

Weil es ums Ganze geht:

**Demokratie durch
Teilhabe verwirklichen!**

“It’s about the big picture: making democracy happen by participating”

18th German Child and Youth Welfare Congress
13 to 15 May 2025 LEIPZIG

**18. DEUTSCHER KINDER-
UND JUGENDHILFETAG
13. bis 15. Mai 2025 LEIPZIG**

Policy guidance paper on children and young people for the 18th German Child and Youth Welfare Congress (DJHT)

It’s about the big picture

With its slogan for the 18th German Child and Youth Welfare Congress (Deutscher Kinder- und Jugendhilfetag - DJHT) “It’s about the big picture: making democracy happen by participating!”, the Child and Youth Welfare Association (Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Kinder- und Jugendhilfe – AGJ) is highlighting the importance of democracy for the welfare of children and young people. Democracy as a form of life and society is a non-negotiable and necessary condition for the work which the AGJ and its partners carry out. We – representing the organisations and people working in child and youth welfare – are together campaigning for the defence of our free-democratic constitutional order against antidemocratic forces and advocating human dignity, the rule of law and diversity. More than any other political system, democracy thrives on participation, involvement and freedom of opinion, believing that it’s best to discuss differing positions and conflicts respectfully.

Freedom, equality and solidarity are central values of our democratic society. However, they are in danger, among other things owing to the rise of extreme (right-wing) and populist (right-wing) parties and movements. In the large number of crises over the last few years many implicit beliefs have also been questioned, while social conflicts and social inequalities have increased. The impact of these

crises has also been noticed by the professionals in child and youth services, which has exacerbated the lack of professionals even further in many places.

We as the Child and Youth Welfare Association (AGJ) are making every effort to enable all young people and their families to participate, regardless of their social class, disability, natio-ethnic cultural affiliation, gender, sexual orientation or also world-view/religion and in this way be part of a democratic society. The welfare of children and young people is a driver of democracy if it enables young people to participate, promotes diversity and contributes to reducing social inequalities.

The statutory responsibility of child and youth welfare is to encourage the approximately 22 million children, adolescents and young adults in our country in such a way that they can develop into self-determined people with a sense of their own responsibility and civic involvement. In order to do justice to this requirement, child and youth welfare services must work towards creating the best arrangement of democracy and try to counter its limitation or even abolition. Where the supporters of child and youth welfare strengthen democracy, society as a whole will benefit.

With its slogan for the 18th German Child and Youth Welfare Congress, the AGJ is sending a clear signal in favour of democracy and highlighting the importance of the participation and involvement of young people. This paper is intended to intensify the youth policy discourse, promote critical exchanges between the world of politics, theory and practice in child and youth welfare and provide an impetus for future-proof child and youth welfare together with young people.

Diversity is freedom and fear is created with diversity – enabling diversity

Freedom as a form of lived diversity is possible only in a democratic society. In an inclusive and diverse society people have the opportunity to participate with equal rights and independently of diversity features. At the same time, lived diversity unsettles some of the population.

Diversity means the acknowledgment of differences and the free development of everyone. This requires identifying the target audience and structuring services on an inclusive basis. Child and youth welfare has skills in the participation of various target groups. Inclusion and diversity are guiding concepts for many organisations. However, child and youth welfare also faces the challenge of doing justice to this requirement and implementing the acknowledgement of diversity and inclusion in its structures as well as in its daily educational work. It is creating spaces to do this, in which various groups interact with each other and exchange any differing positions. For example, (learning) processes are being initiated, which can then be anchored in society as a whole. The inclusive German Social Code Book VIII (SGB VIII) will make a major contribution to the further development of child and youth welfare.

It is necessary to have concepts, reliable standards, well-designed structures, qualified staff and a basic democratic approach in order to ensure the participation and involvement of everyone in child and youth welfare and promote the various dimensions of diversity within a pluralistic, democratic society. Only in this way can child and youth welfare make a contribution towards diversity and inclusion becoming a matter of course in society.

