



# Child protection

## What Youth Welfare Offices do

Questions and answers

**DAS JUGENDAMT.**  
**THE YOUTH WELFARE OFFICE.**  
Support where it counts

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## About us

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## Dear reader,

Most children grow up in a safe and protected environment. Usually they are looked after by their parents who do everything possible to ensure that their children turn out to be strong and self-confident adults.

Sometimes, however, children are distressed: they are exposed to violence and neglect within their families and are at risk of being harmed in their development. It is possible that parents have lost sight of their children as a result of their own problems. It may be, however, that young people are no longer able to withstand the pressure, refuse to attend school or run away from home.

In situations like these, parents require assistance and support which enable them to care for their children in a responsible manner. And children and young people need someone to support them, to stand up for their rights and to protect them effectively against violence and neglect.

Both tasks are carried out by the Youth Welfare Offices (Jugendamt). They support parents in many ways. They also actively ensure the protection of children and young people when their development is at risk. These are major challenges which have to be fulfilled professionally.

This brochure provides you with further information on how the Youth Welfare Offices organise their work and contribute to the effective protection of children.

# What is the responsibility of the Youth Welfare Offices when it comes to child protection?

## Children should be with their parents...

Parents are the people who know their children best and who are most interested in ensuring their welfare. This is why the German constitution gives parents the primary right to bring up their children.

→ The Youth Welfare Office provides the best child protection by supporting parents in caring for their children.

People do not think the same about how to bring up children in the best way. How should one nourish in a healthy way? How much TV should a child watch? When is a child able to do things independently? There are various answers to all these questions. Parents struggle to find good solutions to child-related issues. Nobody wants the state to interfere by regulating such discussions.

This is why the constitution gives mothers and fathers a great deal of freedom when it comes to deciding how to bring up their children. They decide about the value system their education is to be based on, the school their child should attend and what their joint custody arrangements should be following a divorce.

→ As education is a difficult task, parents have the legal right to make use of many forms of assistance and support to help them. The Youth Welfare Office is responsible for providing this support on site.

... but children are not their parents' property.

Parents' rights also entail parents' responsibilities. Parents must ensure that their children's basic needs are met, for example their need for food, health care, a safe place to live and reliable persons around them.

They are not allowed to violate the rights of their children. When parents grossly neglect or abuse their responsibilities, it is the state - in this case represented by the Youth Welfare Office - which must protect children and young people.

→ The Youth Welfare Office must follow up on any indication that boys or girls could be at risk and it must actively protect them against dangers.



## The Youth Welfare Office

- assists parents by providing them with information, advice and support, whether they are experiencing problems in raising their children or having a simple question.
- is the point of contact for children and young people. In emergency situations, this is where they can get advice and, if necessary, the Youth Welfare Office can find them a safe temporary place to stay.
- follows up on any indication that children or young people could be at risk. Whenever the question arises of what to do, the Youth Welfare Office is the central point of contact.
- actively approaches families and organises support or protection as soon as the development of a child is at risk. In emergency situations, the Youth Welfare Office can offer families a wide range of relief and support services.



In order to enable children and young people to grow up in a secure and healthy environment, Youth Welfare Offices rely on a comprehensive, graded support system.

This ranges from a variety of services to ensure that girls and boys grow up safely and to avoid the development of threats wherever possible, to practical help in situations of crisis or steps for effectively protecting children and young people in acute risk situations.

## **Supporting parents, protecting children**

– this sums up the legal task of the Youth Welfare Office when it comes to child protection.

# What does the Youth Welfare Office do to ensure that children grow up well?

## Preventing crises and risks

The Youth Welfare Office strengthens, promotes and supports children, young people and their parents by offering a broad range of services:

### *Information*

The Youth Welfare Office supports parents(-to-be) in all child-related matters from the very beginning of pregnancy. Youth Welfare Offices provide parents(-to-be) with a handbook and pay them a personal visit after the birth of their child to inform them about the local services available to them to ensure that their children grow up in a healthy environment. A range of courses, such as those presented at educational institutions for families, provide answers to specific child-related questions. There are also empowerment programmes to provide information to young people about protecting themselves against the risks posed by alcohol, drugs, new media, violence and bullying.



