

Navigating Crisis: The Transformative Impact of COVID-19 on Family Support Services in Germany

Nina Weimann-Sandig^{1,*}, Götz Schneiderat¹, Aileen Völlger¹

¹University of Applied Sciences for Social Work, Education and Nursing, Evangelische Hochschule Dresden, Dresden, Germany

*Correspondence should be addressed to Nina Weimann-Sandig, Nina.Weimann-Sandig@ehs-dresden.de

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Abstract

In 2024, we published a study named "COVID-19 as a Driver of Professionalization in Work with Families in Germany" [1]. The following text is a commentary on this study. It presents key findings and the study's approach but also contextualizes further questions arising from the post-pandemic period.

The article presents a comprehensive examination of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family support services in Germany. It highlights how the pandemic acted as a catalyst for both the professionalization and professionalization of social work with families. The study articulates the multifaceted challenges faced by families during the pandemic and the subsequent adaptations made by practitioners in the field. Shortly after the onset of the pandemic in February 2020, it became evident that the restrictions on public life significantly impacted families, particularly children and young people. Prior to the COVID pandemic, certain family structures were already experiencing considerable pressure and relied heavily on various facilities and networks for educational and preventive support. However, providing consistent assistance to these families during the pandemic proved challenging, as many critical facilities were not initially deemed "systemically relevant" and were forced to close for extended periods. The study therefore investigates the extent to which support networks and specific services for children and families were maintained during the prolonged period of contact restrictions and facility closures from 2020 to 2022. It also examines how working conditions and the overall environment for supporting families evolved during the pandemic. The results illuminate both the negative and positive changes in educational and support work with families throughout this period.

Keywords: COVID-19, Social Work with families, Mental exhaustion, Professionalization, Deprofessionalization

Background: Family Work and Family Support Social Work in Germany

In Germany, support options for families have expanded significantly over the past twenty-five years, shaped by a diverse range of professionals from social work, healthcare, and early education [2]. The framework for family support emphasizes early intervention, providing services from pregnancy through a child's third year to identify developmental issues and enhance parenting skills. Special attention is given to families facing unique challenges, such as single-parent households or families with migration backgrounds. The early intervention system, which integrates various support services and has been part of family policy in Germany since

the 1970s, is therefore crucial for fostering healthy parent-child relationships and ensuring children's well-being from the time of pregnancy [3]. Tailored support and advice are available to parents and children up to the age of three. However, there are other family support measures in Germany that go beyond early intervention and are particularly relevant for families with older children. These measures are anchored in various laws.

Family education and counselling offers parents and children information, workshops and advice on topics such as parenting, health and conflict resolution. These services are designed to strengthen parenting skills and promote exchange between families. The legal basis for this is provided by the German

Social Security Code (SGB) VIII. This Code also includes youth welfare as a further measure. Youth welfare comprises various services such as advice, support with educational issues and assistance in crisis situations. These also include services for open child and youth work that promote leisure activities and social integration. Family care and assistance offers support in difficult life situations, e.g. in the event of separation, illness or financial problems. The aim is to stabilize the family situation and support education. Child day care is also one of the family support measures in Germany, the legal basis for which is the Child Education Act (KiBiz) and the Social Code (SGB) VIII. School social work is also part of the support measures of the SGB VIII. School social workers offer support in schools, help with social and emotional problems and promote integration. They are contact persons for students, parents and teachers. In addition, there is help with parenting. This includes various forms of support, such as educational counselling, day groups or residential support. They aim to strengthen the parenting skills of parents and promote the development of children.

The beginning of the pandemic in February 2020 drastically altered the landscape of family support services in Germany. The study especially examines the sudden changes in the federal state of Saxony. The results of a large family survey (2,425 parents and 453 children were interviewed), which was conducted in the first and second year of the pandemic, show that the restrictions on public life disproportionately affected families, particularly children and young people, who faced significant challenges related to educational disruption and social isolation [4]. Nevertheless, the survey underscored that not all families experienced the COVID-crisis equally, emphasizing the need for targeted support for vulnerable family structures, such as single-parent households and families with migrant backgrounds. Those families, who had been under considerable pressure due to socio-economic factors prior to the pandemic, were particularly affected by the social restrictions. The pandemic exacerbated these existing vulnerabilities, making it imperative for practitioners to navigate a complex web of needs. Despite the closure of many facilities deemed non-essential, some support services were able to adapt and continue functioning, showcasing resilience in the face of adversity.

