

Children's news: Topics that interest children

RESULTS OF A REPRESENTATIVE SURVEY OF GERMAN CHILDREN BETWEEN 6 AND 13 YEARS OF AGE

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This article summarises the results of an IZI study on which children's news topics interest German children the most and who should present the news.

Children want and need children's news. A study in the context of the natural and technological disaster in Fukushima in 2011, for example, revealed that only under 10% of children between the ages of 6 and 12 did not think it is important to have children's news programmes (Götz, 2011, 2019). Studies on knowledge shows and educational programmes showed that some themes, like animals or other children, have it easier than others (e.g., Holler & Götz, 2017). What does this mean for children's news? What kinds of topics interest children the most and who should present the news?

These were the points taken up by the IZI study on topics that interest children in children's news programmes.

THE STUDY

At the end of 2020, German children between the ages of 6 and 13 (n=837) from a representative sample were surveyed by 391 specially trained young interviewers in face-to-face interviews (paper and pencil method).¹

Regionality of topic interests: Town, federal state, Germany, the world

To get an idea about how regional stories should look like, we asked the children if they would like to know more about:²

1. What is going on in other countries?
2. What is going on in Germany?
3. What is going on in your state?
4. What is going on in your village, town or city?

The results show: 9 out of 10 children (91.5%) said they want to know what's going on locally in their village, town or city. What is going on in Germany was considered a little less interesting, but still nearly 9 out of 10 children in the age group of 10- to 13-year-olds, and 8 out of 10 in the age group 6 to 9 years old (82.6%) found it interesting to know more about what is going on in Germany.

When it came to their own state, almost 7 out of 10 younger children (69.5%) wanted to know more, while this number was much higher for the older children (85.6%). The children were least interested in what is going on abroad with 6 out of 10 6- to 9-year-olds (60.5%) and more than 7 out of 10 among the preteens (74.1%) agreeing on this point.

The findings fit in with research results on children's news: Children potentially are very interested in current events. The closer the occurrences are to their daily lives, the more they can imagine that the pieces of news are important for them.

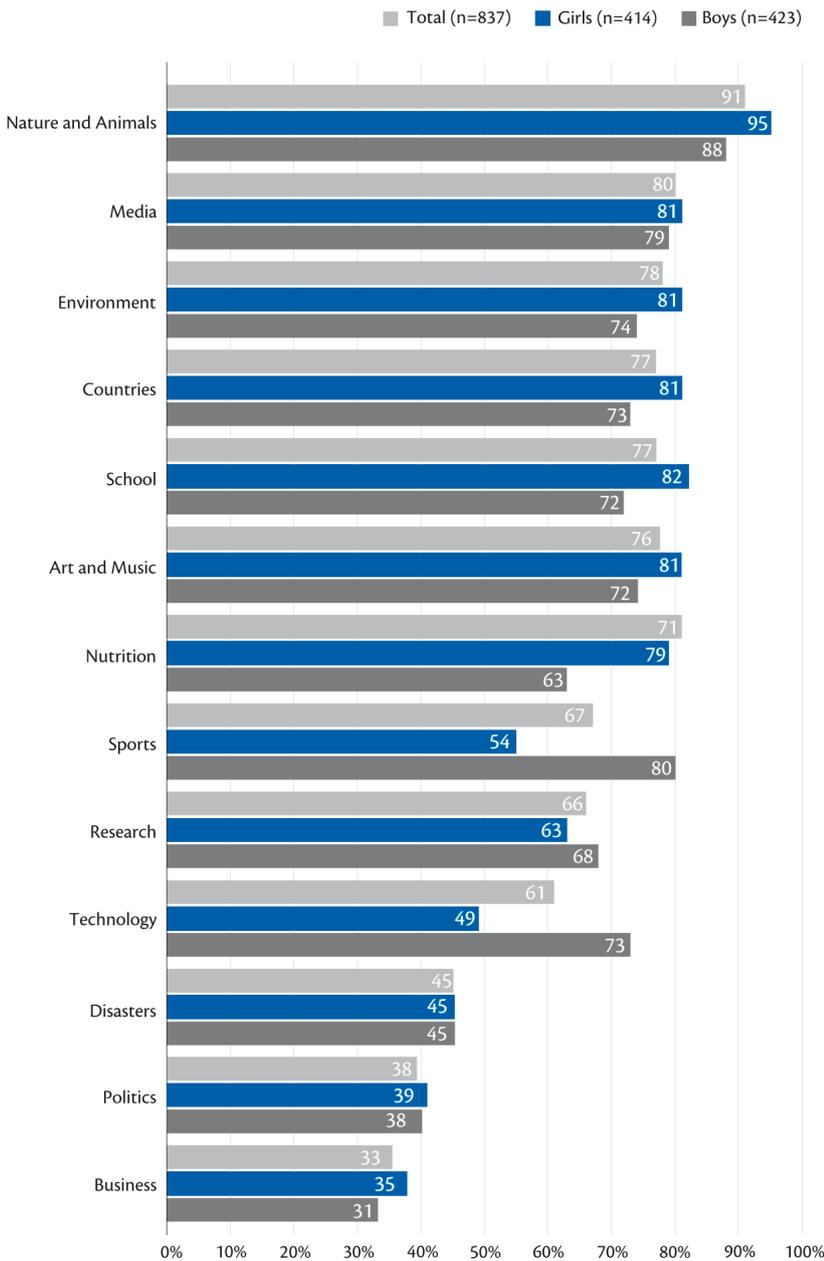
The decisive point is whether they can make meaning out of the news and whether it has a connecting point to their frame of reference (Berger & Luckmann 1989/1966). This is primarily what concerns them directly, but could also be further away. It is crucial whether connecting factors to their world of experience are offered and thus whether the content is concretely meaningful for them.

