

Research project

"Raising Children in Migration"

Presentation of findings and recommendations

By Berlin Early Years Institute for Quality Development (BeKi)

Imprint

Authors:

Luka Antonia Born

Milena Lauer

Dorota Niewęłowska-Köhler

Andriana Noack

Parent interviews: Nerges Assisi

Consultant: Henriette Heimgaertner

Editorial work - English version: Tayisiya Barna

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Berlin Early Years Institute for Quality Development

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1. Introduction

This final report entitled "Raising Children in Migration" examines the needs and challenges of families who have been living in Germany for a period of either more or less than three years. Interviews with parents who have been affected by this situation and a group discussion with experts who work in the field of supporting migrant families provide invaluable insights into the circumstances surrounding the arrival of these families in Germany, as well as the obstacles and opportunities encountered. The objective of the report is to present a detailed account of the specific needs and challenges faced by these families, and to derive recommendations for the development of effective support programmes. The focus is on the voices of the parents who were interviewed. Empowering parents contributes significantly to the positive development of their children and the family as a whole. The findings of this study should help to better address the needs of families with migration experience and pave the way for a successful and fulfilling life in their new home country.

2. Data basis

2.1. Sample

The parents interviewed for this study are originally from Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

The members of the expert panel are social workers, cultural mediators and psychologists with many years of experience in working with migrant families, particularly with refugee families.

Additionally, data from a previous study examining the experiences of refugee parents were taken into account.

2.1.1. Parent interviews

In July 2024, four parents originating from Afghanistan and Tajikistan were interviewed. The interviews were conducted in Farsi and translated into German by the interviewer, Nerges Assisi. The translated interviews were analysed with particular focus on the stated six objectives. Additionally, the interviews from the "Creating Dialogue" project conducted by BeKi in 2012-2013 were used. These interviews were similarly structured and provided an additional data basis. In total, the analysis included interviews with ten parents who have been living in Germany for more or less than three years.

2.1.2. Expert panel

On July 12th 2024 four experts participated in a focus group discussion, providing different perspectives, programmes and experiences.

Focus group discussions were also held in the previous "Creating Dialogue" project, but in this case with parents. At that time, five focus groups were held with parents of Afghan origin, assisted by a German and Dari-speaking facilitator.

2.2. Research questions

The research questions address the following topics: cultural identity, support for well-being, communication between parents and children, resilience, social interaction and parent counselling. The interviews conducted in 2012 ("Creating Dialogue" project) and 2024, as well as the focus group discussions (FGD) were analysed in accordance with the research questions.

Two analysis workshops were held to analyse transcripts using a coding paradigm (Strübing 2008, 28). Part of the analysis is to identify a central *phenomenon*¹ as well as the associated causes, intervening conditions, context, strategies and consequences. The objective of a qualitative researcher is to find connections between the different *phenomena* and to give deeper meaning to what respondents say.

¹ The term phenomenon is used in qualitative research to describe findings, specific contexts and the essence of what people say and/or mean.

3. Needs of the families

The needs of the families are presented in accordance with the six objectives of the research. For each of the six objectives of the research (Cultural Adaptation, Wellbeing Support, Parents-Child Communication, Resilience Building, Social Integration, Parenting Services Guidance), one *phenomenon* was identified that reflects the underlying need. We address these *phenomena* along with the associated strategies, consequences and conditions in order to answer the questions about the needs of families in different areas of the research.

3.1. (Cultural) Identities: Finding Balance

The interviews with parents were characterised by the search for a balance between integrating into a new country with its social norms and cultural aspects and preserving their own cultural identity, including their language, traditions, religion, and holidays.

The challenge lies in striking a balance between maintaining ties with their own community and adapting to life in a new country. The aim is to fundamentally preserve their own culture. However, it is evident that this goal can only be partially achieved, as the parents also prioritise integration into the new country. Furthermore, many see great potential in Germany and are actively exploring new opportunities, not only for themselves but also for their children.

