

How safety measures can leave children unsafe

TELEPHONE HELPLINES FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN THE CORONAVIRUS PERIOD

Anne Pütz

An IZI study asked 15 counsellors from child and youth helplines in Germany about how the coronavirus crisis is affecting the situation of children and their counselling work.

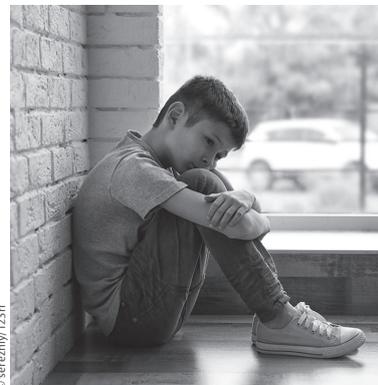
Yini¹, aged 16, who is of Chinese origin but grew up in Germany, always felt “fully integrated and accepted” – until the coronavirus arrived in Germany. A few weeks before the school closure, a “nickname” for Yini began to spread, not only in her own class, but also in the parallel classes: everyone started to call her “Wuhan.” At first it only seemed to be a joke, but then the “joke” became more and more malicious. Eventually Yini was even blocked by her fellow students in their chat groups. Shortly before the schools closed, she turned in desperation to her class teacher for help. The teacher’s response was that she should not take herself so seriously, and that such jokes were the other students’ way of compensating for the fear that everyone was now feeling. And after all, the virus had come from China. Perhaps, the teacher suggested, the reason Chinese people were so sensitive was they had always been brought up in dictatorships? So who could Yini turn to now? Should she talk to her parents – and confront them with the racism she was experiencing? In the end she rang a telephone helpline. Here there was someone who understood how hurtful such comments and experiences can be. The longer the lockdown lasts, the greater the importance of these sup-

port services, which can be contacted by mobile phone or online. At present the trained staff at these helplines are among the few people who can assess how children and adolescents are feeling, and how they are coping with the worries they cannot share with their families. The IZI therefore carried out expert interviews with n=15 counsellors² from telephone helplines and child protection hotlines in Germany.

THE CURRENT USE OF HELPLINES

When asked how the number of children seeking help has changed since the lockdown, most respondents speak of a marked increase. For example, contact with the “Nummer gegen Kummer” (roughly translatable as the “worry line”), which received 1,500 calls

or messages per day from children and adolescents in 2019, increased by over 20 % Germany-wide. Since 8 April 2020 additional hours of availability have been set up on 3 mornings a week from 10 till 12, with the slogan: “We’re there for you and we’re listening – more than ever! Anywhere in Germany, anonymous and free of charge. Child and youth helpline 116 111.” These extra hours have been well received: “There are hardly any breaks between calls – that was different before,” says a counsellor from the Nummer gegen Kummer. At present the counselling window can also be opened “on a voluntary basis,” says a young counsellor, talking about his Saturday shifts. One provider registered an increase of about 1,300 calls from the end of March to the end of April. Another counselling service, “Telefonseelsorge,” has received between 3,200 and 3,500 calls per day since the corona crisis, compared to around 2,500 normally. Only the crisis line with a focus on suicide prevention has seen a fall in the number of people seeking help. This is due to the closure of the schools, where school counsellors and school social workers provide the first link to support services. “We’re familiar with these interruptions, e.g. during the summer holiday period,” says an interviewee. When asked whether they expect an increase in calls when schools reopen, some of the counsellors say that they expect a backlog will have built up, leading to a surge in calls.



Ill. 1: The number of children in Germany contacting helplines has increased markedly since the lockdown

THE CURRENT ISSUES FACING CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Loneliness due to isolation

When asked why children and adolescents call the helplines in times of coronavirus, respondents cite loneliness and social isolation as a key issue. The children and adolescents miss their friends, classmates and grandparents. And they are trapped in an infinite loop of boredom. "There's a complete emptiness behind it, they have no idea what to do," says one counsellor.

Family situation

Another major issue is conflicts in the family home. Many children and adolescents meet with incomprehension, coupled with high expectations, from their parents. They have more quarrels or power struggles with their siblings, and are in some cases severely reprimanded or punished (e.g. beaten or locked in). They are worried about growing tensions in the home, tensions that, in the words of one counsellor, are "intensifying to the point of becoming intolerable." Because of the increased arguments they are witnessing between their parents, fears of separation and divorce are another frequently mentioned issue. Some children and adolescents have to take over the care of their younger siblings, help them with their schoolwork, and also shop, cook and clean. This pushes them into a role of great responsibility for which they may not yet be mature enough. In addition to this, the parents' fears in the context of the crisis (risk of infection, death, financial worries, unemployment etc.), and the transferral of these fears to their children, are also an important topic.

School and the future

Fear of failure and anxiety about the future also play a prominent role. The

students are worried about what will happen with school or with their training. They wonder how they are meant to manage the heavy workload of assignments, without sufficient (didactic) support, whether they will be graded for homeschooling, and whether they will have to repeat the year.

Physical, sexualised and psychological violence

The respondents report that the number of calls on the subject of domestic violence has risen substantially. A young counsellor says that domestic violence usually comes up once in every 2 or 3 shifts. Since the coronavirus lockdown, however, it has been coming up at least once per shift. Another counsellor tells of a young girl who wrote about sexual assaults by her older brother. In these times, the (constant) fear of violence and sexual assaults is an especially serious issue:

"The difference is that when a girl goes to school she's in a safe place, because no assaults happen there. The fear only comes back when she returns home. But if she's at home all day, she lives with that fear all day long."