Professional Profiles and Work Dynamics of Child and Youth Welfare Practitioners in Saxony

We selected professionals for our multi-method study based on guidelines from family and socialization research. Emphasizing the family as the foundational unit of society, we focused on practitioners who support families as systems in their work. The early childhood phase was particularly significant in our selection, as a healthy parent-child relationship is essential for establishing basic trust during this critical period of socialization. A child's development is greatly influenced by the trust present in the parent-child relationship [5].

The study gathered comprehensive data on the qualifications and work activities of 174 practitioners in the field of child and youth welfare. The findings revealed that 53% of respondents held a university degree, while 28% had a degree from a university of applied sciences, and 17% completed vocational training as their highest qualification. This indicates an overrepresentation of university-educated professionals, particularly those with degrees in social pedagogy and social work, compared to those with vocational qualifications like state-certified educators.

In terms of work activities, 21% of practitioners were involved in day care social work with young children, making it the largest group. The next largest groups included early education educators (14%), school social workers (11%), and community-based family support professionals (11%). Family and pregnancy counselling and local authority youth welfare offices each accounted for 10% of respondents. However, certain fields, such as after-school care, residential care, child and youth social work, and early intervention services, were less represented, with 2% to 3% of the study population working in these areas. Additionally, 6% of respondents worked in other, less-defined roles, such as general social counselling or healthcare.

Comparisons with official statistics indicated that the work areas of the practitioners were broadly representative of the overall landscape in Saxony, particularly regarding the number of professionals in day care centers, school social work, and family counselling services. However, areas like child and youth social work and residential care were notably underrepresented.

Regarding the agencies employing these practitioners, 173 respondents provided insights into their organizational affiliations. The majority (38%) worked for non-religious non-profit organizations, while 20% were with faith-based organizations. Additionally, 34% worked for local authorities or public agencies, with only 3% employed by commercial agencies or self-employed. This distribution reflects the existing structure of child and youth welfare in Saxony, though public/local authority roles were slightly overrepresented in the survey results.

The size of work teams varied among respondents. About 27% worked in small teams of two to five people, 28% were in medium-sized teams of eleven to nineteen, and 19% were in larger teams of twenty or more members. Only 6% indicated sole responsibility in their roles.

When asked about job clarity and task distribution, 196 out of 205 respondents reported that clear job profiles and task distributions were established by their facilities or employers. Only nine professionals indicated a lack of such structures. These established roles were primarily found in family centers, local authority youth welfare offices, community-based family support, day care social work, and school social work.

Overall, the diverse qualifications and experiences of the practitioners highlight the complexity and multifaceted nature of work in the field of child and youth welfare in Saxony. The data underscores the importance of professional education and training in shaping effective support services for families and children, as well as the necessity of clear job roles and team structures to enhance collaboration and service delivery.

Mental Strain on Families during the Coronavirus Pandemic

In order to understand the challenges of family work and the associated burdens for educational and social workers, we included data that we had previously collected in a family survey in the federal state of Saxony [6]. The aim of the family survey was to let parents, children and adolescents (aged 10-21) have their say regarding how they were coping with the coronavirus pandemic. A central research interest was to gain differentiated insights into family resilience, stress and conflict factors, with a particular focus on the development of family conflicts since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. Two questionnaires were developed, one for parents (or legal guardians) and one for children and adolescents between the ages of 10 and 21 who live together in a household in Saxony. Specific sets of questions were developed for two types of family: one for 'normal' families¹ and one for families in the residence and alternating model. In the parents' questionnaire, the filter function was further differentiated between mothers and fathers, who, however, answered the same content-related questions in order to ensure comparability of the results. The children's questionnaire was also standardized in terms of content and only at relevant points was a distinction made between different age groups. The parent survey was open to mothers, fathers, and legal guardians living in a household with at least one child under the age of 21. All children, adolescents and young adults between the ages of 10 and 21 living in a household with their parents, one parent or their legal guardians were eligible to participate in the child survey. The professional and ethical coordination of the survey content was carried out by the EHS center with the involvement of external experts, for example from the Saxony branch of the German Child Protection Agency. After the data had been cleaned, a total of 2,878 data sets were available; 2,425 parents and 453 children actually took part. Of the 2,425 parents surveyed, 2,020 were mothers and 405 were fathers. This means that mothers, with a share of 83.3%, represent the majority of all respondents, which points to their disproportionately high participation in the family survey. In contrast, fathers were significantly less likely to participate in

