

Paper presented at the Wellchi Network Conference 1  
**CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FACED BY EUROPEAN WELFARE  
STATES: THE CHANGING CONTEXT FOR CHILD WELFARE**

St. Anne's College, University of Oxford  
January 7-8 2005

## **Work life balance from the children's perspective**

Ute Klammer. Niederrhein University of Applied Sciences. Germany  
Please do not cite or quote without the permission of the author

### *Abstract*

Work life balance has been a topic in the academic as well as in the political debate for many years now. The main focus of the debate has usually been on the reconciliation of work and care, in particular taking up the perspective of working mothers. In the context of the trend towards an adult worker model the need to combine work with care obligations has become even more urgent in most European welfare states. The flexibilisation of work contracts and working times has sometimes eased work life balance for persons with care obligations, but has also led to new challenges and problems in this field. At the same time many programmes and initiatives have been launched to enable mothers (parents) to reconcile work and care, not least inspired by the political intention to reverse the negative demographic trend, as well as by the European Union's request to increase women's labour market participation rates to at least 60% before 2010.

Whereas mothers' (parents') work life balance has been broadly discussed, the children's perspective on (their parents') work life balance has remained a neglected issue so far. This paper picks up and discusses some of the relevant issues.

What are the implications of the trend towards an adult worker model, and in particular towards mothers' increasing labour market participation, for the children? Are there "good" and "bad" combination scenarios from the perspective of children? Do parents' opinions about what is a "good" solution go along with their children's opinions? Does family policy, do companies and do parents sufficiently take children's needs into account?

The paper reviews some of the existing literature dealing with the topics mentioned above. It also reviews literature about the changed concept of childhood and about how children live today – between diminished obligations to help their parents and new, dense schedules of their own.

The paper then draws on two qualitative research projects conducted by the WSI<sup>1</sup> in which parents and (in one project) children were interviewed about their daily lives, their work life balance and their opinions about it, including parents' opinions

---

<sup>1</sup> WSI = Institute for Economic and Social Research, Düsseldorf – the research institute where the author has worked until 9/04.

about their children`s needs and children`s opinions about their parents` arrangements concerning work and family life.

Based on these findings, the paper scrutinizes the recent trends and programmes of family policy in Germany from the perspective of children. The analysis centers on the initiative “Alliance for the family” which was launched in 2003 by the German family ministry in cooperation with the Bertelsmann Foundation, and in particular on its two sub-programmes “Audit career & family” and “Local alliances for families” that intend to ease work life balance in Germany (among other goals).

It is argued that the recent trend towards an increased labour market participation of mothers and an extension of public childcare could bring along two positive effects with regard to the perspective of children:

- a) During the last decades there has been a severe shift of the poverty risk from the elderly population to children in Germany. Far more than one million children today live on social assistance, the main reason being the joblessness or insufficient labour market income of one or both parents. A policy enabling more mothers, in particular lone mothers, to take up a job or increase her working hours can improve children`s chances to get out of poverty, to get a better education etc.
- b) As it has become clear from the international PISA-tests during recent years, the educational skills of German children are quite moderate when compared internationally, and there are particular problems in the education of children from vulnerable and disadvantaged families (such as migrants, social assistance recipients etc.). The extension of public childcare – now an explicit goal of the government – could improve the educational chances of children from disadvantaged families. This, however, will only occur if the quality of childcare (and not only the quantity) will be improved.

Although the trend towards an adult worker model and the recent shift in family policy might be positive from the children`s perspective concerning these two aspects, the analysis at the same time reveals that in many respects children`s needs only play a minor role when it comes to new services that claim to facilitate work life balance. The rise of 24hours care institutions, for example, might increase parents` disposability at their workplace in a flexible 24hours economy, but raises questions about the minimum standards for work life balance from the children` perspective.

Slide 1

Conference: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FACED BY EUROPEAN WELFARE STATES:  
THE CHANGING CONTEXT FOR CHILD WELFARE  
January 7-8 2005 St. Anne's College, University of Oxford

## **Work life balance from the children`s perspective**

*Ute Klammer, Niederrhein University of Applied Sciences, Germany*

**Structure of the presentation:**

1. Introduction
2. The development of mothers`/parents` labour market participation, working times and work-life balance. Empirical evidence from Germany
3. How about the children`s perspective?
4. "Alliance for the family" – the new approach in German family policy
5. For the better or for the worse from the children`s perspective?