“Us and them”?! – Confronting misanthropic and anti-democratic attitudes

Democratic society in Germany is currently under pressure; it's particularly in times of crisis when antidemocratic attitudes advance towards the centre of society. This is exacerbated in places where only a few people participate, where many people do not feel that they are heard, represented, involved or when they are misled by incorrect information. Guilty parties are sought and in order to be able to name them, inequalities are referenced, such as social class, disability, natio-ethnic cultural affiliation, gender, sexual orientation or also world-view/religion.

People working in the field of child and youth welfare are increasingly being confronted with and sometimes even being threatened by antidemocratic attitudes

and group-related misanthropy – represented by some of their target audience, their colleagues and by political stakeholders. This challenges them in their professional work on relationships and attitudes. There should be continual reflection on how a discussion at eye level can nevertheless be successful.

It is one of the core objectives of child and youth welfare to empower young people to take political action and have a clear position on misanthropic and antidemocratic attitudes. Full-time and voluntary staff must be continuously given the expertise and support for this. A firmer basis is necessary for political education in child and youth welfare services. Furthermore, specialised services are also needed from stakeholders in civil society to promote democracy, work against discrimination and prevent extremism.

Between a welcome culture and isolation – recognising immigration as a reality and opportunity

Forced migration is an expression of global crises. Contrary to what migration debates suggest, only a few of those affected worldwide immigrate to Europe; freedom of movement in choosing a place of employment and residence within the European Union compares with a European policy of isolation to the world outside the EU.

In particular in 2015 society demonstrated a high level of commitment in welcoming refugees. The situation was and also remains challenging for child and youth welfare, but full-time and voluntary staff make a decisive contribution to managing this situation constructively. Consequently, child and youth welfare has built up additional expertise.

Diversity and migration are an organisational task and developmental opportunity for child and youth welfare. If migration is refused and migrants become the target of group-related misanthropy, child and youth welfare must interfere. It must identify and reduce hurdles to access its services for young people and their families with a history of migration and refugee status. Unaccompanied refugees who are minors and families with a background story of immigration or refugee status are entitled to the same standards and access to child and youth welfare as all other young people.

Being poor in a rich society – preventing poverty as a task for society as a whole

Poverty prevents participation and endangers democracy. Rising costs for groceries, energy and housing are a burden for many people and also generate fears of poverty and social exclusion for those who are unaffected. Although Germany is a rich country overall, wealth is distributed unevenly. For example, 50 percent of the population actually own 1.3 percent of total German wealth, while the richest ten percent own over 67.3 percent.

Child and youth welfare has the statutory task of avoiding or reducing disadvantages. In doing so, it must continually ask itself critical questions so that social inequalities are not reproduced in its access points and the structure of its services. This is because on the one hand access points with a high threshold increase social segregation; however, on the other hand the precarious premises used by youth welfare establishments have an adverse effect on the self-image of the target audience. The increasing split in society between poverty and wealth as well as social networks which are becoming weaker result in costs. Despite increasing expenditure on child and youth welfare, the funding of its services to date to overcome the challenges of social inequality and additional responsibilities is not sufficient.

The target audience of child and youth welfare needs a preventive and structural fight against poverty, which is taken up by society as a whole together with well-funded basic social security benefits to prevent poverty. Only then can child and youth welfare do justice to the entire range of its statutory responsibility and therefore contribute to promoting democracy.

Counteract loneliness – improve mental health

If social relationships cannot be experienced, such as during the coronavirus pandemic, this can lead to loneliness, which has an adverse effect on the mental health of young people. Almost half of under 27-year-olds feel lonely, which can also promote anti-democratic attitudes.

Child and youth welfare plays a part in counteracting loneliness through low-threshold services and non-commercial spaces, in which community and self-efficacy can be experienced. It promotes mental resilience, supports treatment services and contributes towards building-up long-term social relationships.