Abuse via media

In the lockdown phase, sexualised violence is also occurring more frequently via the internet. One counsellor, for example, reports a case in which a girl met a stranger via a games app. Eventually he urged her to send photos of herself, threatening to break off the contact if she refused. She complied, and only found out later that the stranger was an adult. Of course such dangers on the web are nothing new, but the coronavirus crisis acts "as a catalyst because of the absence of other contexts (such as the peer realm)," explains one counsellor.

"Because the media now play such a major role, there seems to be an increasing tendency to lose critical distance. Children and adolescents are exchanging photos and videos of themselves with even fewer inhibitions than before."

The "usual" issues of children and adolescents

The topics which usually occupy children and adolescents, such as love and sexuality, jealousy, physical appearance, the peer group and bullying, are also still there. Some of the respondents observe that these are, in some cases, much less prominent in the coronavirus crisis. Others say that the issues have remained the same and have merely intensified since the advent of the virus. Mental illnesses always play a major role, as do love and sexuality. Some adolescents worry that their (new) relationship might not be able to last because of the extended period of distancing. Or they are afraid that the virus could be transmitted by kissing. A counsellor at the crisis line focused on suicide prevention says that no corona-specific changes in topic can be observed here. Those seeking advice are often suffering from mental illnesses; they are sad and cry "for no reason," they self-harm and sometimes have suicidal thoughts.

NEW BARRIERS TO THE UPTAKE OF SERVICES

Lack of privacy

We asked our interviewees about obstacles to the uptake of counselling services in the coronavirus era. "What is lacking is a safe space and the opportunity to talk on the phone in peace and quiet. I see that as alarming," reports a counsellor. The service offered by the child helplines can generally be described as low-threshold, mainly because of the guarantee of anonymity.³ Nonetheless, it is not easy for children and adolescents to use the services, since most have to overcome inhibitions to do so, and calling takes courage. "When children have had the courage to open up, we celebrate that with them, especially in cases of sexual abuse," says a counsellor.

When asked what physical spaces or time windows children and adolescents use for phone counselling, the interviewees mentioned parks and schoolyards, or times when they are alone at home, while their parents are still at work. The counsellors make it clear to the callers that they have “all the time in the world” and are able to listen patiently. The loss of privacy is a major source of stress, especially in families with difficult socio-economic circumstances, for example those living in cramped conditions, where there may only be a curtain rather than a door separating rooms, where no escape is possible within the domestic setting. The counsellors report that many of the children and adolescents who nonetheless find the courage to call during the lockdown period speak in an inhibited way, i.e. softly and indistinctly; they may be sitting under a table, or hiding in the toilet or in a cupboard. Sometimes there is someone knocking on a door, so they are under time pressure. Seeking help under this kind of stress – under guard, as it were – can mean that many children and adolescents who urgently need help do not call at all, or that conversations with counsellors are suddenly broken off, for fear of being “caught,” or because a parent takes the phone away.

Particularly vulnerable groups

We also asked some of the interviewees what the situation is like for particularly vulnerable groups such as children and adolescents with physical or mental disabilities, or young refugees. Are there any special services available to them? One thing we discovered during our research is that Caritas in Berlin has set up a hotline specifically for refugees, but that children and adolescents do not use it. Nor are there more refugees than usual calling the “Nummer gegen Kummer.” Why not? Are they perhaps coping better with this crisis because they have already

survived much worse things, and are more resilient? We can only speculate. One counsellor, whose responsibilities include care of refugee families, recounts that some families were very fearful because their poor language skills did not allow them to assess the situation. Because of the closed shops, empty streets and police presence, they assumed that there was a war going on in Germany. “They didn’t dare leave their homes, and stayed inside for 3 weeks,” says the counsellor. Refugees, he reports, are particularly afraid of doing something “wrong” and being sent back to their former homeland. “Even as they’re potentially still processing their war experiences, they’re exposed to a new crisis which makes them even more unstable.” One possible support measure might be for the relevant institutions to work with e.g. Arabic-speaking counsellors, and to advertise this measure on posters and on the web etc.

WHAT CAN WE AS A SOCIETY DO?

See the needs and the dangers

When asked how to ensure that society shares the responsibility, one counsellor replies: “We often overlook children and their needs.” And this is the point that all the interviewees agree on: we need an alert, active society. Another counsellor sums it up as follows: “Since children don’t have a lobby, they need us adults as advocates.” Now is the time for every individual to be even more attentive than usual. Neighbours should keep their eyes and ears open, listen properly to children and adolescents, and act. If necessary, we should offer help and if need be report cases of neglect or domestic violence. “That doesn’t require any training, and youth welfare offices are open even in the coronavirus period,” stresses a helpline worker. She adds: “It always takes help to get out of a crisis.”

CONCLUSION

The measures to protect us against the virus are putting many children and young people in a vulnerable situation. So the counselling services offered to children and adolescents in Germany are especially important in the present situation. By listening and understanding, the counsellors can help to reduce the emotional strain experienced by those seeking support. This is, however, more or less all they can do. The fact that the institutions themselves are surviving the crisis – in terms of personnel, finances and mental health – is a positive and pleasing finding of our study.

It becomes clear in the interviews that the collateral damage from the lockdown should not be underestimated. The number of calls to helplines has risen substantially, and topics such as conflicts and violence in the family have become more prominent than usual. The respondents were unable to gauge whether the end of the lockdown would bring even more calls, or would see an increased number of children being taken into care. They are, however, preparing for a possible surge in demand. ■

NOTES

¹ Name changed by the editors.

² The 5 men and 10 women interviewed were between 40 and 75 years old, with one young counsellor aged 22.

³ No names are named, calls are answered by a random counsellor, and even serious cases such as abuse are not allowed to be reported.

THE AUTHOR

Anne Pütz is a freelance author and lives in Berlin.