Slide 2

## Sources (empirical data)

- Two qualitative research projects on families` everyday life and work life balance (interviews with parents and children, 2000-2002)
- A quantitative telephone survey on working parents`/carers` expectations and needs concerning the family friendliness of companies (ca. 2000 interviews, Nov./Dec. 2003)
- ECHP-data, project "Towards a new organisation of time over the life-cycle" (2002/2003)
- Secondary analysis of data from the German statistical office
- Institutional analysis for the international peer review on German family policy within the open method of coordination (Dec. 2004)

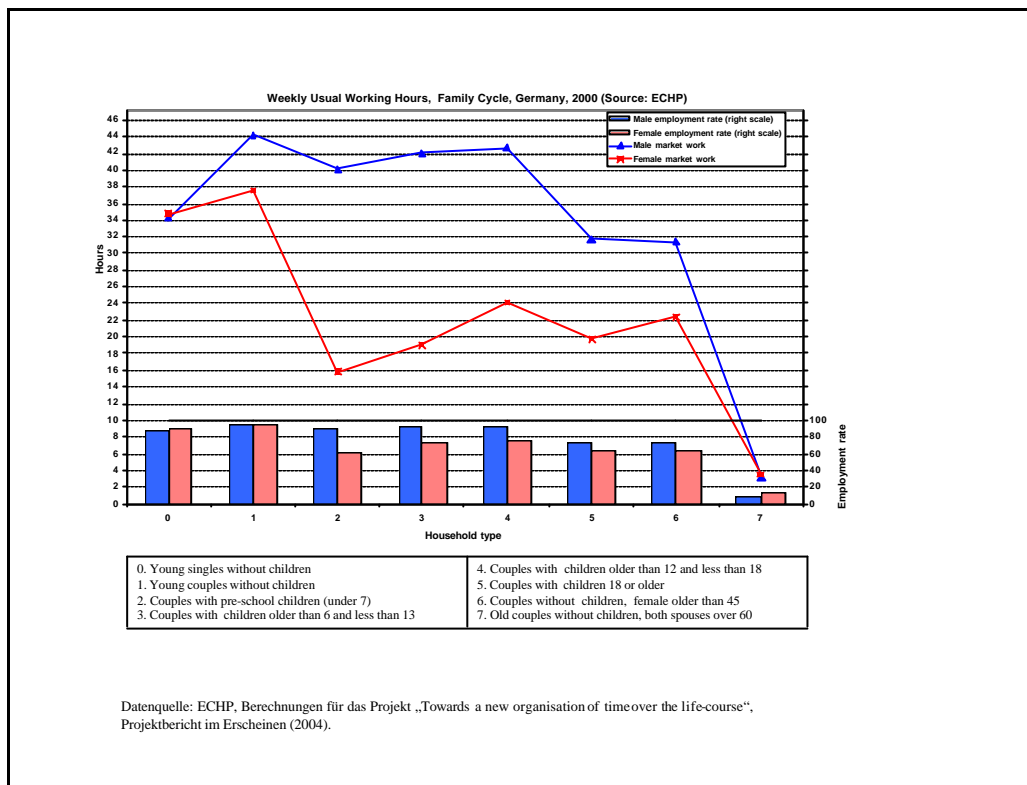
## Germany: institutional background

- For a long time focus on the breadwinner model of married couples in (West) Germany (many institutional regulations still in force)
- Extension of public childcare has been a neglected issue (quantity and quality, still very low coverage for children under the age of three in West Germany)
- The red-green government in its first four years (1998-2002) mainly increased cash benefits (child allowance)
- Only recently (after 2002) the focus has shifted to an extension of public childcare (a new law passed in autumn 2004 centers on an extension of childcare for small children)
- ... and to policies aiming at an improvement of work life balance (institutional support mainly for a full-time/part-time model; "Alliance for the family" as a broader approach to create a more family-friendly society)

## Parents' labour market participation

- Today the overall labour market participation of women is about 64% (mothers: 61%), which means above the EU targets set for 2010 (60%)
- But still a very unequal, gendered division of labour
- Couple working times have gone up; among working families, there is a concentration on 50-70 hours per week in West Germany and on 70-90 hours in East Germany, but 28% of East German couples (9% of West German couples) even work 90 hrs per week and more

Slide 5



Slide 6

## New problems of work life balance in a flexible economy

- Paid work often becomes more intense and more individualized
- Paid work becomes a rare good
- Parents have to invest in their employability
- Flexible working times are ambivalent for work life balance (45% of working parents work on Saturdays – at least occasionally -, 23% on Sundays, 37% on evenings between 18-22 o'clock)
- At the same time family becomes a place of increasingly differing needs and motivations of its members that have to be negotiated
- While the economy is increasingly based on flexibility, families (still) need some reliability and stability