This is clearly illustrated by the quotes *"Two cultures are important to us: the one we grew up in and the culture of the society we live in, which we want to respect and where we want to adapt."* ["Raising Children", Parent 4_2024] and *"I always tell my children: there are opportunities here, the path is open for you, if you want to take advantage of these opportunities, you have to take an effort."* ["Raising Children", Parent 4_2024]. The parents interviewed indicated that they wish to honour, uphold and maintain parental traditions, though they emphasised that they cannot force this on their children. This interview provides a more detailed account of the contrasts between the family's daily life in Afghanistan and that in Germany. In order to be able to cope with everything without compromising one side, the following strategies become clear in the interviews: attending German courses, acquiring knowledge about expectations and social norms in Germany, and identifying opportunities, such as educational opportunities, on the one hand, and contact with people who share their values and traditions on the other. This strengthens the parents' self-confidence and is linked to the development of a sense of belonging and a new identity. In this context, we use the term identity change rather than cultural adaptation: *"You can't completely preserve your cultural identity"* and *"The more languages you speak, the more identities you possess."* ["Creating Dialogue", FGD 1].

These changes are perceived as very positive and seen as an opportunity. Nevertheless, the families also face challenges in Germany. However, they differ significantly from those experienced in Afghanistan. For each family, it represents a balancing act to bring the values of their family life in sync with the culture of their new environment.

3.2. Supporting well-being: Tension between experiencing security in daily life and new stress factors in an unfamiliar context

In the interviews, there is a clear expression of gratitude for the provision of a safe environment and living in a building with a solid roof (as opposed to tents etc.). The families consistently draw comparisons with their previous living situation, which was associated with fear in everyday life. Nevertheless, there are indications of underlying tensions.

Based on the phenomena of security, peace and tranquillity (or stress factors, conversely), there is a range of relevant references that can be made. People are now out of danger and can move around freely without having to constantly fear for their lives or those of their children. The living situation of families has improved due to the aspects of security, peace and tranquillity. However, as briefly mentioned above, they are now confronted with new challenges as parents and as a family that come with a new start in another country. As a result, they continue to encounter challenging circumstances that impact their daily lives.

Well-being is influenced by factors such as the current housing situation (collective accommodation without privacy or a flat with privacy) and also the financial situation (including uncertain residence status) *"The more you understand the system [in Germany], (...) and your residence status is clearer, then I think you can relax. Then there was also time to take care of yourself."* ["Raising Children" FGD Experts 2024]. Accommodation in a collective centre is a great burden for families: *"(...) how disappointed and depressed they are. They never thought they would arrive in a hangar [Tegel collective accommodation centre] where the children can't even sleep, and the lights are on all night."* ["Raising Children" FGD Experts 2024]. While the parents in the current interviews emphasise the opportunities in Germany and the feeling of security, peace and tranquillity, the parents in the study "Creating Dialogue" also expressed experiences of discrimination: *"Our experience here is not good. We are foreigners and what are you as a foreigner?"* ["Creating dialogue", Parent 1]. Experts also emphasise structural discrimination, which severely restricts well-being in Germany: *"(...) he experiences so much discrimination at his job, but still swallows it and says: 'Never mind, we have to move on'. So life is not so nice and rosy."* ["Raising Children" FGD Experts 2024].

The interviews show that faith carries people through challenging times and strengthens their sense of confidence and gratitude. *"Nowadays, thanks to God, I no longer have so many difficulties. I know we faced major challenges in the beginning, but we have left them behind us. This means that if we face a challenge today, we know it's not so bad. We will put that behind us too."* ["Raising Children", Parent 1_2024].

Bureaucracy and language barriers are also stress factors. *"However, we had to wait until we received a residence permit. My partner had access to a course, but I didn't at all. I couldn't do anything but sit at home."* ["Raising Children", Parent 2_2024]. This is especially the case in healthcare, where language barriers can make things a lot more difficult.

Parents use various strategies to increase their own well-being and that of their family. Social contexts are important to them, including other families and friends, communities and community meetings. The social environment was identified as a significant influence on well-being, as this is where trusting exchanges can take place, which in turn facilitates access to further support measures and enables families to accept them with greater confidence.

The interviews also show that the housing situation with their own flat, a secure place in a daycare centre or school, the increase in German language skills and the associated certainty of being able to speak or understand leads to more independence and thus security and peace of mind in everyday life. Recognition in a professional context, (after obtaining a residence permit) based on professional activity/employment or through linguistic exchange, also contributes to an increase in well-being.

