc.)?”, answers: 1 = “yes”, 2 = “no”, 3 = “I am not working”, asked for respondent and partner separately). Altogether, data regarding the job situation of the parents will be analysed separately for women and men.

Table 2: Sample statistics: familial outcomes, family and individual resources

	Mean (Std. deviation) % for categorical variables
<b>Familial well-being</b>	
Chaotic and conflictual family climate	2.87 (0.86)
Well-being of the child	6.27 (2.16)
<b>Family resources</b>	
<i>Resources on the family process level</i>	
Structure and Daily Routines	3.48 (0.93)
Child-centered Communication	4.24 (0.60)
<i>Structural conditions of the family</i>	
Economical/educational disadvantages	31.5%
Disadvantages in housing situation	7.7%
Childcare support	24.8%
<b>Individual resources</b>	
<i>Work-related resources</i>	
<i>Women</i>	
Not working	7.7%
Essential worker	41.4%
Flexible work situation	57.4%
<i>Men</i>	
Not working	1.4%
Essential worker	30.0%
Flexible work situation	45.2%

Note: N = 10,265; weighted data

#### 4.1.3 Analytic strategy

For the analyses, the scales for child-centered communication and the chaotic and conflictual family climate were first formed using the mean value of the associated items. Two stepwise linear regressions were calculated to examine the correlations between structural conditions, individual resources of parents and children, family process and

family well-being (dependent variables: chaotic and conflictual family climate; child well-being). The models consider the impact of family and personal structural conditions on family well-being in the first steps. In step two and three, aspects on the family process level (structure and child-centered communication, family climate) were included in the analysis to figure out to what extent factors at the family process level can mediate the linkages between resources and family well-being.

#### 4.2 *Method qualitative study*

The qualitative study examines the subjective experiences of children and their parents during the first COVID-19 lockdown. The telephone interviews were conducted separately with parents and children between the ages six to 14. Generally, we interviewed the parent first, in order to get to know the life circumstances of the family. Using a semi-structured interview guide, we asked the parents about their way to organise work and childcare. For both parents and children we focused on topics like home learning, contacts with friends, family mood and recreational activities. We looked at children's and parent's everyday experiences to gain a more comprehensive insight into pandemic-related changes in family life. By reconstructing the changes in daily practices and routines, the families reveal their strategies for dealing with the pandemic. In addition, we have asked the families how they feel, which allows us to look at the effectiveness of the strategies. Research with children is always a challenge for scholars (Heinzel, 2012). This applies all the more under pandemic conditions, which essentially prevented a trust-building approach based on face-to-face meetings with families. Considering these limitations, semi-standardized telephone interviews are a valuable method to approach the subjective everyday experiences of families during Germany's first lockdown in spring 2020. We recruited participating families via a corresponding supplemental question at the end of the quantitative survey. In sum, 2,798 parents in the online survey had agreed to participate in a qualitative interview of parents and children. From this group, a quota sample of 21 families was drawn based on the gender of the children (50% girls), the degree of urbanization of the place of residence (two-thirds urban, one-third rural), siblings (two-thirds with, one-third without siblings), and the age of the children (between six and 14 years). In addition, families' socioeconomic background (perceived coping with income) and state of residence in Germany were included in the drawing of the quota sample. An overview of the participating children can be found in Table 3, for a more detailed overview consider Table A1 in the Appendix.

Qualitative interviews took place between May 26 and June 8, 2020. During this time, contact restrictions were easing up and some schools were beginning to open again, however with strict regulations and varying schedules for school-aged children (Bujard et al., 2021). The conversations lasted between 40 and 60 minutes per family and were all transcribed and fully anonymized. Following Kuckartz (2018), we formed coding categories deductively from the questionnaire (structures of the daily routines and first experiences with the restart of classroom teaching) and supplemented them inductively from the interviews. In the analyses of the interview material, we identified several major themes, which partly overlapped with the quantitative findings however also revealed new results. We analysed both the parent's and children's material and decided to include and

focus on the children's perspective in our study, as this is missing in other research during this time and offers new insights.