the survey, with a share of 16.7%. Looking at the participating parents in terms of family model, the majority of respondents live in so-called normal families, which usually consist of two parents and one or two children. Their share of all family forms in the present study is 81.3%. Single parents represent the second largest group with 13.1% of the parents surveyed. The alternating model, as a further separation model, was chosen by 5.1% of the respondents. Furthermore, 0.5% of the respondents identified themselves as same-sex families, also known as rainbow families. Of the 453 children who took part in the survey, only eight did not provide any information about their gender. 55.3% of the participating children and young people identified as female, 44% as male and 0.7% chose the category 'diverse'. The age distribution of the participants shows that a large proportion of the children and young people surveyed, namely 53%, were between 10 and 13 years old. 37% identified themselves as being in the 14-17 age group, while 10% selected the 18-21 age group. Regarding the educational level of the participating children and young people, 16.6% were attending primary school at the time of the survey, 53% were at grammar school, and 19% were attending high school. Differences in life satisfaction arise with regard to the different family models: while parents and children from normal families are the most satisfied overall, children who live in alternating models show lower satisfaction than their parents. Single fathers are significantly more satisfied than single mothers, especially if they have a new partner. Among the single mothers surveyed, however, a new partnership has a negative effect on general life satisfaction.

With a view to mental stress, single parents, especially single mothers, showed an increased likelihood of reduced or limited well-being: their risk of clinical depression was significantly higher than the average for other family models. The findings reveal significant fears among single parents regarding their ability to manage responsibilities, with 42.4% often feeling anxious about coping. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, 68.4% reported an increase in their general feelings of fear, highlighting a concerning trend. The analysis of free-text responses identified four key themes:

- **Loss of income:** Many respondents expressed anxiety over potential rent arrears and housing loss due to income instability.
- **Health concerns:** Fears about their own health and that of their children were prevalent, alongside worries about inadequate childcare support from employers and the government.
- **Home schooling challenges:** Respondents feared returning to homeschooling, feeling overwhelmed by educational responsibilities and concerned about their children falling behind academically.
- **Psychological Exhaustion:** There was a strong sense of burnout stemming from the pressures of sole responsibility, with calls for greater political support.

¹ The term 'normal family' is taken from scientific discourse and is not meant to be judgemental. Rather, the term 'normal' here refers to the numerical distribution of family forms in Germany. The dominant family type was – and still is – the heterosexual family with children living together. This family model is therefore referred to as a normal family. The term does not imply any devaluation of other family models.

Overall, those with strong social networks and state support reported significantly lower levels of anxiety during the crisis. Differences in well-being can also be seen between parents and children according to the family model. For example, the well-being of children in single-parent families or those children and adolescents who live in an alternating model was more negative than the well-being of parents living in these family models. The big problem in these difficult times was that the support structures for families under particular psychological stress were extremely reduced and limited by the contact restrictions. This is also shown by our data. The quarantine regulations were perceived as more burdensome by the parents than by the children. The group of single mothers also felt particularly challenged here. With regard to the age and socio-economic circumstances of the parents surveyed, a significant influence on the level of stress within the family was found in that parents who were younger and had a lower income perceived the quarantine periods as more stressful for themselves than other families. Local disparities could also be identified here. Parents from large cities expressed a significantly higher level of stress compared to parents from smaller cities or rural areas. Looking at the acceptance of the quarantine regulations among children, differences emerge according to age group: children between the ages of 10 and 13 and adolescents between the ages of 18 and 21 found the regulations most stressful. Overall, it was found that children, adolescents, and young adults in rural areas were generally better able to cope with the quarantine rules than those in cities. Consequently, family social work and family support services were faced with the major challenge of assessing the problems of families without personal contact, identifying extreme needs and responding professionally. The following section explains how this was achieved.