Existing structures in child and youth welfare should be improved on a permanent basis to implement this requirement. In addition, closer networking with the

healthcare system is necessary. This can make a greater success of young people growing up healthily and enable them to participate in democracy.

Gold-dust on the employment market, but powerless politically? A new generational contract is needed

In times when there is a shortage of professionals, young people are like gold-dust on the employment market; they can frequently fulfil their expectations of a good job. At the same time, their political influence is dwindling owing to demographic development. This leads to conflict between the generations, for example when it comes to political decisions regarding the use of resources. Young people are developing their own forms of political involvement, also beyond the traditional participation structures. Despite and precisely in view of multiple crises, they have their own ideas about the structure of society and the further development of democracy. However, many turn away from political bodies such as governments and democratic parties.

With regard to the welfare state, a generational imbalance can be identified, for example regarding political decisions on pensions or a lack of investment in education. Against this background, the discussion about generational inequality and a social generational contract must be driven forwards. The time has come to no longer postpone the debate about the structural incorporation and validation of the concerns and rights of the younger generation.

From the perspective of child and youth welfare, the incorporation of the rights of children into the German Basic Law can improve the position of young people and safeguard their involvement in structuring society. Furthermore, it is necessary to reduce the voting age to 16 years at all political levels, such as in European elections. Child and youth welfare stands besides young people and is campaigning with them so that their votes and interests are taken into account appropriately in political decision-making processes. It's about making it possible to be young in an aging society.

High temperatures, cool heads – implementing climate neutrality

International and European climate targets must be met. In particular protest movements initiated by young people such as "Fridays for Future" show that urgent action is imperative. Failure to reach climate targets and the renouncement of the extremely noticeable consequences of climate change lead to frustration and anger in society. In an important decision on the Climate Protection Act of 2021, the Federal Constitutional Court emphasises the responsibility of the State to also

protect natural resources for young people so that basic rights such as freedom and integrity can also be valid for future generations.

Child and youth welfare promotes children's environmental rights and creates an awareness of climate responsibility in establishments. For the sake of generational equality, it is necessary to strengthen the position of children and young people and ensure they have a basis for true participation in climate policy, which safeguards their future.

Child and youth welfare professionals should act as advocates for young people and consistently highlight the climate crisis and its consequences for future generations. With targeted programmes and services as well as by following a sustainable direction in the establishments themselves (infrastructure and modes of action across educational programmes), children and young people can be taught about ecological values and child and youth welfare services can themselves become climate-friendly.

Between opportunity and risks – Supporting digital environments

Digital media offer young people new opportunities for development and participation and the option of becoming involved in democracy to a greater extent. Children and young people hardly make a distinction between analogue and digital spaces; the environments they live in are hybrid. Traditional journalistic media have lost significance and have been replaced by social media, above all among the younger generation. This also has risks: algorithms steer user behaviour, collect and use personal data, some scatter fake news and spread hate speech – informed and self-determined forming of opinion requires media education.

Child and youth welfare must help to structure all digital developments for its target audience. Despite the digitalisation of many services during the coronavirus pandemic, professionals in child and youth welfare often lack a point of reference to the digital environments of young people and the necessary resources to track corresponding developments. There is therefore a need for a joint digital strategy in the Federal Government, federal states and municipalities in order to drive the digitalisation of youth welfare structures forward. In doing so, the focus must be on the rights of young people and their participation must be ensured. It's also necessary to have appropriate equipment in the organisations in terms of hardware and software together with the corresponding qualifications among professional staff.

At the same time there are challenges regarding data protection as well as the protection of children and young people. These cannot be solved individually and also not solely through educational media services. Additional transnational, regulatory solutions are required for this together with the political will to also implement them.