## How do parents cope?

- Not one model, variety of “family arrangements”
- Care packages: public childcare plays a major role, but still only 18% of 5-6 year old children in West Germany (and fewer younger children) attend a full-time public kindergarten with lunch meal
- 2/3 of all couple households and 3/4 of all single parent households have at least one additional regular care arrangement, 25%/20% at least 3 additional arrangements (fewer arrangements in lower class families) (source: DJI children panel)
- There is a reluctant trend towards the double earner/double carer model (“co-parenting”), with parents sharing care responsibilities, and handing over children at precise times

## What do parents want?

1. Working time wishes of parents:  
mothers on average want to work more, 50% of couples with children below 6 live in a “father full-time/mother not employed-constellation”, but only 6% prefer this model; high preference for a full-time/part-time model
2. Working time wishes of employed parents:  
both fathers and mothers on average have a preference for working time reductions. This usually refers to actual, not contractual working times (overtime!)

## Parents wishes concerning the family-friendliness of companies

- Family friendly working time schemes are seen as the most important task for companies (women 36%, men 28%), followed by financial support by the company and additional leave schemes for carers
- A majority of employees with care obligations can already make use of flexible working time schemes (e.g. flexible beginning/end of work: 48% of male and 40% of female people with care obligations, free time for overtime work: 60% of both sexes)
- Working time accounts in most cases seen positively for work life balance (different to “annualisation” in France!)
- But: 4 out of 10 employees mention that changing/flexible working times sometimes lead to problems for work-life-balance, e.g. childcare
- Complaints about unforeseeable working times and Sunday work (but not generally about weekends and evening work)
- About 2/3 of the interviewees think their company is family-friendly, but 31% say there are problems

## How about the children’s perspective? – childhood today

- Children are capable agents of their own lives
- A. Solberg (1997): “In my account children are responsible, independent and ‘big’; to some extent they are adultlike”
- But: new challenges and contradictions:
  - Autonomy (creativity, authenticity) is expected from children at an ever earlier age; at the same time structural time control has grown, children increasingly have to follow strict time schedules and targeted activities (= contradiction between dependency and autonomy)
  - Not only parents’ flexible working times but also children’s full agendas complicate the organisation of everyday family life
  - Children are directly involved in the market economy. Their parents’ position and resources determine children’s chances of participation. And they are consumers themselves.
  - Children today need more competences to organize their own times, to cope with a variety of options and contradictions. They have to develop the ability to ‘give sense’ to an increasing complicated, contradictory world, and they have to learn to cope with ambiguities and uncertainties. This requires some guidance.

## Example: East German children after reunification (Kirchhoefer et al.)

### Ambivalent developments:

- More insecurities for children
- Dissolution of regular rhythms
- Parents working times became unpredictable
- Private networks of the family became unreliable

### New challenges:

- New degrees of freedom, more autonomy
- New contradictions and inconsistencies
- Need to define own goals, to find stability

### Negative developments:

- Erosion of time discipline
- More non-rational behaviour
- Difficulties to make use of the new freedom, trend to seek stability by joining fan-groups etc., a part of the autonomy was given up

## Do children have a voice when it comes to parents' work and care arrangements? – The UN convention

### UN convention on the rights of the child (1989):

- The best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children (Art. 3)
- Parents have the main responsibility to care for the children's development and should try to achieve the best for their child; the state has a supportive role, e.g. an obligation to provide good quality public childcare facilities (Art. 18)
- A full and harmonious development of the child, e.g. on the spiritual, moral and social level, has to be secured (Art. 6)

### Last but not least:

- **Children have the right to express their views and to have their views taken seriously and given due weight (Art. 12)**

## “Ask the children” (Galinsky 1999) – What America’s children think about their working parents

**“The problem isn’t that mothers (and fathers) work: it is how we work”**  
(p. XIV)

- Children do not question their parents employment and work and care arrangements in general
- Children with working mothers did not say more often they wanted to see their mother more than children with a housewife mother (however children want to see their father more often)

But:

- Top on children’s wish list (23%): They want their parents to make more money (money as a stress reducer?)
- Children suffer when parents come home from work stressed and tired
- Children want their parents to love their work
- Children want more focus (“quality time”?)

And:

**“Parents and children often see the same issue quite differently”** (p. IX)

## German children’s opinion about their parents’ work and care arrangements

- Again: children seem not to question their parents’ (mothers’) employment in general
- There is a general approval of the existing work and care arrangements by the children  
(Do children want to function well and to please their parents?)
- “more money” is no important issue among children of *working* parents

However:

- Children want to have the opportunity to escape the strict time schedules from time to time
- Children criticize special flexible work arrangements of their parents, in particular: work on weekends or late afternoons
- Children with “co-parenting” parents enjoy to have one parent “for themselves” – sometimes the mother, sometimes the father
- Children want their parents to be with them on special days, in particular: birthdays, Christmas etc., but also on special occasions such as school events, sports competitions etc.
- Children react sensitively when “family rituals” are (repeatedly) hurt, such as “return rituals” or “going to bed rituals”, or when they are only practiced in a unusual hurry.
- Children want to have reliability (e.g. to know when their parents will come home)
- Children are often happy with a carer’s “background presence” (quantity time instead of quality time??)