Shifts in Professional Practice of Family Support Practitioners

Until the pandemic, the special features of family support services in Germany, as well as the professional self-image of the professionals working in them, were characterized by a self-image of personal interactions. A face-to-face encounter with a client was considered an essential basic principle for getting to know a case and for case processing. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 dramatically transformed the working conditions for family support practitioners in Germany. As the pandemic progressed, the reliance on face-to-face interactions, which had been regarded as central to family support work, was challenged by the necessity of implementing contact restrictions. This transition revealed the complexities and vulnerabilities of the existing support systems, prompting a reevaluation of how services are delivered to families. Prior to the pandemic, family support in Germany was characterized by in-person formats, where cooperation and communication among practitioners, families, and children were vital. Professionals

from various fields, including social work, health care, and early education, collaborated within multi-professional teams to meet the diverse needs of families. An online survey and expert interviews were conducted to assess changes in work organization during two distinct phases of the pandemic: from March to September 2020 and from October 2020 to March 2021. The significance of differentiating these phases lies in the unique challenges faced during the initial lockdown and the subsequent adaptations made as the situation evolved.

The first lockdown, initiated in March 2020, marked a historical moment in Germany, as societal life came to a halt. With schools and day care centers closed, parents were required to manage home-schooling while balancing work responsibilities, often leading to heightened stress and uncertainty. The initial lockdown lasted seven weeks, during which time many family support services were forced to suspend in-person contact, disrupting the flow of essential support for families.

As restrictions were gradually lifted in May 2020, a “new normal” emerged, but the situation remained fluid. The government implemented strict hygiene protocols, which complicated the delivery of educational and support services. Many practitioners reported a significant shortfall between the educational mandates outlined in guidelines and the realities they faced under these stringent regulations. In particular, early education facilities struggled to uphold their educational objectives while complying with health guidelines, leading to frustration among staff and parents alike. As the pandemic progressed into the fall of 2020, a second wave of infections prompted the government to reintroduce restrictions, including a “lockdown light” that allowed schools and day care centers to remain open under new hygiene protocols. This situation was particularly challenging in Saxony, which emerged as one of the worst-affected states in Germany. The rapid rise in case numbers necessitated strict local regulations, including the implementation of “2G rules,” which restricted access to various public spaces to vaccinated individuals or those who had recovered from COVID-19.

Throughout this period, the experiences of family support practitioners highlighted the impacts of the pandemic on their ability to provide effective services. The loss of in-person meetings—a cornerstone of family support—was acutely felt. Practitioners relied heavily on informal interactions, such as drop-off and pick-up conversations, to gauge family dynamics and identify potential issues. The elimination of these interactions due to contact restrictions hindered their ability to observe and engage with families effectively. **Figure 1** gives detailed information about the perceived changes of work.

In the early childhood education sector, practitioners expressed concerns about the conflicting demands of adhering to hygiene regulations while maintaining the educational quality expected by parents. The pandemic shifted parental