On the one hand, the process and the need to orientate and act independently is challenging. This applies, for example, to visits to public offices and doctors, coordinating appointments, sports club participation and the childcare and school system, but also to connections with communities and municipalities, parents' traditions or the topic of multilingualism in education: *"Parents are instructed to help themselves"* ["Raising Children", Parent 4_2024]. It is therefore recommended that networking opportunities be created within a flexible framework in order to facilitate an exchange at eye level and to ensure the accessibility and visibility of reliable information on multilingual health advice centres for mental and physical health in communities and municipalities. Children and their needs are often at the centre of a new beginning: *"Our time is over now, it's the children's turn."* ["Creating Dialogue", FGD 2] Parents express similar thoughts in the current interviews conducted in 2024. One goal can be to focus on the parents who are burdened with everyday family life, childcare services and challenges such as residence status, housing or work situation.

3.3. Parent-child communication: How do changes in parenting style occur?

A major motivation for many families to migrate is to give their children a better future: *"I think the future is bright for my children here. Personally, I am also one of those people who wish they had been born here or had come here earlier. Because you have access to education here."* ["Raising Children", Parent 3_2024]. This is linked to the desire for their children to understand and respect their parents' origins: *"In terms of raising my children, teaching them about our culture is important to me. Our faith. Our culture. Everything we had before, we still take with us to Germany and show it to the children. That is important. We want to pass on to our children everything that we ourselves have experienced. They also need to understand what we had. What we did. We have to show them that."* ["Raising Children", Parent 1_2024].

The interviews with the parents revealed various reasons for a "change in their parenting style". In addition to the basic assumption of the move as a stress factor and the new, unfamiliar situation, the culture, faith, high educational standards and the fact of a different language are also significant. As

the children often pick up the new language and make friends quickly, they are able to act as interpreters for their parents when they visit the authorities or the doctor. This is also a situation that influences the relationship, as the balance of power changes temporarily and is viewed critically by some parents: *"It's not good practice for parents to go somewhere and have their children interpret for them. That worries them. Knowing that the parents don't understand the language or can't speak it. It makes the children feel uncomfortable."* ["Raising Children", Parent 1_2024]. In addition, the multilingualism of their children is important to the families: *"The language comes from home, it is home. Regardless of that, the more languages you can speak, the better. Especially us, foreigners, we should know English, Panjabi, Hindu and Pashto. Our time is over now, it's the children's turn. They are German now, so they have to know German."* ["Creating Dialogue", FGD2].

Parents say that they are proud of their children when they perform well at school or in sport. However, the most important goal for them is that their children become "good people": *"My wish is first of all that they become good people. Once they have become good people, they will know the rest for themselves, how they want to live their lives."* ["Raising Children", Parent 1_2024]. What this means is linked to the values parents live by. This includes treating older people with respect and honouring their roots: *"Faith and culture, and respect for the identity of the parents, that's what our children should have. That is my wish. But I repeat: the decision is in their own hands. I don't force them to do anything, I want something from them."* ["Raising Children", Parent 1_2024].

The importance of cohesion within the nuclear family is highlighted, given that these families are isolated in a "foreign" country. The interviews clearly show that the parents do not want to lose their children, both physically and emotionally. In the discussions with the experts, various fears of the parents were identified. The fear of the Child protection services (Jugendamt) is a significant source of concern. In addition, the fear of alienating the children from their parents can also have a powerful influence on the parenting style. However, it also emerged from the expert panel that the fears of the Child protection services could be reduced through personal contact.

The change in parenting style is linked to a change in the way parents communicate. They learn new behaviours, spend more quality time with the children than before, explain their actions and possible consequences and exercise less discipline. This *phenomenon* also shows that children's education is very important to parents, so they actively seek out educational programmes and try to create new opportunities for their children. Parents are particularly proud of their children and their achievements at school and in (sports) clubs.

One of the central consequences of this change in parenting style is the transition from strict discipline to an upbringing that emphasises the explanation of consequences and a more intensive investment of time with the children. In addition, there is a shift in parenting in which parents try to integrate the positive aspects of both the German culture and the culture of their origin: *"We both try to take the good aspects from the respective customs"* ["Raising children", Parent 3_2024] (Germany and country of origin). This change in parenting styles is also reflected in the growing acceptance of new opportunities for their children, especially for girls, who can, for example, take part in sports activities in their new environment that they were denied in the country of their origin.