What topics interest children?

We asked children what topics they would be particularly interested in when it came to news. In each topic we integrated a phrase of reference to their lives. For example, the



Ill. 1: The topics Nature and Animals (first place) and Environment (third place) are very interesting for German children when it comes to children's news



Ill. 2: The most interesting topics for children in children's news

term Nature and Animals was formulated: "How nature and animals are doing right now and what you should pay attention to, for example: Wolves are spreading in Germany – why wild animals are coming to the cities". The statements were based on existing headlines of the German children's news programmes *klarol*, *Klicker News* (*Kirakara*) and *logo!*.

The most interesting topics for children in children's news are in the

area of Nature and Animals (Ill. 1), followed by Media, Environment, Countries and School. All these topics are even more interesting for girls than for boys. For boys, Nature and Animals is followed by Sports, Media, Environment and then Technology and Countries (Ill. 2).

Nature and Animals – 9 out of 10 children wanted to know "How nature and animals are doing right now and what you should pay attention to. Girls

were more interested in the topic than boys and especially elementary school children were even more interested than preteens.

Media – On the topic of "What's new in comics, books, TV, mobile phones, etc. and what that means for you, for example: How Harry Potter was invented; What to do about cyberbullying?" a total of 8 out of 10 children were interested in learning more (79.9%).

Environment and Global warming – A total of nearly 8 out of 10 children (78%) wanted to know more about "How the environment is doing right now and what you can do, for example: Why rainforests are so important; What does global warming mean for my future?" The age comparison showed only a marginal difference between younger children and preteens.

Countries and Cultures – Girls were once again more interested than boys in the question "What is it like in other countries and what that means for you, for example: How Christmas is celebrated in other countries; The Natives of North America". The topic was still a bit more attractive for preteens than for primary school children.

School – Almost 8 in 10 (77%) were interested in knowing more about the topic of "What's new about school and what that means for you, for example: What are the new corona rules (Ill. 3)? How can I participate in a youth research competition and what can I win?" Girls were even more interested in this topic than boys. There were hardly any differences in the age comparison.

Art and Music – We asked if the children would like information on "What's current in art and music and what that means for you, for example: What is hip-hop and how can you learn it? Who was the famous painter Picasso, how did he paint?" The girls were more interested here than the boys. In age comparison, the topic was more interesting for preteens than for younger children.

Nutrition and Health – Girls were more interested than boys and preteens



Screenshot from logo! © ZDF

Ill. 3: 8 in 10 German children are interested in knowing more about the topic School, e.g. on corona rules concerning their school life

showed more interest than younger children in the topic “Healthy food and how to stay fit, for example: What is whole grain food? Recipes to try out; Inline skating every day – healthy or harmful?”

Sports – In response to the question of whether the topic of Sports (Ill. 4), with the example of “Current developments and events in sports, for example: Who is currently leading and what new types of sports are there?”, should be reported on in children’s news, 8 out of 10 boys were either “interested” or “very interested”, but only 54% of girls. In age comparison, the topic was once again more interesting for preteens than for younger children.

Research – 66% of the children surveyed wanted to learn more about the topic of Science, using the example of “What new things have just been discovered in the world and what that means for you, for example: What did the research ship Polarstern find out? A painting made of sand? A 37-metre-long cat was found!” There were only slight gender and age differences.

Technology – The topic of Technology as part of children’s news, given with the example “What technology, machines and devices made by humans can do and what that means for you, for example: How do self-driving cars work? Justin, the new household robot!” was interesting for a good 7 out of 10 boys, but only for just under 1 in

2 girls (49%). Comparing ages, the topic was more interesting to slightly older respondents compared to younger ones, but the difference was less than might be expected.

Disasters – When asked whether children and preteens want to know about Disasters, using the example “When something bad happens in the world that everyone is talking about, for example: Heavy storms over the Philippines; A teacher is murdered in Paris”, only 1 in 10 respondents would “very much like” to have information about it and just under 1 in 2 children would at least “like” to be told about it. Older children were more interested than younger ones.

Politics and Society – Only just under 4 out of 10 respondents would like to know something about Politics and Society, specifically “What regulations

and new developments there are in Germany and the world and what that means for you, for example: Who is the president of the U.S.; What is racism and does it also exist in our country?” The topic was more interesting for the older children than for the younger ones – without relevant gender tendencies.

Business and Economy – The topic Business and Economy was concretised by the question “How money is made and what that means for you, for example: What is ‘fair trade’? Who is making a lot of money right now from the corona crisis?” Of all the areas surveyed, this topic was the least attractive to children, with only 1 in 3 children wanting more information on it. Those who were interested tended to be the preteens in contrast to the younger children.

To summarise: There are topics that interest many children and preteens largely regardless of gender and age: Animals, Media/Trends and Environment, and to a lesser extent Science.

Then there are topics that are more relevant to girls – understood as being at least 10 percentage points higher than boys – but can still be considered attractive to boys: Countries and Cultures, Art and Music, and Nutrition.

A third group of topics were much more interesting for boys: Sports and Technology. The difference in attractiveness is relatively large, at 30 and 20 percentage points respectively.



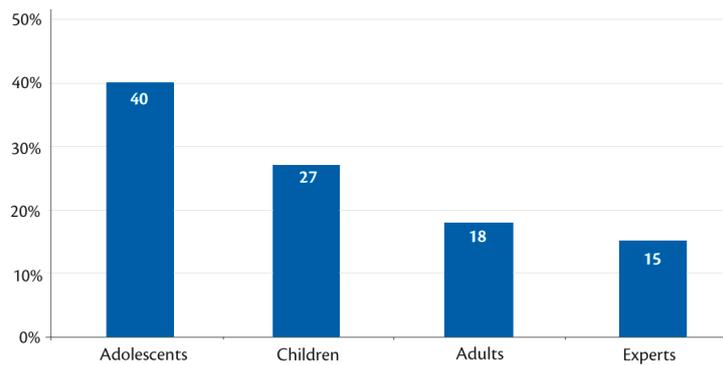
Screenshot from logo! © ZDF

Ill. 4: Sports news are especially interesting for German preteen boys

RESEARCH

A fourth group of topics which are more difficult to make them interesting for children are Politics, Economy or Disasters, only a small group wants to receive information, and it was typically the older children.

Who should present the children's news?



Ill. 5: Children's answers to the question: "Who would be best to introduce and explain the news to kids your age?" (n=837)

Regarding the presentation of a knowledge programme for children, it is known that children tend to want a presenter who is similar to them, both in terms of gender and natio-ethno-cultural background. At the same time, children fall back on a type of presenter they already know and like (Holler et al., 2016). In German children's television, it is mainly *white* men over 30 who explain the world to children (Prommer & Linke, 2019).

For the present study we asked "Who would be best to introduce and explain the news to kids your age?". We presented 4 cards with the words: "adolescents or young adults", "adults", "children" as well as "experts, i.e. professionals for a certain topic" and asked the children and preteens to make a ranking from 1. (favourite) to 4. (least wanted):

The result: 4 out of 10 children and preteens would like to have teenagers or young adults (40.1%) present the shows, a good quarter wanted to see child presenters (26.8%) and less than 1 in 5 would like to have an adult (18.4%) and 14.7% wanted an expert (Ill. 5).

The gender comparison showed that girls had a slight preference for adolescents/young adults (41.5%) and children (30%) as presenters, while boys

slightly more often put adults (21.7%) and experts (15.8%) in first place.

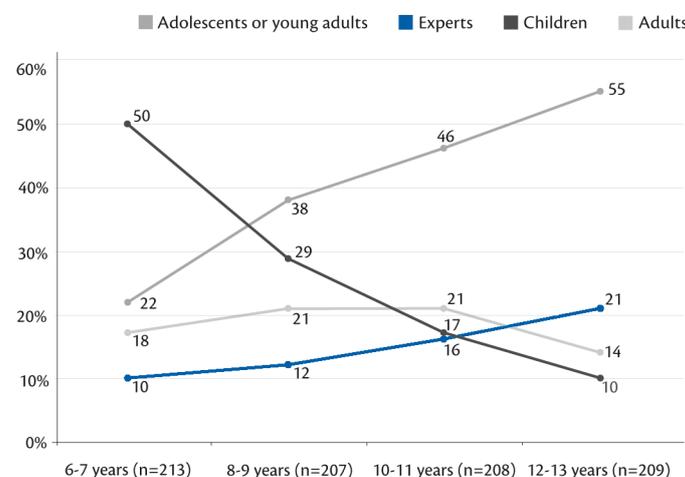
The data also reveal an interesting age difference. While experts and adults are of interest to very few with nearly no age-differences, the number of those mentioning young people/young adults rises from 22.1% among the youngest respondents to 55% among the oldest. Half of the youngest children want a child to present the news, but this drops steeply to 10% among the oldest (Ill. 6). Even with 8- and 9-year-olds, adolescents are far more desired as presenters. It can be assumed that, on the one hand, the positive experience they have already had with young adults as presenters in children's TV is reflected in these numbers. On the other hand, it is also possible that the respondents

Headline phrasing

A practical topic that is of importance for producers of children's news but has hardly been studied, is the question of how to phrase headlines and teasers. To approach this issue, we searched for children's news headlines on the websites of the German channels BR, WDR and ZDF etc. on the same event. The review revealed typical ways how news for children are introduced online: from neutral to creative to provocative, tabloid-like statements. For this study we asked children which news headlines they would listen to, watch or read, and asked them to rank the 3 variations according to which they would most like to hear, watch or read.

Hand washing: Info, question or rap version?

On the topic of washing hands to protect yourself and others from the coronavirus, we offered the following 3 headlines: 1. "Coronavirus. How long you really have to wash your hands" (information-oriented); 2. "Corona Check-up: Why does soap kill coronaviruses?" (informal language and question wording); and 3. "The hand-washing rap" (creative variant).



Ill. 6: Children's answers to the question: "Who would be best to introduce and explain the news to kids your age?" according to age



Screenshot from loger® ZDF

Ill. 7: Political news are less interesting for the children surveyed and topics from the local area are potentially more interesting than those from abroad

Surprisingly, the study did not reveal any huge differences in the overall ranking. The information-oriented headline came out best (39.7%), followed by the one with informal language (31.4%). The “hand-washing rap” (the creative variant) was chosen least frequently (28.9%). There were no significant gender or age trends.

Forest fire: Informational, tabloid or call for action?

On the topic of forest fires, 3 different headlines were offered: 1. “Dry forests. Bad wildfires in the U.S.” (information-oriented); 2. “Tens of thousands flee the flames. Fierce wildfires have raged in California for days” (tabloid); and 3. “Fires in the U.S. – What can we do about wildfires?” (a question-based, almost call-for-action phrasing). Just as with the first example, the ranking was close. The tabloid wording (36.7%) is a bit ahead of the informational headline (34.5%) and question wording (28.8%) among respondents. Once again, there were hardly any gender-specific trends.

Violence against children: Informational, affecting oneself or distance

The third topic for which headlines were included was violence against children: 1. A question-oriented headline with call-to-action character: “Corona crisis. An adult is hurting me: What now?” (affecting oneself); 2. Phrasing directly addressing the children: “Corona and violence at home. Find out

here what you can do”; and 3. A more distanced phrasing: “Family violence in times of corona”.

The variant that referred to children being personally affected was chosen most often (40.0%), followed by the variant that directly addressed the

children (38.5%). Both were placed first almost twice as often as the distanced wording (21.5%). This suggests that it is particularly important to explicitly address children as a target group in headlines. Presumably, children identify whether the text interests them or not based on the headline.

CONCLUSION

The data once again clearly show: Children want children’s news. In terms of content, they are interested in a wide range of topics, with some topics having an easier time than others. Almost all of the children surveyed were interested in information about animals, media and trends, and the environment. There was also a high level of interest in the topics of countries and cultures, art and music, and nutrition – although girls were more interested in these than boys. In contrast, boys were significantly more interested in sports and technology than girls. Topics from the local area are potentially more interesting than topics that report nationwide or internationally (Ill. 7).

For the presenters, most would like to see young people or young adults, and only the youngest (6- and 7-year-olds) would prefer to have the news presented by a child. As long as the reference to children as the target group of the news or the topic is clear, headlines or teasers can be worded in various

ways and still be well received. In the end, the most important thing is for children to be able to assess whether what is being offered is specifically designed for them and to ensure that the relevance of the content to the children’s lives is clear. ■

NOTES

¹ Quotas for the random sample were: Age, gender and immigration background of children surveyed, schooling level of the head of household, distribution by state and municipality sizes (according to 150 BIK sample points), and marital status of the mother. The survey is representative of the population of all 6- to 13-year-olds in private households in Germany, total number 5.92 million, of which 5.04 million live in the states of former West Germany and 0.88 million in the states of former East Germany. The worst-case sampling error for $n=837$ is $\pm 4.01\%$. 391 specially trained adolescent interviewers carried out face-to-face surveys in the families’ private residences as part of the multi-topic survey iconKIDS bus. The survey period was November 13 to December 9, 2020.

² Asked in varying order

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