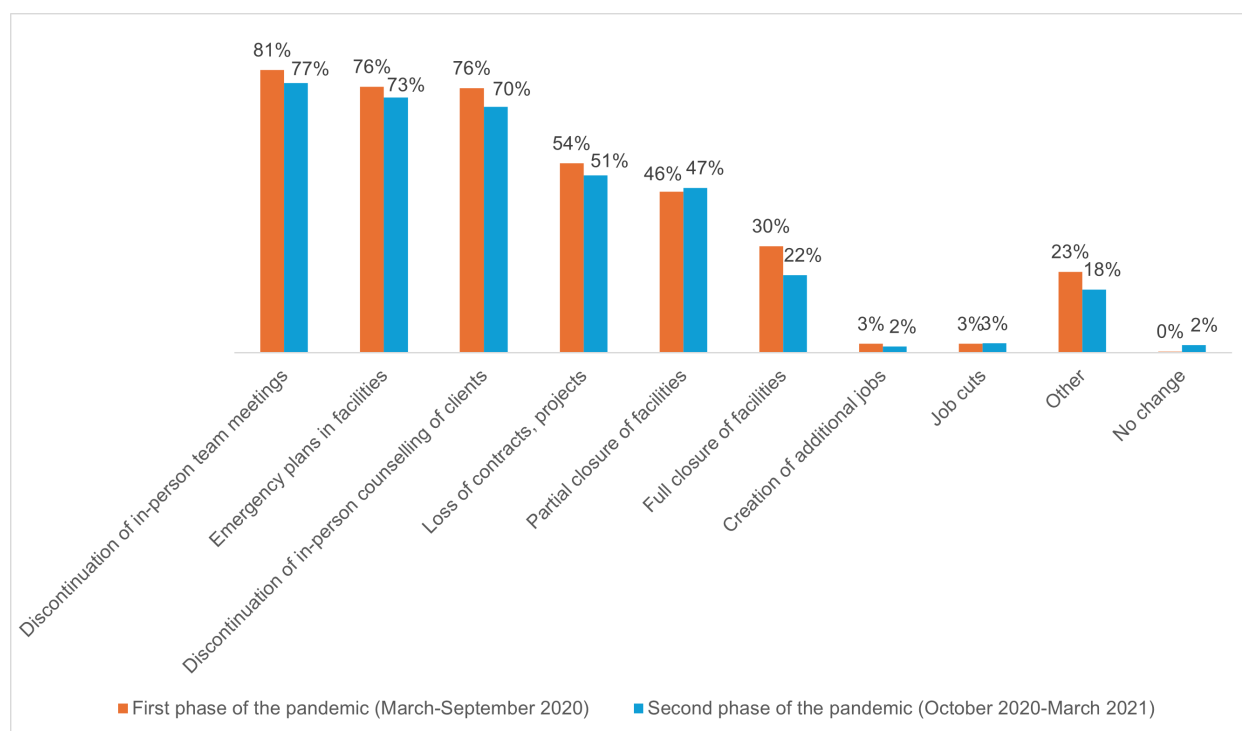


Figure 1. Changes in the perception and organization of work (multiple answers possible, numbers as percentages, n=232; 221); Source: [1].

priorities, with many becoming increasingly worried about their children's social and motor development. As a result, parents began to press for greater attention to these aspects within educational settings. However, due to staff shortages—exacerbated by COVID-related absences—many facilities struggled to meet these demands, leading to a focus primarily on basic childcare rather than comprehensive educational support. Moreover, the issue of inclusion for children with special needs became particularly pronounced during the pandemic. Many facilities reported that individualized support for these children had been significantly reduced or eliminated, leading to a lack of appropriate resources for their families. The reliance on external support services further complicated matters, as many of these resources were inaccessible during the pandemic's early stages, resulting in unmet needs for vulnerable families. Youth social work also faced significant challenges during the pandemic. Practitioners noted that their field was not initially recognized as “systemically relevant,” which contributed to feelings of neglect among young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The absence of safe, informal meeting spaces outside the home restricted young people's opportunities to discuss personal issues, leading to a sense of isolation. Although youth social workers attempted to maintain contact through phone and video calls, these interactions were often less effective due to distractions at home, making it difficult for young

people to express themselves freely. School social workers echoed these sentiments, highlighting the importance of in-person interactions for assessing and addressing the needs of students. They observed that, while children were initially excited to return to school, underlying issues soon surfaced. Behavioral problems and disparities in educational attainment became apparent, revealing the detrimental effects of prolonged home schooling and social isolation. Overall, the pandemic served as a watershed moment for family support services in Germany, emphasizing the need for adaptive strategies and a more integrated approach to service delivery. The experiences of practitioners during this period underscored the importance of flexibility, resilience, and collaboration among various support systems. As the landscape of family support continues to evolve, it is essential to prioritize inclusive practices that address the diverse needs of families in order to foster healthy development and well-being for children and young people. The lessons learned from this crisis may inform future policies and practices, ensuring that family support services can effectively respond to challenges and continue to meet the needs of families in an ever-changing environment. As practitioners reflect on their experiences, the need for robust support networks and resources becomes increasingly evident, highlighting the importance of ongoing dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders in the field.