In order to cope with these changes, parents develop new strategies based on open, respectful and patient communication. Parents are endeavouring to find a balance between preserving their cultural (including religious) identity and integrating into German society by introducing their children to both their own culture and that of the new environment. The link between the *phenomena* can be clearly seen here. These strategies are also a reaction to the changed balance of power within the family, which is mainly due to the children's faster language acquisition compared to their parents. In general, parents feel the need to convey a sense of security to their children. Overall, the change in parenting style in the new cultural context can be perceived as a dynamic process.

3.4. Resilience: "It takes a village to raise a child"

Some interviews reveal that community cohesion is perceived as particularly valuable. Differences between parenting in Germany and parenting in the country of origin are discussed: *"Germans spend a lot of time alone. We don't want our children to learn to be alone. We are afraid that our children will get used to being alone. We want them to know that it's normal for us to always be with people."* ["Raising Children, Parent 1_2024] The feeling of being socially connected acts as a strong protective factor. Psychosocial support and social belonging strengthen resilience.

In the parents' country of origin, the community plays a decisive role, and children are also brought up "outside" through friends, family and meeting places. This time is characterised by negotiation processes, independence, but also safety and security through the social "network". In Germany, they believe that the responsibility lies more with the parents: *"They [relatives, friends, neighbours] would also take part in the upbringing. Here, this role is just taken by mum and dad. So we have more responsibility here."* ["Raising Children", Parent 1_2024]. These quotes remind us of the well-known African proverb "It takes a village to raise a child". Due to the new living conditions, they are looking for a way to become socially integrated. Particularly if the family has been living in a "collective accommodation" for a long time, the parents judge this living situation as not conducive to their child's development and set off in search of a new "village" or a new social network. The interviews show that they then find this in sports clubs, places of worship, community centres and educational institutions: *"Parents have a responsibility to bring their children to sports. You know what it's like here in the camp and in the refugee centres, if you have to come here after school, it could have a bad effect on them. (...) So it's better if they can stay out a bit longer after school and don't have to go straight home. We try to take them to sports twice or three times a week. I think it's better for them to be educated there."* ["Raising Children", Parent 4_2024].

Due to the constellation as a small family, the so-called "village" is perceived as important, particularly considering the necessity for childcare services. Regardless of the life situation alone, as a (married) couple or as a family, the desire for social connections can be explained by the sudden break in the biography. Here too, social interaction is an important means of getting closer to this goal. By enrolling children in sports clubs, various aspects are covered at the same time. In addition to the desire for a good environment and satisfactory childcare options for their children, new opportunities are in the

foreground: *"It's impossible in Afghanistan for a daughter to do sport and get prizes for it. That is a big difference."* ["Raising Children", Parent 4_2024]. All parents use social networks, also the community of the country of their origin. Moreover, social media is frequently identified as a valuable platform for professional networking, knowledge exchange, and information access.

3.5. Social participation: Education as a prerequisite for empowerment

The interviews show that the social participation of refugees is hampered by various barriers, such as a lack of German language skills and discriminatory experiences. Education and the development of independence and agency are key components of successful social participation. The role of the family in this process is of great importance.

The aim is social inclusion, to ensure that every person, regardless of their individual differences, is accepted by society and has the opportunity to participate fully in it.

In Germany, people are often reduced to their experience of being a refugee, which makes social participation more difficult and leads to fissures in their identity: *"(...) that these people come here, and they are actually only reduced to being a refugee, and everything they had been before disappears. That really does a lot for the self, for the self-efficacy."* ["Raising Children", FGD Experts 2024]. They experience discrimination and face many obstacles, the experts emphasise. The causes include negative experiences, such as being shouted at due to a lack of language skills or challenges when communicating with authorities, educational professionals and teachers. Fear of the Child protection services and difficulties in finding childcare and school places also play a role. Education and the development of the ability to act are crucial for successful participation: *"When I was nine months pregnant, I was attending a German course. And I learnt German. So I don't have to rely on interpreters when I, for example, need to go to the doctor."* ["Raising Children", Parent 3_2024).