*Table 3* Sociodemographic characteristics of interviewed children (qualitative study)

	n
Age of child	
6 to 8 years	8
9 to 11 years	12
12 to 14 years	2
Gender of child	
Female	10
Male	12
Number of siblings	
Single child	3
Two children	12
Three or more children	7

*Note:* N = 22

## 5. Results

In the following, the results of the quantitative and qualitative study are presented based on the three assumptions to be tested in the present study. Tables 4 and 5 show the results of the quantitative study: Table 4 displays the results of the linear regression model predicting a chaotic and conflictual family climate. Table 5 shows the results of the linear regression model predicting child well-being.

### 5.1 *Structural conditions are crucial for family well-being*

#### 5.1.1 Disadvantages of the family

In Tables 4 and 5 we see that family disadvantage is relevant for both the family climate and the child's well-being. Thus, economic or educational strain is linked to more chaos and conflict in the family climate and less getting along by the children during the corona time. Similarly, housing deprivation is associated with a more chaotic and conflictual family climate and less child well-being. Yet, the housing situation is not relevant for child well-being if chaos and conflict are controlled, which indicates mediating effects (see 5.3). While the correlations are significant, it should be noted that the effects are not very strong and do not explain much variance.

The qualitative study provides some insight to how housing might have an effect on the children. In the few cases where the children shared their rooms with their siblings,

one girl named Maria recounts how the siblings constant togetherness led to more arguments and her feeling annoyed by her younger brother.

*Table 4* Results of linear hierarchical regression analysis predicting a chaotic and conflictual family climate (standardized regression weights  $\beta$ )

		model 1	model 2
		$\beta$	$\beta$
structural conditions	Disadvantaged family (economic, educational) <sup>a</sup>	0.02*	0.01
	Disadvantaged family (housing situation) <sup>a</sup>	0.06***	0.05***
	Number of babies <sup>b</sup>	0.09***	0.09***
	Number of children in kindergarden <sup>b</sup>	0.22***	0.21***
	Number of children in primary school <sup>b</sup>	0.15***	0.16***
	Number of children in lower secondary school <sup>b</sup>	0.07***	0.07***
	Number of children in upper secondary school <sup>b</sup>	-0.02	-0.02
	Single mother <sup>a</sup>	0.04**	0.03**
Childcare support <sup>a</sup>		0.01	0.01
individual resources	Mother not working <sup>c</sup>	0.01	0.02
	Mother essential worker <sup>a</sup>	-0.04***	-0.02*
	Mother with flexible work situation <sup>d</sup>	0.00	0.02
	Father not working <sup>c</sup>	-0.01	0.01
	Father essential worker <sup>a</sup>	0.00	0.01
Father with flexible work situation <sup>d</sup>		0.01	-0.01
family process	Structure and daily routines <sup>b</sup>		-0.15***
	Child-centered communication <sup>b</sup>		-0.14***
R <sup>2</sup>		.06	.11

*Note:* N= 10,265, <sup>a</sup> 0 = no; 1 = yes; <sup>b</sup> increasing; <sup>c</sup> 0 = working; 1 = not working; <sup>d</sup> 0 = no flexible work situation or not working; 1 = flexible work situation.

p<0.05\*, p<0.01\*\*, p<0.001\*\*\*

Furthermore, the qualitative study underlines the importance of existing conditions and pre-pandemic challenges. Exemplarily, Maria's eight-year-old brother has an ADHD disorder and needed special assistance at school. Now, during distance learning, he receives "one-to-one intensive assistance, and then he still only manages to do, well, 25 percent of the tasks", as Maria's mother explains. Families with children who have intensive support and care needs quickly reach their limits without external support. In this case, her mother even described the family climate as "catastrophic". Parents in such situations can hardly find any time for their recreation or even joint family activities that provide a positive counterbalance to the stresses and strains.

If, on the other hand, the structural conditions (financial resources, sufficient living space) are good, the crisis goes partly along with benefits of an intensified family life, more time together, and new joint activities, especially when families reported a typically



tightly scheduled family life in times before COVID-19. Some even experience the initial lockdown as a new freedom and enjoy the additional family time, like Andrea does: “I think before we didn't really have such family activities together, and that's nice that now we go play badminton together.”