## *Education and upbringing*

Parents do not exclusively have to bear all the responsibility for ensuring that their children can grow up in a positive environment. The Youth Welfare Office provides many services used by families on a daily basis: baby and child-care centres, youth centres and after-school care centres offer children and young people places to learn outside their families, to test their skills and to develop their self-confidence.

## *Advisory services*

Child-raising is by no means easy, which is why it is good for parents to make use of advice. Sometimes an open ear, a tip or clarification is all that is needed. This is being provided by advisory centres, emergency hotlines and the social services offered by the Youth Welfare Centres. Mothers and fathers can find contact persons there for all child-related matters free of charge and without formalities. The professionals will help to ensure that conflicts and problems do not turn into crises and violence. This means that the advisory centres are open to everybody:

- Parents and legal guardians, boys and girls have the right to contact the advisory centres and the Youth Welfare Office with their questions and needs; in a situation of crisis, this may even be done without their parents' immediate knowledge.
- The Youth Welfare Office also offers advisory services to those who perceive signs of risk, thus allowing them to get a better assessment of the situation and to help the affected children.

### Assistance with child-raising

Sometimes the daily routine is so stressful that a discussion is no longer sufficient. Then the parents have a right to assistance. This may be a social worker who will assist the family members for a few hours a week to help them organise their daily routine. It may also be a care worker or it may involve the (temporary) accommodation of a child or young person in a foster family or a children's home.

The general rule is as follows: the Youth Welfare Offices plan and organise what type of service or assistance is required or sensible in each case and finance this. The services themselves are rendered by the Youth Welfare Offices or by independent organisations such as charity associations or church institutions.



# What does the Youth Welfare Office do when children are acutely at risk?

## Effectively protecting children and young people.

When there are signs that the well-being and development of a child or young person may be harmed, the Youth Welfare Office is obliged to protect them. It has the legal obligation to follow up on such indications and to make contact with the family and the child. This might also mean paying an unannounced visit.

Parents do have the right to take their own decisions in child-related matters and to accept or reject assistance. However, this right can be limited when it poses a risk to the child. When there is an indication that a child or young person is in distress, the Youth Welfare Office must weigh up the protection required by the child against the rights of the parents. Child protection always takes precedence in the event of neglect and abuse or serious danger.

These questions must be answered in each individual case:

- How acute and serious is the risk to the child?
- What needs to be done to ensure that the child is not harmed in the long term?

→ Which steps - including an intervention in the parents' rights - are required and justified?

The procedure to be followed by the Youth Welfare Office depends on whether parents are prepared to assist in improving the situation for their children.

### Protecting children and young people by supporting their parents.

When parents are prepared to make changes themselves to ensure that their children are once again safe and protected, the entire range of support services is available to them to ensure relief and assistance for the families.

In critical situations it will be necessary to conclude a binding agreement with the parents, setting out what they need to do for their children, such as visits to the doctor, daily attendance of a day-care centre or school or regular meals. And it is necessary to follow up on it to make sure the parents fulfil the agreement.



## What happens when parents refuse to participate? The family court will decide.

If parents do not accept help or when they fail to provide adequately for their children despite receiving support, the Youth Welfare Office is obliged to act. In the event of acute risk, the Youth Welfare Office may temporarily organise the assistance a child needs, even against the will of the parents. A child may be temporarily accommodated in a safe place, taken to the paediatrician, etc.

However, the basic right of the parents to decide about the health care and accommodation of their children is not affected. The Youth Welfare Office is not authorised to limit the rights of parents - only the family court can do this. Thus, when parents refuse to accept necessary help, the Youth Welfare Office may have to approach the family court.

The family court will first hold a personal discussion with the parents to find a mutually acceptable solution for the child and try to motivate the parents to accept help. The family court may, however, oblige mothers and fathers to accept help or take a decision about custody of the child or its future living environment.

The Youth Welfare Office supports the family court and is involved in the discussions and procedures. It makes available the information it has about the family situation and the development of the child or young person and will recommend appropriate remedial measures. The family court regularly follows up to see whether these measures are effective and still required.



### Difficult situations

There may be situations in which a child clearly requires external assistance and support, but this is rejected by the parents; at the same time, the risk indicators may not (yet) have come to the point at which a family court would limit the parents' custodial rights.

These situations may be very difficult to handle for the professionals of the Youth Welfare Offices and for all other parties involved.