## First conclusions

- Children can cope with a lot of flexible work and care arrangements, as long as some basic rules are followed.
- However, children's wishes are not always met adequately in families' work and care arrangements – and parents often do not even know much about their children's opinions and wishes
- Main problems are unforeseeable working times and working times that strongly interfere with the usual rhythms of family life and common times of parents and children
- Companies' working time schemes can be called family friendly when they fulfill the following criteria
  - Planning security for the employee
  - Predictability and reliability
  - Options in the area of working time duration
  - Life phase specific time planning
  - Minimisation/avoidance of weekend and evening work
  - Limits on the duration of working times

## “Alliance for the family” – the new approach in German family policy

- New initiative, launched in 2003
- Goal: to create a new consciousness and awareness about families' support needs, to increase family-friendliness in the whole society
- New approach: to bring different actors together
- Various activities at different levels
- Based on voluntary engagement
- One focus: company culture (work organisation, working time regimes, recruitment and development of personnel...)

## Example 1: “Local alliances for family”

- Local round table alliances of relevant local actors
- After only 11 months, in Nov. 2003, the 100<sup>th</sup> local alliance was founded
- Ministry provides service office, seminars, PR-activities, website
- Scientific accompaniment and evaluation by the German Youth Institute, Munich
- Different local alliances focus on very different issues (such as: organisation of additional childcare/eldercare, flexible working time arrangements, family-friendly opening hours, schedules for public transport, special qualification programmes for mothers, godparenthoods of volunteers for families in crisis or young people entering the labour market...)
- Each month one local alliance is awarded “local alliance of the month”

## Example 2: “Career & Family Audit”

- Voluntary company audit organised by the Hertie Foundation
- Management instrument, should help interested firms to improve their family friendliness (without a lot of financial/administrative effort)
- Procedure: an external auditor checks the already existing family-friendly measures in an interested company
- During a workshop the auditor checks the future potentials of the firm together with representatives of all relevant groups in the company (checklist with 140 items)
- An agreement about the goals and practical steps is fixed
- The company receives the basic certificate
- After three years (during which time the company can always get help) there is a re-audit
- Provided the self-set goals are fulfilled, the company receives the certificate “family-friendly company” and can use it

## What can be expected from the “Alliance for the family” for work life balance in Germany?

- Reliable evaluation data not yet available
- But high approval of the approach in the population (both local alliances and audit career and family)
- Now about 130 local alliances have been set up, and more than 80 companies (covering more than 220.000 employees) have obtained the certificate “family friendly company”
- Official expectation: general improvement of family-friendliness, change of the working culture, improvement of women’s labour market chances and families’ chances to realise a good work-life balance, reduction of social exclusion
- But: the high financial support for the male breadwinner model (e.g. by matrimonial tax splitting) has not been abolished; the disincentives to work for married women remain.

## For the better or for the worse from the children’s perspective?

### Ambivalent picture

#### Problem:

- If one looks at the main goal of the “alliance for the family” (concept paper), the dominance of economic concerns and goals become very obvious
- Main goals: a) to increase birth rates to stimulate economic growth and to reduce social security burdens in the long run; b) to avoid wasting qualified women’s (mother’s) potentials, also because of the economic loss going along with it
- Consequence: Family friendliness as a means to stimulate economic growth! (social investment paradigm)
- In addition the voluntary character of the initiative makes it necessary to convince companies about the positive return on investment of family-friendly strategies (Prognos: ROI =25%); it remains open how companies can be convinced to become active where they don’t expect a win-win-scenario!
- Some new services can bear new problems, e.g. “24 hour emergency care institutions” can strengthen the trend towards the “zero-drag employee” (Hochschild)

#### But positive:

- There is some evidence that the initiatives could really help to facilitate families’ work and care arrangements – also to meet children’s needs
- In addition: the third main explicit goal: children should get a better education at a young age (reaction to PISA shock!). Extension of public childcare, however this has to be accompanied by improvements in quality.
- A better education in young age is certainly positive for the participation chances for immigrant children and children from vulnerable, disadvantaged, low educated families
- The better enabling of mothers’ employment can be an important precondition to help children out of poverty (today more than 1 million children below the poverty line). It could help in particular children of lone mothers (of which today 26% live from social assistance, and 31% live below the poverty line)