*Table 5* Results of linear hierarchical regression analysis predicting child's well-being

		model 1	model 2	model 3
		$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$
structural conditions	Disadvantaged family (economic, educational) <sup>a</sup>	-0.17***	-0.16***	-0.15***
	Disadvantaged family (housing situation) <sup>a</sup>	-0.03**	-0.03***	-0.01
	Existence of siblings <sup>a</sup>	0.04***	0.04***	0.11***
	Childcare support <sup>a</sup>	-0.00	0.00	0.01
	Single mother <sup>a</sup>	-0.05***	-0.05***	-0.03**
individual resources	Gender of child <sup>c</sup>	0.02	0.02	0.00
	Age of child <sup>b</sup>	-0.00	-0.01	-0.05***
	Mother not working <sup>d</sup>	0.03*	0.02*	0.03*
	Mother Essential worker <sup>a</sup>	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01
	Mother with flexible work situation <sup>e</sup>	0.07***	0.06***	0.06***
	Father not working <sup>d</sup>	0.01	0.01	0.01
	Father Essential worker <sup>a</sup>	-0.03**	-0.04***	-0.03**
	Father with flexible work situation <sup>e</sup>	-0.03**	-0.03*	-0.03**
family process	Structure and daily routines <sup>b</sup>		0.05***	0.00
	Child-centered communication <sup>b</sup>		0.08***	0.02*
	Chaotic and conflictual family climate <sup>b</sup>			-0.39***
R <sup>2</sup>		.05	.06	.20

Note: N= 10,265, <sup>a</sup> 0 = no; 1 = yes; <sup>b</sup> increasing; <sup>c</sup> 0 = male; 1 = female; <sup>d</sup> 0 = working; 1 = not working; <sup>e</sup> 0 = no flexible work situation or not working; 1 = flexible work situation.

p<0.05\*, p<0.01\*\*, p<0.001\*\*\*

### 5.1.2 Number of children

The number of children in the families is significant for the family well-being during the initial COVID-19 Lockdown. While the age of the children is important for the family climate, having siblings is helpful for child well-being. Several younger children of kindergarten age who are not yet able to occupy themselves put the greatest strain on the family climate. The number of older children in the age of upper secondary school is not related to the family climate. Interestingly, the existence of siblings has a stronger connection to child well-being in the model by controlling for structure, communication, and chaos (see table 5, model 3).

In the qualitative study, the theme that children with siblings display better well-being is very prominent. Siblings offer social contact and can help with feelings of loneliness, as

is the case in multiple families with children. Benny (11 years) has two younger brothers that helped him cope with feelings of loneliness: "Maybe my brothers then replaced that, so that maybe I just didn't feel sooo alone." However, in families with unique stresses or increased care needs for young children, the older children run the risk of falling short in their support needs. Sabine, for example, has two younger siblings, which demand most of her mother's attention. She perceives them as a distraction from her schoolwork due to their frequent games and laughter. "So I'm a bit behind with my schoolwork, because that's just so hard for me, because I have to do my schoolwork, and meanwhile my little brother and sister are playing, running around in the hallway with cars and laughing; and that always distracts me so much, and I just can't work!"

### 5.1.3 Single parent families

The quantitative data illustrates the importance of the family form for family well-being during the COVID-19 lockdown: Single motherhood increases the feeling of chaos and conflict. Furthermore, lone mothers rate child wellbeing worse than mothers in two-parent families. Albeit that single parents were not interviewed in significant numbers in the qualitative study, the responses of parents in two-parent families are instructive to understand the particular situation of single parent families. They show that parents often appreciated that they could share and balance their care duties with the other partner. This had positive effects on the family climate. In single parent families, the burden to organize care and home schooling often falls squarely on the shoulders of only one parent with possible negative consequences on family climate, parenting behaviour and the child.

### 5.1.4 Childcare support

In the quantitative study, we do not see a mitigating effect of childcare support for families as it was expected neither for the family climate nor for the children's well-being. The qualitative study illustrates by the example of Sabine's family that the intensive care needs of two children of kindergarten age combined with high professional demands on both parents increase the stress level in the family. After some negotiations with their kindergarten the family was able to send the two youngest children to emergency childcare for a couple of hours on three days a week. This small support was perceived as very helpful for the mother: "It is already a huge relief, to be able to plan your important appointments on these days, and to do something in one stretch in peace."