Parents emphasise that they want to give their children a better future, in which education plays a central role, and they try to protect their children from negative influences such as alcohol and drug abuse. The "successful" educational path is directly linked to recognition and success. Parents consider their children's education to be a key factor in ensuring a brighter future, while at the same time experiencing pressure to attain certain accomplishments in order to gain social recognition. This dynamic emphasises the importance of social participation as a means of promoting independence and agency within stable family structures. Ultimately, social participation leads to agency, which then leads to independence and the protection of family structures.

3.6. Parent support: Guidance instead of duplicate structures

The "guidance" *phenomenon* in the "Parenting Service Guidance" category is essential to support parents and their children in challenging life situations. Regular and long-term counselling services prove to be indispensable in order to overcome the new challenges that constantly arise. Good experiences with counselling services such as those provided by social workers show the need for services that strengthen parents' self-efficacy and agency, especially against the backdrop of biographical breaks and the reduction of identities to refugee experiences.

The interviews show that although there are many existing offers, parents often feel that they have to find out everything themselves. This includes the regulations and structures surrounding enrolment at childcare centres or schools.

Parents express different needs, such as leisure time together with their community, cultural activities and expert advice. They lack programmes that involve parents and children together. The expert panel revealed that general and educational support services for fathers are very rare. Factors such as fear of the Child protection services, shame in making enquiries and bad experiences with the authorities complicate and change the process of making use of counselling services.

Parents emphasise that many have difficulties with printed material, while social media is omnipresent. Some parents make sure that they only use online services from experts: *"This should ideally be a psychologist or someone with expertise who can then give advice on which path to take."* ["Raising Children", Parent 3_2024]. Parents' strategies for obtaining information and support on parenting issues also include involving childcare centres and schools, using places of worship and activating private networks such as family, friends and landlords. Both the discussions with the parents and the experts show that many services are already available. Nevertheless, the parents feel left alone with the information or have difficulties identifying reliable and suitable offers for them.

The findings from the interviews show that "human guides" (as opposed to printed material or online sources) can play a crucial role in providing reliable information, guiding parents to suitable facilities and helping to reduce anxiety. This strengthens the participation and well-being of families.

4. Key aspects and recommendations

- I. Based on the results of the analysis of the interviews and the FGD, we recommend building on existing structures and services to support families in challenging situations in Germany. The interviews indicate **that regular and more long-term support services are desired**. The process of "arriving" is often a longer-term process. It takes time to find appropriate accommodation given the shortage of housing in general, particularly in larger towns and cities, to acquire language proficiency, to complete the process and paperwork to receive residence status, to complete vocational training or schooling and to finally find paid employment. Certainly, all these processes come with new challenges. Not only one "new start" is needed, but many. Each step carries its own challenges. **Long-term and regular support systems build trust between the newly arrived and the personnel on the support side, which is essential for the acceptance of counselling.**
- II. **The findings of the previous "Creating Dialogue" project are taken into account in the recommendations.** The concept of "Creating Dialogue"² is based on the appreciation of the diversity of families and the strengthening of partnership-based cooperation between parents and educators through Dialogue Groups based on a specific "dialogue methodology". This format has already proven its worth and is part of BeKi's in-service programme (regularly implemented since 2015 in Berlin and Hamburg as part of a larger in-service programme). In the course of the Dialogue Groups, a regular exchange is ensured in a confidential environment and trust is built up with the trainers and facilitators. **The aim of the Dialogue Groups is to convey the idea that the dialogue partners are equal in the discussions and parents are thus "empowered", experience their self-efficacy, share their experiences in a protected space, choose topics themselves according to their interests and needs.** Facilitators are on a par with parents, and parents are seen as experts of their own lives. Everyone is perceived as an equal dialogue partner, regardless of their language skills. Reliable relationships can also be established or further strengthened which are key needs the interviewed parents speak about. The experts interviewed for this study explicitly mention the need to develop formats for the support of fathers. **Therefore, Dialogue Groups for men, especially for fathers, are considered useful.** It is important for fathers to exchange ideas with each other, for example about the upbringing and development of their children. **Dialogue Groups can be offered at locations such as accommodation centres, community centres, and meeting places for the communities.**
- III. **The Dialogue Groups strengthen personal networks and community cohesion and help develop an informal counselling and support structure.** Participants can expand their network