Resilience Factors for Practitioners During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 crisis has been described by the interviewed professionals as a meta-crisis, affecting individuals already facing challenges in their personal and professional lives. The ability to cope during such crises largely depends on psychological resilience, which enables individuals to navigate difficult situations and focus on improvement options. Prior studies, such as the BeWAK study [7], highlighted the resilience of professionals in early education, and these findings are applicable across family support and social work fields. Practitioners often feel undervalued due to low remuneration, limited professional development opportunities, and a general lack of societal recognition for their roles. This sentiment resurfaced during the pandemic as discussions around "systemic relevance" emerged, determining which professions were considered essential for societal functioning. Practitioners anxiously awaited decisions on their work's classification, leading to significant uncertainty, particularly in the first year of the pandemic.

The stressors faced by practitioners included constant changes in hygiene protocols and severe staff shortages, exacerbating existing pressures. Factors such as personal skills, established routines, teamwork, and workplace atmosphere were identified as crucial for coping with stress [8]. Survey results indicated that experienced professionals felt more equipped to handle the crisis compared to those with less experience, who highlighted deficiencies in teamwork and reflective practices due to staffing challenges.

Structural resources, like flexible work schedules and family-work balance, were also important. While practitioners rated work-family compatibility positively, they expressed concerns about employer support for professional development and supervision. Job satisfaction remained relatively high among practitioners, but those with less experience reported lower satisfaction and increased exhaustion.

Self-efficacy played a significant role in how practitioners managed crises [9,10]. Most respondents felt confident in their abilities to navigate challenges, with experienced professionals exhibiting higher self-efficacy. However, lower resilience was noted among those in residential care, pointing to the varied experiences across fields.

Social support emerged as another critical factor for resilience, especially during the pandemic's restrictions on interactions. Those living with partners reported better coping mechanisms compared to single individuals. Finally, interviews revealed that adaptability and a commitment to lifelong learning were essential resilience factors. Practitioners who embraced continuous skill acquisition, particularly in digital tools, adapted more successfully to changes brought by the pandemic. This proactive learning attitude fostered team cooperation and strengthened overall resilience among staff, highlighting the importance of support networks and ongoing professional development in navigating crises effectively. **Figure 2** demonstrates the resilience of professionals, based on the BIG 5 Inventory Scale.

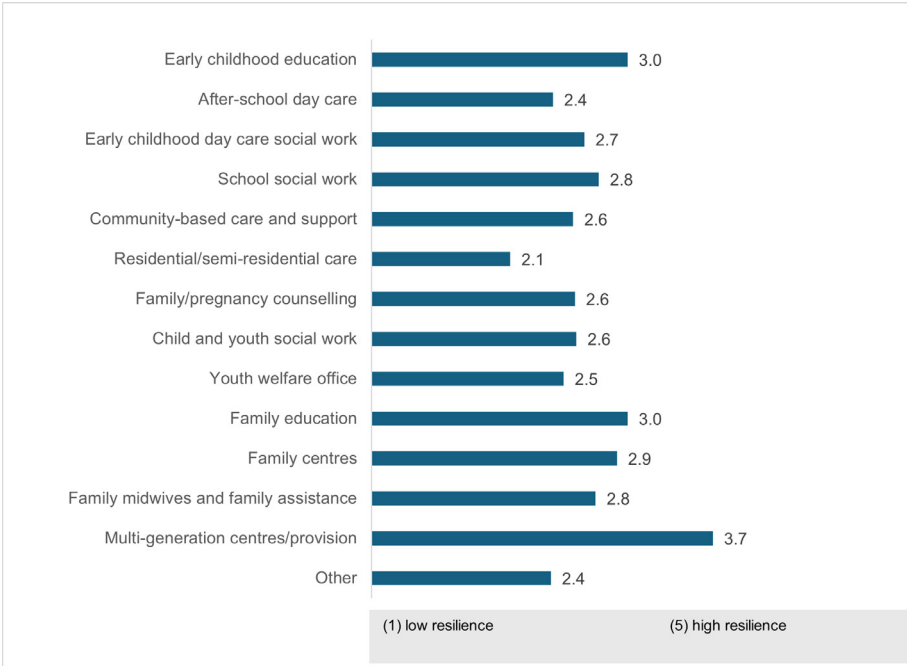


Figure 2. Resilience of educational professionals (basis: Big Five) by fields of practice (mean values, n=171). Source: [1].