## 5.2 *Individual resources of parents and children are meaningful for family well-being*

### 5.2.1 Individual resources of parents

Considering parents' individual resources, it turns surprisingly out that, if the mother is an essential worker, there is less chaos and conflict in the family. The well-being of children is better if mothers are not working or working more flexibly or at home. Interestingly, if fathers are essential workers, children's well-being is worse. The influence of fathers working situation on family well-being however, in total is less important. While the presence of the mother in the home office is beneficial to child well-being, it is the

other way round for fathers: here there is a slight negative correlation between home office or flexible working hours and child well-being. We also notice in the quantitative study that several mothers do not work at all and more mothers work flexibly and at home or have essential jobs (see table 1).

Although in the qualitative study some of the parents said that they are sharing the responsibility of working and childcare together, deeper analysis of the interviews show that more often the mothers reduced their work time in order to take care of distance learning and childcare responsibilities. These new working arrangements can lead to more stress for the mother as can be observed in the family of Werner. During the lockdown his father was working even more at home, instead of spending more time with the family, much to the dismay of Werner's mother. She was responsible for homeschooling, but also had to continue her part-time job, which meant significantly more stress for her.

On the other hand, the qualitative study shows that temporarily giving up the mother's job eases family life significantly. Multiple mothers reduced their work hours, as was the case for Hannelore's mother. She was able to accept a temporary leave of absence in the form of "short-time work" without any significant professional disadvantages. Mother and children gain entirely new temporal freedom, leading to a situation that is experienced as very beneficial and allows new opportunities for intensive contact in the family. It remains to be seen whether the family will be able to cope financially for more than a year, not to mention the 'mother's sacrifice for her professional success.

### 5.2.2 Individual resources of children

The quantitative study shows an interesting effect of the age of the children: Only when controlling for family climate a negative age effect emerges. The older the children, the less well they cope with the COVID-19 situation. We interpret this to mean that the family can only compensate for negative consequences of the pandemic and the loss of peer contact up to a certain age.

The qualitative study may give deeper insights into the meaning of this finding: Older children often report that they are more involved with their friends and personal interests. Spending more time with their families during lockdown may not be their first choice. This was especially strongly expressed by Lars (11 years): "Sometimes I just wanted a bit of privacy, well not, so after a while, I just don't want to be with my family then somehow so, because it's somehow just too much."

However, one of the most interesting finding from the qualitative study is that children develop their own coping strategies to deal with the pandemic, which we did not focus on when planning the quantitative survey. The reported children's coping strategies are pretty differentiated and focused on their well-being. In Sabine's case, she finds support in contact with her friend via Facetime. Besides talking, they read books to each other and made up little plays with their puppet theatres. On the other hand, in times of family turmoil and lack of contact with her friends, Sabine used her pets, a family of snails, as a diary to confide her innermost thoughts and secrets. "They can't really cuddle, but they can crawl up your arm, for example, and you can also use them as a diary [...] You just tell them what you're thinking, and they'll never tell anyone else, they'll keep it to themselves, and you feel so good then because you've finally voiced all your thoughts".

Many children spoke of either personal or medial contact with their friends to improve their mood and frequently mentioned going outside to play, going out for walks and sport activities, and family excursions. Lars was able to combine sports and meeting his friends while maintaining a distance by going on mountain bike tours together.

For some children, engaging in activities by themselves was also very important, such as pursuing their interests and hobbies (e.g. playing an instrument) or occupying themselves and interacting with media (e.g. playing computer games, watching Youtube videos). The interviewed children often reported a balance between all these different types of coping strategies. Exemplarily, Jan describes that apart from renovating his room, "I draw from time to time, I do graffiti, well, on paper. And I've been on my cell phone and PC a lot (laughs), so I've been watching YouTube and Twitch and gaming and stuff. And now recently I'm playing again, so I have trumpet lessons again, so I play trumpet, I have online lessons again now for three weeks, I think; and that's working pretty well, too."

### *5.3 Resources at the family process are most important for family well-being*

In table 4 we can observe that by adding the family process variables (structure and daily routines and child-centered communication) the variance explanation of the chaotic and conflictual family climate improves from 6% (model 1) to 11% (model 2). Structure, as well as child-centered communication, actually contribute to less conflict and chaos in the family. The impact of both factors is significant and relatively large compared to the other regressors. It is similar with child well-being (see table 5): The inclusion of structure and daily routines and child-centered communication contributes to 1% more variance explanation. If the family climate is also taken into account in the model (model 3), 20% of the variance is explained. A chaotic and conflicted family climate has an impact on its own, which mediates the impact of structure and routines, which is no longer significant when chaos and conflict are taken into account.