² Busuleanu, Štěpánka & Höhme, Evelyne (2019): Creating dialogue. Strengthening trusting partnerships with parents. Institut für den Situationsansatz (ISTA)/Berliner Kita-Institut für Qualitätsentwicklung (BeKi), part of the International Academy Berlin for Innovative Pedagogy, Psychology and Economics gGmbH. Online version available on demand from the Consultant (BeKi)

through the religious community, participation in Dialogue Groups, the language cafés or other educational opportunities. Through these processes, people are strengthened in their ability to exercise agency, become independent and resilient. They are also integrated into their network and gain a stronger sense of community.

- IV. In the context of a range of themes, and particularly in relation to the area of “Well-being”, it is evident that the empowerment of parents is crucial. Parents are often focussed on the needs of their children, but their own well-being makes a significant contribution to the well-being within the family. It is therefore considered important to establish programmes for parents that strengthen their self-efficacy, as they subsequently also have a positive influence on the children. **It is desirable to create access to educational opportunities for parents.** The *phenomenon* "Education as a prerequisite for empowerment" shows that these programmes give parents security and independence in their everyday lives. German language courses in the context of language cafés with volunteers at a par level, where there is not only the opportunity to find access to the language, but equally to network or receive support in the area of reading and writing. These existing offers can also be promoted via the Dialogue Groups.
- V. The facilitators who offer Dialogue Groups at locations relevant for **parents can be qualified in the “Creating Dialogue” methodology** by the Berlin Early Years Institute for Quality Development. Building on this, **BeKi materials can be developed for further transfer** (working with fathers, with young adults and teenagers etc.).
- VI. Parents interviewed for this study and for the “Creating Dialogue” study emphasize gratitude vis-à-vis the country of arrival rather than dwelling on difficult situations. Nevertheless, the experts emphasize structural discrimination. **Therefore, we recommend trainings to foster prejudice-awareness for professional working with refugee/migrant children and families.**
- VII. The topic of "social media" was also addressed. Regardless of their situation, all parents had access to the internet via a smartphone. They use social media channels to get information and support quickly. The use of this tool is a very low threshold, so social media groups, websites or an app that provide reliable information from qualified experts in several languages can be helpful for many people. The interviewees prefer oral or visual information, while, as they rate it, the access to written sources of information is more difficult for them. **Programmes and networking opportunities that emerge from the Dialogue Groups can also be made accessible online.**

The methodology of Dialogue Groups can act as a pathway to access other support structures and programmes within the community. These factors foster confidence and trust, which are prerequisites for successfully navigating the challenges associated with arriving in a new country after prolonged periods of insecurity, instability, and turmoil.

4.1. Recommendations in a nutshell

- A. **Dialogue Groups for different target groups:** This established programme meets the diverse needs of parents, such as long term and regular support, connecting with their community, building social networks, sharing experiences and challenges in a confidential atmosphere, building self-efficacy and recommending trusted support services. Dialogue Groups specifically for fathers can fill a gap in existing support services.
- B. **Training of trainers:** In order to make use of existing structures, we recommend and are able to offer training of trainers. These trainers can then offer Dialogue Groups in locations such as accommodation centres, community centres and meeting places for the communities.
- C. **Material development:** On the basis of 'Creating Dialogue', BeKi can further develop and supplement the existing material. In this way, the concept can be extended to other target groups (e.g. young people, fathers). Materials on current issues and challenges facing families can be used by trainers to design the Dialogue Groups.
- D. **Trainings to foster prejudice-awareness for professionals working with children and families:** "Creating Dialogue" is based on prejudice-conscious methods. Therefore, Creating Dialogue training can also be used to sensitise practitioners, teachers or social workers to the needs of families.
- E. **Social media/online videos:** Parents prefer social media or video to written information. They value trustworthy sources. Digital offerings can complement face-to-face contact and trusting exchanges in Dialogue Groups in a low-threshold way. Programmes and networking opportunities that emerge from the Dialogue Groups can also be made accessible online.

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