Critical Analysis of Professionalization and Deprofessionalization in Family Support Work During COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst for significant changes in various sectors, particularly in family support services in Germany. In fact, the pandemic highlighted the vulnerabilities of family structures and the critical need for support services. Initially, the response to the pandemic resulted in the closure of many facilities deemed non-essential, which significantly limited access to support networks for families. This situation posed a dual challenge: practitioners were forced to adapt their methods of service delivery while simultaneously addressing the heightened needs of families under stress. The early stages of the pandemic saw an overwhelming focus on maintaining continuity of care despite significant restrictions. Practitioners had to pivot rapidly to digital communication methods, often without adequate training or resources. This shift marked a significant moment for professionalization, as practitioners were required to develop new skills in digital literacy and remote engagement. Those who could adapt quickly not only maintained their efficacy but also expanded their repertoire of skills, reinforcing their professional standing. Many practitioners embraced technology to provide support through online counselling, virtual workshops, and digital resources. This shift not only demonstrated adaptability but also opened new avenues for reaching families who might have previously been inaccessible due to geographical or logistical barriers. Moreover, the necessity of teamwork and collaboration became more pronounced during the crisis. As teams adjusted to remote work, there was an increased emphasis on communication and collective problem-solving. Experienced practitioners often took on mentorship roles, helping newer colleagues navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic. This collaborative spirit fostered a sense of community and professional identity, which is essential for the field's legitimacy and development.

The characteristic of only weak functional differentiation of social work occupations proves to be of little use in times of crisis. During the coronavirus pandemic, for example, it led to a situation in which responsibilities were not clearly delegated and, accordingly, professionals did not see themselves as responsible for certain areas of work and for the need for restructuring under pandemic conditions. As a consequence, many areas of work remained untouched, further exacerbating the plight of affected families.

Conversely, the rapid changes also led to elements of deprofessionalization. The initial response to the pandemic demonstrated a lack of recognition for the systemic relevance of family support services, as many were closed or reduced in capacity. This neglect highlighted the precarious nature of these roles and raised concerns about the sustainability of professional standards. Additionally, the reliance on digital

communication exposed significant disparities in access to technology and training among practitioners. Those with limited experience in digital tools struggled to maintain effective support, which could undermine their professional credibility.

The division between experienced and inexperienced practitioners became more pronounced, leading to frustration and burnout, particularly among younger professionals who were less equipped to handle the sudden shift in service delivery. The erosion of face-to-face interactions also impacted the quality of support provided. The traditional model of family support heavily relied on personal relationships and observational skills, which are difficult to replicate in a digital format. As a result, the ability to conduct thorough assessments and interventions diminished, leading to concerns about the overall effectiveness of services during the pandemic.

Conclusion

The dual nature of these developments suggests a complex landscape in family support work. While the pandemic spurred innovations that could enhance professionalization, it simultaneously exposed vulnerabilities that could lead to deprofessionalization. The challenge lies in balancing these forces to ensure that family support services can thrive in a post-pandemic world.

Future efforts should focus on addressing the systemic issues that became apparent during the pandemic. Enhancing training for digital tools, promoting equity in access to technology, and reinforcing the importance of family support services in policy discussions are crucial steps. Additionally, fostering a culture of continuous professional development can help practitioners navigate future challenges more effectively. The interplay between professionalization and deprofessionalization, coupled with the drastic shifts in practice, presents a critical area for further exploration. Only a few years after the pandemic, it is clear that no real lessons were learned, nor supported by public funding or public attention. Rather, the focus, especially on family support and family social work, has been on a quick return to normality before COVID-19. To what extent this is effective remains questionable and would need to be examined in further research. On the one hand, it should be noted that the needs and problems of families will continue to arise, especially with the emergence from the pandemic and the lengthy process of coping with its consequences (long COVID in families, missed school and truancy, behavioral problems in younger children or prospective school children due to a lack of peer socialization, etc). Family work must develop in this direction and can certainly learn from the experiences and innovations of the pandemic with regard to suitable formats, low-threshold contact initiation or the communication needs of young people or young families. Furthermore, the extent to which the professional self-image and openness of

specialists in family work towards digitization has increased should be examined, and how this can be used efficiently and innovatively, especially in view of the tense personnel and budgetary situations in the federal states.

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