While there are no mediation effects of the family process between structure or individual resources and family climate, there is a mediation effect of family process for child well-being in model 3: By adding the family climate, the association between disadvantage housing situation and child well-being is no longer significant. If families succeed in creating a positive family climate under the prevailing conditions, the negative effects of the housing situation on the child can be mitigated. All other correlations remain significant. Thus, there seem to be direct effects of both structural conditions and individual resources on family climate but also on child well-being.

In the qualitative study, we identified also the importance of a good family climate on the well-being of children. Parents do their best to protect their children from stressors and find creative ways to improve the family climate. Shielding their children from such stressors can be strenuous for the parents and some of them report that maintaining the family climate in addition work and childcare can be exhausting. However, most of the time, parents manage to keep their children from feeling this stress. Nonetheless, there are a few cases where parents report that their children do poorly during this time. In these cases, we observed that the children themselves do not want to be interviewed or make this a topic in the interviews. Our interviews reveal that if parents prioritise

improving family climate, this can lead to a positive child well-being: While most of the families struggled with the pressures of home schooling, Jonas' mother decided to maintain a relaxed attitude and focus more on shared activities that raise the mood of the family: "I found this attitude, that it has the highest priority and goal that our family atmosphere is good". Jonas himself reports feeling good, not feeling particularly lonelier and liking the way he can schedule his school work himself.

Above all, joint activities apparently improve the family climate. The families reported activities such as going outside, planning family excursions, or doing family activities like sports activities, board or card games, cooking together, and even watching movies. Regardless of the living situation, families incorporated outdoor activities into their routines. The father of Bernd and Benny explains that they "were outside playing soccer, did cycling tours or went for a walk or something like that, or played something special. The aspiration was then actually to always be outside two hours per day."

Furthermore, some families developed a new daily schedule, including times for sports and limited media use. Hannelore's family serves as a good example for this need for new structure. Her mother recalls that at the beginning of the lockdown developing new routines was very important for her family: "You had to structure your day at home, and that was perhaps, I'd say, the thing I found most difficult at the beginning." Such families emphasized the need for a daily schedule to cope better with the new situation; some parents however granted their children additional freedoms to create a positive family atmosphere.

## **6. Discussion & conclusion**

The present paper aimed to revise the approach on families' coping with the COVID-19 pandemic during the first staying at home orders and the novel, unique constraints on the family as a cohesive system. Due to the social restrictions to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, family members spend significantly more time together. At the same time, parents and children could hardly use other social spaces to shape parenthood and childhood. Our literature review substantiates the argument that family structural conditions and intra-familial processes are complementary resources for family well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic in addition to the individual resources of the family members. Based on the ABC-X model among families in crises (McCubbin & Patterson, 2008; Hill, 1958) and a COVID-19-specific theory of stress and resilience (Prime et al., 2020), we derived three key assumptions, which were empirically tested using a mixed-method study to examine whether they are valid during the time of the first COVID-19 restrictions. Overall, the present study gives evidence that the theoretical statements are valid for the period of the first lockdown. This is particularly feasible with the present study because, unlike most of the representative studies, the survey was conducted during the first COVID-19 lockdown in Germany. We conducted an online survey of parents with children aged 3 to 15 to examine how families and children experience and cope with the corona crisis. Additionally, we interviewed 21 children and their parents via qualitative semi-structured telephone interviews. The study shows that both the structural conditions

and the processes within the family are relevant to family well-being and the well-being of the children. In addition, the mothers' work situation in particular plays an important role in terms of individual resources. The qualitative study illustrates, moreover, that the families need to develop new balance management between professional work and family work (Buschmeyer et al., 2021) and joint activities, structure and rituals are helpful in terms of family processes for coping (Zartler et al., 2021). However, these processes have their limits if the existing conditions are unfavourable. Some families experienced the initial lockdown as a new freedom. Whether this is still evident after more than a year of COVID-time needs to be clarified in further studies.

### *6.1 Structural conditions provide an essential framework for experiencing the COVID-19 situation*

Analogous to current research, we find disadvantages in terms of housing situation related to a more chaotic and conflictual family climate and child well-being during the initial lockdown in Germany (Lehberger et al., 2021). Moreover, educational and financial disadvantages are directly related to family climate as well as child well-being. Furthermore, children from single-parent mothers experience the COVID-19 crisis as more stressful and more chaotic than children who live with both parents. In line with existing research, parental stress and wellbeing are linked to children's outcomes such as well-being (Berger & Spiess, 2011; Smith, 2004). Analogous to Neubauer et al. (2021), our results show, that a larger number of children in the household, especially of kindergarten age, lead to more chaos and conflicts during the COVID-19 time. However, children with siblings seem to cope better with the new situation. In contrast to Prime (2020), who assumes that stresses occur in the sibling relationship, our study shows a mitigating effect of siblings. Siblings seem to replace social contacts during the lockdown situation when communication with friends is limited. It raises the question of whether a chaotic family climate is worse than an adverse child's well-being. Since the positive sibling effect remains even if the family climate is controlled, some chaos in the family seems acceptable. Arguably, this stress factor, which relates to the structural conditions, might have existed before COVID-19; however, its negative impact appears somewhat more substantial, now.

While we cannot show any effects of childcare in the quantitative data, the qualitative interviews confirm the results of the previous studies (LaBrenz et al., 2020; Autorengruppe Corona-KiTa-Studie, 2021). Parents were able to observe that the situation eased to some extent as soon as institutional emergency childcare could be used for at least part of the time. The differences between our data and those of other studies may be because we questioned families during the first period of the pandemic. The "Corona-Kita-Study" (Autorengruppe Corona-KiTa-Studie, 2021) has only started its survey in November. At that time, significantly more families were already making use of emergency care. It is possible that those families who had to care for their children themselves were more exhausted by that time.

## *6.2 Family processes are the most critical factor for coping with COVID-19*

As stated in previous studies, a structured daily life contributes to a less chaotic and conflictual family climate and strengthened child well-being (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007), as we see in both our studies. While in the quantitative study the structuring of everyday life contributes only little to the variance explanation of child well-being, it is of greater importance in the interviews with parents and children. Parenting behaviour, shown in the quantitative study by the example of positive communication with the child, also contributes to crisis management. Contrary to our expectations, we see essentially no mediation of the relationship between structural conditions and families' well-being in the quantitative study. Positive family action can only mitigate the effect of an unfavourable living situation without a children's room of one's own and access to green spaces. However, the family climate has the most decisive impact on a child's well-being. The family climate appears to mediate the relationship between a structured daily life and child well-being. Thus, the family climate plays a very central role. The qualitative interviews in particular show that the parents have ensured that the family climate remains good and that the children are doing well through a newly structured everyday life and with new, joint activities. Complementary, the interviews with the children clarify that children acquire subjective coping strategies to deal with the pandemic (Jean-Baptiste et al., 2020).

## *6.3 The role of the mothers is particularly important in overcoming the crisis*

The quantitative study shows interesting links between the parents' work situation and family well-being. While the fathers' working situation has minor influence on family well-being, child well-being increases when the mother works at home and is present for their children. On the other hand, mother's dual responsibility for work and childcare can lead to family conflicts. The negative correlation of the essential worker occupation of parents with child well-being is explainable in this direction, too. In the professions of essential workers, it is unusual to work in a home office, which leads on the one hand to parents (mostly the mothers) not being present for the children during work hours, and on the other hand to the other non-essential worker parent - similar to single-parent families - having to bear the burden of family management alone.

As other studies have already shown (Hipp & Bünning, 2021; Koebe et al., 2020; Knize et al., 2021), we also notice that several mothers do not work at all and also more mothers work flexibly and at home. Especially in the interviews, apparent benefits for family well-being becomes clear in cases where mothers can stop working for a while or significantly reduce their working hours. It is noteworthy that such work interruption strategies are certainly not an option for all families and, for obvious reasons, cannot be recommended as long-term strategies. Since the dual burden of work and family was already a challenge for mothers before COVID-19 (Hilbrecht et al., 2008), it is essential to ensure that this situation does not deteriorate further and, in the worst case, lead to maternal parental burnout (Griffith, 2020). However, it should not go unnoticed that some fathers are particularly involved in the care and nurturing of their children during the Corona

pandemic. In our interview study, some fathers currently spend more time with their children and take more care of them, which is also noted as positive by the children.

Although our study provides a comprehensive view of the importance of family processes in coping with the first COVID-19 lockdown in Germany, it is limited in several ways. First, our study is only cross-sectional, limited to the period of the initial lockdown. As a result, neither individual developments nor changes can be traced. Fatigue or attrition phenomena, which occur with the ongoing pandemic situation, remain unconsidered, as do possible changes in structural conditions and the available resources in the families. Furthermore, no pre-crisis-comparison with the data can be implemented, as would be desirable for better examination of the theoretical model. Longitudinal data are also needed to examine the interaction of family climate as a resource and outcome.

Other limitations of our study relate to the sample: We performed our statistical analyses based on a highly skewed convenience sample. Hardly any families from disadvantaged backgrounds participated in our study. In particular, the results of the qualitative study suggest that family challenges that existed before the pandemic impede successful coping. We tried to remedy the sampling bias with a weighting. Considering the generalization of our results, further research using representative data is needed. Despite this limitation, our study makes an important contribution to the field by testing the generalizability of Prime's theory of stress and resilience, whose validity claim also applies to the present non-representative sample.

It should also be emphasized that children's perspective was not taken into account in the quantitative study, or only via their parents as a proxy. However, the qualitative results make it clear that children develop coping strategies that can complement and correct family processes. Following this, we argue for a more critical look at modeling family processes. Here, our analyses are based on only a small selection of indicators, so that family processes are represented only to a very limited extent. Both are due to research economics and should be addressed in future research projects. Finally, it should be noted that our variable on the work-related flexibility also has its limitations, as it combines two aspects in the same question.

#### *6.4 Conclusion and policy recommendations*

There are several main conclusions that can be drawn based on our investigation. First, strategies for early prevention to promote positive well-being of caregivers and children need to be developed and made available, especially under pandemic conditions. Based on our results, it seems vital to enable families to remain capable of acting at the process level. Support can range from economic support or emergency daycare for children to family counselling.

Second, some families have an urgent need for support, especially if there is an accumulation of pre-pandemic challenges and new problems due to the current situation. Support, therefore, has to be on multiple levels, low-threshold for families or individuals and even for children themselves, and consequently publicized and well accessible in everyday life. Thirdly, suppose we argue to support children to develop mechanisms to deal with the situation. In that case, this could be done by teachers or social workers in



school because all children can be addressed there. Finally, we take a critical view of the situation of mothers. Although home office arrangements and reduced working hours can support work-life balance during the pandemic, mothers in particular bore the double burden of professional work and care work. From our perspective, neither a double burden nor resigning in the profession are appropriate strategies in the long run. Political efforts to further more maintain equality seem necessary.

### Data availability statement

The data of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon request.

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## Appendix

Table A.1: Composition of the qualitative sample

Aliases	Age	Gender	Grade	Siblings	parental interviewee	parental care situation
Andrea	11	female	6th grade	sister (9y)	mother	both parents work full time in home office
Anna	7	female	2nd grade	sister (11y)	mother	mother works partially in home office, father works primarily in home office; mother is primarily responsible for homeschooling
Aron	8	male	3rd grade	stepsister (18y)	mother	mother probably works three quarters of the time, father probably full time; care work is shared between father and mother
Bastian	9	male	4th grade	brother (15y), sister (6y)	mother	parents are self-employed (winery, tourism, gastronomy)
Beate	9	female	4th grade	three sisters (11y, 7y, 4y)	mother	mother takes temporary leave from work and is responsible for childcare; father works full time
Benny	11	male	5th grade	two brothers (Bernd and other, 9y)	father	care work is shared between father and mother
Bernd	6	male	kindergarten	two brothers (Benny and other, 9y)	father	care work is shared between father and mother
Birgit	6	female	1st grade	brother (4)	mother	mother works part-time, father works in home office; care work is shared between father and mother
Hannelore	6	female	1st grade	brother (4)	mother	mother takes a break in her job, father works in a system-relevant job; mother is responsible for the care work
Heike	11	female	5th grade	no siblings	mother	mother works full time in home office; father, who lives separately, takes over a substantial part of the care tasks
Jan	14	male	8th grade	sister (11y)	mother	mother is primarily responsible for childcare; father works in home office
Jenny	9	female	4th grade	no siblings	mother	both parents work full time, Parents have formed a learning group with other parents consisting of three families with five children in total; the mothers take turns caring for and homeschooling the children
Jonas	11	male	5th grade	three adult siblings; brother (24y) living in the family household	mother	care work is shared between father and mother; older brother supports parents' care work



Table A.1: Composition of the qualitative sample (continued)

Aliases	Age	Gender	Grade	Siblings	parental interviewee	parental care situation
Lars	11	male	5th grade	two sisters (8y, 14y)	mother	care work is shared between father and mother
Maja	11	female	5th grade	brother (18y)	mother	mother responsible for care work; works 10 hours per week as cleaner; father: gastronomy management
Malte	8	male	3rd grade	sister (4y)	mother	mother works part-time, father works full-time; care work is shared between father and mother
Marcus	10	male	5th grade	no siblings	mother	both parents work full time; Marcus is cared for by family friends
Maria	11	female	6th grade	brother (8y)	mother	care work is shared between father and mother
Peter	6	male	1st grade	sister (3y)	mother	both parents work partially in home office; mother is mainly responsible for the care work
Sabine	10	female	3rd grade	sister (4y), brother (2y)	mother	both parents work full time in home office; care work is shared between father and mother
Thomas	14	male	8th grade	brother (12y)	mother	mother is primarily responsible for childcare; father works one day per week in home office
Werner	8	male	2nd grade	sister (11y)	mother	mother works part-time, father works full-time; mother is responsible for childcare

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## Information in German

### Deutscher Titel

Die Bedeutung familiärer Ressourcen für die Bewältigung der COVID-19 Pandemie in Deutschland: Eine Mixed-Methods-Studie zu Bewältigungsstrategien und Folgen für Familien und Kinder

### Zusammenfassung

**Fragestellung:** Ziel der vorliegenden Arbeit ist es, die familiäre Bewältigung der COVID-19-Pandemie in Abhängigkeit von den verfügbaren Ressourcen zu analysieren, dabei wird die Familie als kohäsives System betrachtet.

**Hintergrund:** Die COVID-19-Pandemie hat Familien auf verschiedene Weise beeinflusst, wobei viele Studien von einem Rückgang im Wohlbefinden von Kindern und Eltern berichten. Wie Familien mit der neuen Situation umgehen, hängt von den familiären und persönlichen Ressourcen ab.

**Methode:** Es wurde ein Mixed-Methods-Ansatz verwendet, der Daten aus einer Online-Befragung (N = 11,512) und ergänzenden qualitativen Interviews kombiniert, die im Frühjahr 2020 während des ersten COVID-19-Lockdowns in Deutschland durchgeführt wurden. Die Studie analysiert, wie familiäre und individuelle Ressourcen mit dem Familienklima und dem kindlichen Wohlbefinden zusammenspielen.

**Ergebnisse:** Die Studie zeigt, dass strukturelle Bedingungen, Prozesse innerhalb der Familie sowie individuelle Ressourcen, insbesondere die Arbeitssituation der Mutter, für das COVID-19-Erleben relevant sind. Die familiären Prozesse sind der wichtigste Faktor für eine positive Familienbewältigung. Diese Prozesse stoßen jedoch an ihre Grenzen, wenn die Vorbedingungen in den Familien ungünstig sind. Nichtsdestotrotz sind auch die Kinder in der Lage, eigene Bewältigungsstrategien zu entwickeln.

**Schlussfolgerung:** Zukünftige Studien sollten Familien und ihre verfügbaren Ressourcen als Gesamtsystem betrachten und auch die Perspektive der Kinder einbeziehen.

**Schlagwörter:** Familienklima, kindliches Wohlbefinden, innerfamiliäre Prozesse, ABC-X Modell, Onlinebefragung, Kinderinterviews

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Alexandra N. Langmeyer: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7687-675X>

Angelika Guglhör-Rudan: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7386-8044>

Ursula Winklhofer: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4974-613X>

Sophia Chabursky: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6569-5489>

Thorsten Naab: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2864-9560>



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