Not just a feeling of uneven unity – shaping child and youth welfare together at eye level

Germany is characterised by unequal experiences in the eastern and western parts of the country. While existing experiences were not questioned for the population in the western federal states after 1989/90 as part of the transformation process, many people in the eastern federal states experienced a devaluation of their own accomplishments and sometimes also their own experiences as an individual after the jubilation about regaining their hard-won freedom. This led to a doubling of disillusionment among quite a few of them: disappointment about the loss of the old ways and a lack of satisfaction with the expectations about the new way of life. These experiences have penetrated into the younger generation. For some people the wish for democracy existed and still exists but is confronted by an impression of heteronomy in democracy. What has already been achieved under these challenging conditions is often overlooked.

Child and youth welfare also underwent a radical transformation process. A Child and Youth Welfare Act drawn up under the conditions of “Child and Youth Welfare West” became valid in the east from one day to the next, without sufficient involvement of professional staff and the general population. Building up new structures occurred simultaneously with a radical social change/reduction in existing structures.

Child and youth welfare can only be structured as a whole entity with everyone working together responsibly and democratically – with mutual recognition and appreciation. It’s important to research the specific regional circumstances in east and west Germany and to prepare the transformation process so that these findings can be included in the further development of child and youth welfare. The extremely varied regional challenges in child and youth welfare can be overcome overall if lessons are learnt from the mistakes of the reunification process and are linked to positive experiences and a common creative approach.

Democracy and diversity – more Europe in child and youth welfare

Europe offers opportunities for the joint handling of a wide range of crises. However, for many people in Germany Europe is a long way from their own living reality and the EU is regarded as patronising and bureaucratic by some.

European programmes in the field of youth make a particular contribution to finding out about and learning to appreciate Europe. However, there is often a lack of resources in child and youth welfare for educational schemes which make Europe feel tangible. The disadvantaged in particular frequently have no access to European programmes.

European exchanges are intended to become a matter of course to a greater extent in child and youth welfare. It must be made possible for all young people and professionals to access European schemes and to safeguard this by providing the appropriate resources for the relevant infrastructure. In this way they will be given additional opportunities, the area of work can develop further and a contribution will be made towards democracy and diversity in Europe.

Investment, not subsidy – needs-based facilities in child and youth welfare ensure the future of society

Expenditure of EUR 65.8 billion was recorded for child and youth welfare for 2022 (of which: EUR 45.3 billion was spent on daycare for children; EUR 14.9 billion on assistance with bringing up children; EUR 3.1 billion for child and youth welfare/ youth social work; EUR 2.5 billion for other tasks). This is a lot, but amounts to only eight euros per day per young person for all the schemes and services in child and youth welfare, including paying the people who work in this field. Nevertheless, the question is being asked increasingly frequently whether we can and want to afford child and youth welfare in its current form in the future.

Such a question implies an outdated notion of child and youth welfare as a subsidy for young people and their families in need. However, this is not the limit of their contribution to the prosperity of the country. Through its services child and youth welfare contributes to the education and personal development of young people, which in turn is essential from the perspective of the professionals in this field. Child and youth welfare services also create the conditions for participation on the employment market by improving the compatibility of family and gainful employment. Child and youth welfare is an important sector of the labour market employing approximately 1,175,000 staff and also a significant location factor. It is one of the conditions for the effectiveness of society.

Needs-based investment in child and youth welfare as well as in other areas which deal with the requirements of young people are investments in the future of society. A society can be structured democratically in the long term only with the best possible encouragement of subsequent generations. This must have the highest priority from a political perspective.

Making democracy happen by participating!

Child and youth welfare is a decisive stakeholder for implementing the rights of all the young people in our country to a good upbringing and equal opportunities. In doing so, it acts as the advocate of children and young people. Its values are based on the German Basic Law and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as the German Social Code Book VIII. In specific terms this also means making it possible for children and young people to be involved and participate in our democracy: they have a right to social and political participation and protection against discrimination. The implementation of the rights of young people is possible only in a democratic society. The structure and defence of democracy are therefore a constitutive component of child and youth welfare. It's a driver of democracy!

Management Board of the Child and Youth Welfare Association – AGJ
Berlin, 05./06.12.2024