Thus: Child protection affects everyone - children and young people require contact persons in schools, day-care centres, doctors' practices and in their neighbourhood to ensure that their needs and signals are perceived and taken seriously. In such a situation, however, they also need people who encourage their parents to accept help and who minimise their fear of the Youth Welfare Office.



## How does the Youth Welfare Office handle child protection?

Child protection is a very complex task. Signals sent and statements made by children are rarely unambiguous: when did a child really suffer an accident? When are bruises, marks or haematoma the result of abuse or beatings?

To ensure that the protection of children is successful and that experts have clear guidelines for action, there are principles that guide the activities of the Youth Welfare Offices:

### *Priority: supporting the parents*

Strong parents are the best protection for children. This is why, even in dangerous situations, the Youth Welfare Office first looks at what parents are (still) able to provide and supports them in taking care of their children. The experts seek for solutions jointly with the parents and provide the necessary assistance and support.

### *Aim: voluntary cooperation*

The Youth Welfare Office is a partner in the upbringing of children. It therefore relies on the voluntary acceptance of assistance. When parents, children and young people themselves wish to make changes, this also increases the chances of success.

Contact with the Youth Welfare Office is sometimes experienced by parents as a form of control or distrust. The specialists face the challenge to arrange their contact with the mothers, fathers and young people in a way that makes it possible for them to actually accept the necessary support as a kind of help and thus are able to agree to them on their own free will.

### *Involvement of mothers, fathers, children and young people.*

Making contact with the affected children and their parents is the top priority. How do they see the problems and difficulties and what do they regard as the causes? From their point of view, what would have to change to ensure that children are once more well placed within their families? What can they themselves do to promote this?



### *Getting a comprehensive overview*

In order to assess whether a child is at risk, experts have to get a comprehensive overview of the family. They speak to the parents, children and young people, visit them at home or speak to some of the people with whom the children have contact, for example at their day-care centre or school.

What burdens the child? Do the parents perceive the existing problems, do they want to change anything and will they accept assistance? Which abilities, persons and strengths within the family and in their environment have a protective effect on children?

### *Interaction of several experts*

Successful child protection depends on whether it is possible to obtain an appropriate overview of the family situation and to find the best possible solution for the child.

This cannot be done by a single person. It is therefore an important principle of the Youth Welfare Office always to have a team decide on every individual case. This ensures that several perspectives and a wide range of specialised knowledge are incorporated. Specialists are always required to reflect on and verify their opinions and decisions together with their colleagues.



### Clearly structured procedures

Children and young people, mothers and fathers, citizens - all of them must be able to rely on specialised skills at the Youth Welfare Office. Structured, compulsory procedures in the youth offices thus regulate how to handle indications that a child is at risk.

This includes, for example, that

- every piece of information is checked and documented in writing,
- the specialists usually get a personal impression of how the child is looked after at home,
- specialists base their opinions on well-founded social services tools such as assessment sheets, central questions or reference points,
- several specialists jointly assess the situation and debate possible solutions.

How does the

Youth Welfare Office develop its

child protection services?

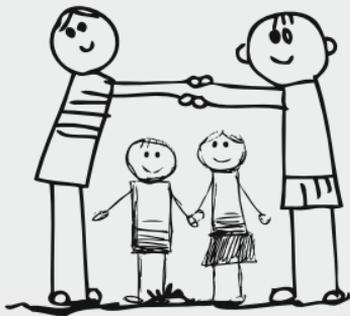
The Youth Welfare Offices are constantly working on further developing the quality of their child protection work.

- In many Youth Welfare Offices, experts debate how successful past assistance has been, in order to draw conclusions from this for the future.
- Youth Welfare Officers regularly attend further training courses.
- The Youth Welfare Offices organise work groups and events jointly with the health services, schools, the police, the courts, etc. in order to create a comprehensive safety network for children, young people and their families.
- They create opportunities for parents, children and young people to raise their complaints, so that this can become a learning experience, too.

**The Youth Welfare Office is the central driving force of child protection. Support where it counts.**

# DAS JUGENDAMT. THE YOUTH WELFARE OFFICE. Support where it counts.

The Youth Welfare Office is the contact partner and central driving force of child protection. How do Youth Welfare Offices structure their child protection work? This brochure will tell you all you need to know about the principles, services and procedures used by Youth Welfare Offices.



Stamp of the local Youth Welfare Office: