

RESEARCH AND PRACTICE OF HEALTH PROMOTION

# PROTECTION OR RISK?

Family environments reflected in  
communication between parents and  
their children

VOLUME 10



Federal Centre for Health Education

BZgA

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**RESEARCH AND PRACTICE OF HEALTH PROMOTION**  
**VOLUME 10**

**PROTECTION OR RISK?**

**Family environments reflected in communication  
between parents and their children**

A study by Catarina Eickhoff and Jürgen Zinnecker, commissioned by the BZgA

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## Preface

The family has a particular significance in the development of children and young people. It plays a decisive role in the mediation of values, norms and behavioural patterns and offers children protection and support in managing developmental tasks and the risks, which are connected with them. However, deficiencies in development and psychological disturbances can also – in an unfavourable family atmosphere – commence in the family.

But, how can a family atmosphere, which is favourable or unfavourable for development, be described concretely? What, for example, should be understood by harmonious, partner family relationships? By what means do children feel support within the family, and how does the action “*Kinder stark machen*” (Make Children Strong) express itself in everyday interaction? The promotion of the health of children and young people is currently the main specific target group focus of the Federal Centre for Health Education. The documented study in Volume 10 of the specialist booklet series “Research and Practice of Health Promotion”, commissioned by the Federal Centre for Health Education, explored this question, with regard to the meaning of the family both as a protective factor and as a risk factor in the development of children and young people. Its aim was to examine more closely communication within the family from a preventative point of view, and to establish its relationship to the family atmospheres, which had been subjectively described by the children.

The great merit of this study is, above all, that in the search for scientifically proven answers, those whom it concerns were asked themselves: the children themselves. It showed that the children had a good perception and estimation of their living environment, and could pass on important pointers. In this case, the subject matter does not commence with the planning and carrying out of measures for this target group, but opens, in a consistent manner, with previous research on this target group.

Cologne, June 2000

Dr. Elisabeth Pott  
Director of the Federal Centre  
for Health Education



## Outline of the project

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Project title: Family communication – discussions between parents and adolescent children about the risks of growing up

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Goals:

- Replication of the formation of different family environments and their characteristics, which were formed on the basis of the assessments of 700 children, aged between 10 and 13 years old, within the framework of a longitudinal study, representative of Germany.
- More exact knowledge about communication between parents and their children.
- Examination of the connection between the family atmospheres, as reported subjectively by the children, and the quality of communication and the way in which conflict and worrying topics are dealt with.

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Implementation period: 1997–1999

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Sample survey: 840 seventh class schoolchildren from Cologne and Siegen  
11 family case studies (father-mother-target child)

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Methods and evaluation: Questionnaire, video recordings of family discussions, coding of the video recordings, quantitative (statistical) and qualitative evaluation of the case-studies

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Project implementation: Siegener Zentrum für Kindheits-, Jugend- und Biografieforschung (Siegener Centre for the Research of Childhood, Youth and Biography)  
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## Summary of results

Children and young people between the ages of 12 and 16 (average age, 13.3), who respect their parents and are happy at home are less vulnerable to cigarettes, alcohol and both hard and soft drugs. Children and young people who have a worse opinion of their parents and see the family home more as a stressful place are more often vulnerable to such addictions. This was shown in a survey of 840 Year 7 pupils.

There are six parental qualities, which make the difference:

- Children feeling that their mothers and fathers really understand them;
- Children seeing their mothers and fathers as competent sources of advice which has relevance to their lives;
- Children finding that their parents take a keen interest in their time at school;
- Children sharing hobbies with their parents;
- Children finding the atmosphere at home co-operative and harmonious;
- Children feeling that their parents really respect them as people.

Around one in four children ascribed such positive characteristics to their parents – fathers as well as mothers – in the survey. However, one in eight thought that their parents showed too few of these characteristics. From a child's point of view, therefore, the very quality of the personal relationship between the parents and the child is important. Contrary to widespread opinion, outward characteristics of the family or child play no or only a very small part in a secure upbringing.

Children from partner families and children from conflict families are divided equally between boys and girls, German families and families of other descent, pupils at secondary modern schools and pupils at grammar schools, those who do well at school and those who do not, and only children and those with brothers and sisters. Admittedly, children who live with both their biological parents at home more frequently ascribe positive traits to their mothers and fathers.

The case studies about the communication structure between parents and children, with selected examples of both partner families and conflict families, showed, above all, that the children and young people we surveyed were good observers. Parents with the six positive characteristics spoke to their children in a different way from the parents whose children had said their parents were lacking in them. Parents of partner children laughed together with their children more often, gave more (positive) feedback, included their children more in conversations, and wanted to know their opinions in contentious situations. In comparison to the 'stress-inducing' parents, they less frequently took on the role of adult authority. As far as children from partner families are concerned, they co-operate more willingly with their parents than the children from conflict families, who are more likely to come across as brusque and distant.



## Introduction

The aim of this study was to obtain more accurate knowledge of communication between parents and their adolescent children. The connection between the family atmosphere, which had been subjectively described by the children, and both the quality of communication and the way in which conflict or worry was handled, also emerged.

Indeed, it is not disputed that family relationships and the family atmosphere play an important role in the development of children and young people. However, most of the information, which we have about these complex interrelationships has been collected from questionnaires or interviews with the parents (predominantly mothers). As being ‘a good family’ is very significant in our society, it is difficult to get valid and accurate information about family interaction from these parental self-assessments (Markman/Notarius 1987; Marta 1997). In current specialist literature, children’s impressions are very seldom found, and, in addition to that, we know very little about what really makes a day-to-day family atmosphere good or bad. There is an obvious lack of valid observational data about communication and behaviour in the family, and about children’s opinions of their fathers and mothers. How do children see their parents? What does it mean (especially with regard to adolescent risks like smoking, drinking alcohol and drug consumption) if a child experiences the family atmosphere as stressful, or, conversely, as supportive? Do families in which children experience the family environment as full of conflict and unhelpful communicate differently from families in which the children feel the family environment is supportive and harmonious? The project ‘Family Communication’, which is published in this volume of the series “Research and Practice of Health Promotion”, asked these very questions.

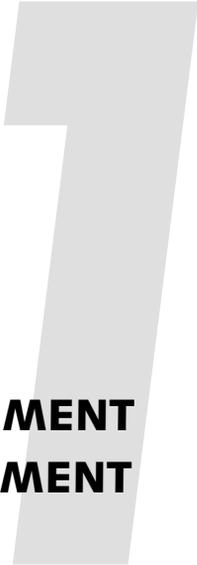
To introduce the theme of family relationships and family communication, statements from specialist literature about favourable and unfavourable characteristics of family relationships will be brought together in the next chapter (*Section 1.1*). Using this as a basis, the corresponding favourable and unfavourable communication characteristics will be examined (*Section 1.2*), and then a bridge will be built between the relationship characteristics and the communication characteristics (*Section 1.3*). Finally, *Section 1.4* gives an overview of the way in which the study was constructed.

In the second chapter, both surveys (i.e. the original, Germany-wide survey, and the current survey of 840 children in Cologne and Siegen) will be introduced (*Section 2.1*), along with the family environments, which were identified by means of this data from the children (*Section 2.2*). The developmental risks and/or protective factors, which the different family environments provide, will also be demonstrated (*Section 2.3*).

*Chapter 3* is concerned with the case studies, which had been selected on the basis of family environment. The communication situation will be introduced first (*Section 3.1*), then

in *Section 3.2*, the partner families and the conflict families will be introduced. Finally, the differences between communication in these families will be demonstrated (*Section 3.3*). As an extension of that, a typical partner family and a typical conflict family will be portrayed and qualitatively analysed (*Section 3.4*).

In conclusion, in *Chapter 4*, a few ideas towards preventing addiction will be brought together.



**THE FAMILY AS A RISK ENVIRONMENT  
AND AS A PROTECTIVE ENVIRONMENT  
FOR ADOLESCENTS**

With regard to conveying norms, values and behavioural patterns, the nuclear family has a very special significance. Both a child's world view, and the image he or she develops of him/herself are shaped by the family atmosphere and the types of relationships within the family (Kreppner/Ullrich, 1997; Wichstrom et al., 1996). The family atmosphere and communication within the family are, furthermore, not insignificant influences in the emergence of psychological disorders (Brunner/Huber, 1989; Doane, 1978; Hehl/Eisenriegler, 1986; Kröger, 1994; Markman/Notarius, 1987; Wichstrom et al., 1996). The likelihood of non-compliant behaviour appearing, or of unacceptable anti-social behaviour developing in children is closely linked to the behaviour of the parents (Marta, 1997; Schuster, 1998). However, the family frequently also takes on a protective function and can assist the child as a resource in coping with developmental tasks and the associated risks. Consequently, it is very important to have information about what distinguishes an unfavourable family atmosphere from a favourable one, and what consequences that can have, for both preventative and rehabilitative work. Hence, we will collect together from the relevant research what is known about the characteristics of beneficial and/or obstructive family relationships, and about the favourable and unfavourable characteristics of communication and interaction.

## **1.1 Favourable and unfavourable characteristics of family relationships in the specialist literature**

There is a whole host of studies and papers about families and their influence on the development of children and young people. In connection with this, risk and protective factors, which can adversely or positively influence the development of a child, are frequently referred to. In general, risk factors and/or pathogenic factors are defined as “Conditions or variables, which decrease the likelihood of positive or socially desirable behaviour, or increase the likelihood of negative outcomes. With regard to health, risk factors reduce the acceptance or keeping up of behaviour which promotes health, and/or they increase the likelihood of behaviour, which is incompatible with healthy behaviour.” (Jessor et al., 1999:43).

In this context, it is important that here we are dealing with a correlative relationship between risk factors and disorders and/or behaviour (Künzel-Böhmer et al., 1993). There are only a few longitudinal studies, which can definitely prove a causal connection between the two aspects. However, this would lead us to assume that there is frequently an interaction between risk factor and unfavourable behaviour and/or psychological disturbances (Bender/Lösel, 1998). In relation to children's anti-social behaviour that would, for example,

mean that if parents were disinterested and insensitive that could possibly cause the child's anti-social behaviour. However, the consequence of precisely this anti-social behaviour by the child could be the parents' withdrawal, with disinterested and insensitive behaviour towards the child.

In connection with risk factors, it should also be noted, that single occurrences of risk factors, as a rule, seldom accompany negative behaviour or psychological disturbances. It is stressed again and again that only the accumulation of several pathogenic factors really increases the risk of behaviour, which can damage health or is otherwise harmful, or the risk of psychological disorders (Bender/Lösel, 1998; Gutierrez et al., 1994).

Whilst previously the focus was directed, above all, at the risk factors, the majority of researchers today are concerned with the so-called protective factors. Their "role is to increase the likelihood of desirable or positive behaviour in various areas of life (including health and well-being) or to mitigate the negative influences of risk factors" (Jessor et al., 1999:42). That means that the effect of risk factors can be cancelled out and/or buffered with an adequate number of protective factors (Egle et al., 1997, Jessor et al., 1999). There is, moreover, evidence that protective factors are even more important than risk factors (Jessor et al., 1999). In addition to that, it is significant that risk factors and protective factors have different strengths depending on age, sex and context, indeed each one can even have a conflicting influence (Bender/Lösel, 1998; Helfferich, 1999). A protective factor, when a child is small (for example, being continually looked after by someone they are close to, and the constant presence of that person) can possibly develop an opposite effect and become a risk factor in adolescence (for example, over-protective, over-involved behaviour/no freedom, see below).

In the next section, we will collect together the favourable and unfavourable influences on the development of adolescent children, which originate in the family. Following the research trend, we will initially turn our attention to protective factors in the family. In doing this, we should note that only very few studies evaluate the factors, and seldom differentiate between fathers and mothers. Marta (1997) stresses, however, that in this context, mothers and fathers play equally important roles. Both Zinnecker's formation of family-types (1997) and this current study confirm that.

The aspect, which is most frequently referred to in connection with protective factors in the family, is the significance of parents' support, sensitivity and understanding towards their children (Abt, 1996; Broderick, 1993; Brunner/Huber, 1989; Egle et al., 1997; Freitag, 1999; Hurrelmann, 1991; Noller, 1995; Marta 1997; Pearson, 1989; Pikowsky/Hofer, 1992; Schneewind, 1991; Segrin/Menees, 1996; Spohr, 1996; Trenholm/Jensen, 1992).

It is particularly important for adolescent children to have support for autonomous behaviour and/or support for their independence (Abt, 1996; Noller, 1995; Pikowsky/Hofer, 1992), as well as a sensitive and understanding reaction to the child's changes during puberty (Pearson, 1989; Schneewind, 1991).

Other protective factors in the family, which were mentioned in the literature were:

- clear boundaries within the family (Minuchin, 1990; Trenholm/Jensen, 1992),
- cohesion in the family (Denton/Kampfe, 1994; Künzel-Böhmer et al., 1993; Noller, 1995; Schneewind, 1991),
- openness in talking about feelings and discussing conflicts (Marta, 1997; Pearson, 1989; Schmitthenner, 1996; Schneewind, 1991),
- attentive and/or ‘democratic’ supervision by parents (Bender/Lösel, 1998; Hurrelmann, 1991; Noller, 1995; Pikowsky/Hofer, 1992; Zinnecker, 1997),
- shared family activities and hobbies (Bender/Lösel, 1998; Peterander, 1993; Schneewind, 1991; Zinnecker, 1997),
- growing up with both biological parents (Freitag, 1999; Künzel-Böhmer et al., 1993),
- less than four siblings with an age difference of at least two years (Werner/Smith, 1982<sup>1</sup>),
- parents’ competence to formulate their views and values clearly, with regard to their children, and set an example by them (Harbach/Jones, 1995),
- a balanced and harmonious family atmosphere (Hurrelmann, 1996; Zinnecker, 1997),
- recognition of the child as a person (Abt, 1996; Künzel-Böhmer et al., 1993),
- confidence in parents’ advice (Zinnecker, 1997),
- availability of parents (Grossmann/Grossmann, 1995),
- warmth in the parent-child relationship (Broderick, 1993; Hurrelmann, 1991; Pikowsky/Hofer, 1992; Schneewind, 1991),
- communicative openness of the family with the outside world (Degenhardt, 1996; Künzel-Böhmer et al., 1993),
- the possibility of negotiating mutual decisions within conflicts (Noller, 1995; Shedler/Block, 1990).

## Psychological protective factors of the child

The protective factors of the family which we have mentioned have, in turn, a direct effect on the psychological protective factors of the child. These refer to aspects of a person’s personality or combinations of their characteristics, which reduce the likelihood of negative or socially undesirable behaviour (Künzel-Böhmer, 1993). This means that we are dealing with protective factors, which are within the nature of a person. To name a few examples:

- a strong sense of self-esteem (Abt, 1996; Bender/Lösel, 1998; Broderick, 1993; Künzel-Böhmer et al., 1993; Marta, 1997),
- a responsible independence (Pikowsky/Hofer, 1992),
- self-confidence and/or a feeling of being able to achieve something (Abt, 1996; Bender/Lösel, 1998; Künzel-Böhmer et al., 1993; Pikowsky/Hofer, 1992),
- good relationships with people of the same age (Noller, 1995),
- feeling happy with one’s own body (Abt, 1996) and
- a good ability to communicate (Abt, 1996).

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Künzel-Böhmer et al. (1993).

Hence, we can see that the individual protective factors of the family mutually influence, and, in part depend on, one another. Also that the protective factors in the family, for example, have an effect not only on the psychological protective factors of the child, but also on external influencing factors (for example, what kinds of friends a child chooses; Bell et al., 1988; Denton/Kampfe, 1994). In addition to that, we should not disregard the significance of the psychological protective factors, which the parents themselves possess. For example, parents can only provide real security, when they feel secure themselves (Abt, 1996).

## Family risk factors

First of all, risk factors in the family can, of course, be the absence of the protective factors, which we have mentioned. Accordingly, a lack of support and sensitivity, and a deficiency of understanding from parents have been assessed as risk factors (Abt, 1999; Brunner/Huber, 1989; Denton/Kampfe, 1994; Künzel-Böhmer et al., 1993). Also, over-protective, over-anxious behaviour by parents, which leaves the child little freedom, proves to be an unfavourable factor (Abt, 1999; Bender/Lösel, 1998; Helmersen, 1983; Künzel-Böhmer et al. 1993; Noller 1995).

Other 'absent protective factors', which appear in the literature as risk factors are:

- no warmth (Denton/Kampfe, 1994),
- very controlling behaviour (Denton/Kampfe, 1994),
- a lack of harmony within the family (Hurrelmann, 1996; Werner/Smith, 1992<sup>2</sup>),
- a family's social isolation from the external world (Abt, 1996; Degenhardt, 1996),
- parents with little competence in giving advice in comparison with friends (Künzel-Böhmer et al., 1993),
- parents' indifference (Denton/Kampfe, 1994; Künzel-Böhmer et al., 1993),
- non-availability of parents (Denton/Kampfe, 1994),
- broken home (Hurrelmann, 1991; Künzel-Böhmer et al., 1993; Denton/Kampfe, 1994; Freitag, 1999),
- over-stepping of boundaries, or unclear boundaries between family members (Minuchin, 1990) and
- a lack of openness in dealings with one another (Denton/Kampfe, 1994).

Other unfavourable characteristics of family relationships are:

- a lot or hardly any conflict (Markman/Notarius, 1987; Segrin/Menees, 1995),
- pressure to do well or parents' high expectations of their children (Denton/Kampfe, 1994; Nordlohne, 1992; Schneewind, 1991),

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2 Cited in Egle et al. (1997).

- a negatively authoritative style of upbringing, or one in which the child is spoilt (Hurrelmann, 1996),
- a family member who is over-stretched or stressed (Abt, 1996),
- illness of a family member (Tarullo et al., 1994),
- parents or siblings as negative role models (Denton/Kampfe, 1994; Freitag, 1999; Gutierrez, et al., 1994) and
- social decline or unemployment of family members (Abt, 1996; Hurrelmann, 1996).

This final characteristic is also subsumed by critical occasions in life, which take on a very special significance in this context. Among others, the death of a family member, moving house or the birth of a family member, come to mind. A summary of the risk factors and protective factors in the family can be found in Table 1.

The risk factors, like the protective factors, also mutually influence one another. That means that risk factors in the family can negatively effect psychological risk factors, (for

Protective Factors in the Family	Risk Factors in the Family
Support/sensitivity/understanding Support for autonomous/independent behaviour Warmth Attentive supervision Harmonious family atmosphere Family's openness towards the external world Trust in parents' advice that of the parents Child lives with both biological parents Openness in interaction with each other Few critical occasions in life Clear boundaries Availability of parents Less than four siblings Family cohesion Shared family activities  Successfully setting an example and mediation of values and beliefs The possibility of negotiating joint decisions within conflict	Lack of support/sensitivity, no understanding Over-protective, over-involved, overanxious behaviour, no freedom Lack of warmth Authoritative checking behaviour Lack of harmony in the family Family's social isolation from the outside world Friends' advice is valued more highly than  Broken home No openness in interaction with each other Frequent critical occasions in life Unclear boundaries Non-availability of parents More than four siblings Parent's indifference Parenting style which is negatively authoritative or, which spoils the child Pressure to do well and high expectations  A lot or hardly any conflict  Parents or siblings as negative role models

Table 1: Family risk factors and protective factors, taken from specialist literature

example, a lack of self-esteem), social factors (for example, no social network) and other risk factors. In addition to that, the psychological characteristics of the parents again play a central role here. For example, the literature mentions parents' lack of self-confidence in their own methods of parenting as a pathogenic factor (Denton/Kampfe, 1994).

Risk factors emerge, above all, in times of mental and physical changes. It is well recognised that puberty is such a phase of changes, so both risk factors and protective factors take on a very particular significance at this time.

## Summary

In the literature, protective and pathogenic factors are investigated and described, particularly, in connection with drug use, delinquency and poverty (Marta 1997). The risk factors and protective factors, which are mentioned in this publication, are likewise predominantly related to the consumption of alcohol and drugs, and to smoking, as this behaviour provides an important focus. It is, however, disputed among the scientific experts, as to which protective factors and which risk factors have which effect. Opinions range from “all protective factors can be evaluated together as an authoritative parenting style, and all have a generally favourable effect” (Silbereisen, 1999) to the view that protective factors and risk factors can be differentiated in a substance-specific way (Kröger, 1999). If one looks at the literature about the protective factors and the risk factors, it will be obvious that the majority of writers do not work from a basis of specific target risks. The protective and pathogenic factors, which are mentioned, can also be found in literature about psychological disorders (for example, schizophrenia) and behavioural abnormalities, and in literature about behaviour which risks health. This corresponds to the opinion of Gutierrez et al. (1994), who claim that many of these aspects are connected with one another. They postulate, as an example, the fact that drug use, failure at school, delinquency, risky sexual behaviour, early pregnancy and suicide during childhood or adolescence frequently appear together. The family environments described by us in *Section 2.2.* also suggest evidence that the pathogenic and protective factors, which we have mentioned, combine to have less of a specific effect than a generally favourable or unfavourable effect on a child's development.

## 1.2 Favourable and unfavourable characteristics of communication in the specialist literature

The previous introduction to risk factors in the family and protective factors in the family should have demonstrated the most important aspects, which can be found in this context in the literature. So far, we have not referred to the fact that many writers attach a central value to family communication in the context of the characteristics of family relationships (Denton/Kampfe, 1994; Doane, 1978; Elke, 1986; Harbach/Jones, 1995; Kreppner/Ullrich, 1997; Wichstrom et al., 1996). Admittedly, as a rule, this appears in a very general form without the individual characteristics of communication being differentiated. Therefore, the following section should explain to what extent the characteristics of communication and/or interaction can be judged as favourable or unfavourable.

### Communication research in practice

Although (or perhaps, precisely because?) interpersonal communication and/or interaction, and the characteristics of communication and/or interaction have been examined and described for some years already, there is no generally accepted definition of communication. In the area of family communication, there is, additionally, a lack of generally accepted and empirically proven theories. Even if there are undoubtedly useful approaches in connection with this, (for example, from Minuchin, 1990, Schulz von Thun, 1981 or Watzlawick, 1990), we do not want to look into the theoretical meaning of communication here, but to turn our attention exclusively to the practical element of research into communication. In connection with this, it can be confirmed that the trend of research is moving away from clear, summative assessments of communicative behaviour in family members (by means of questionnaires or interviews) towards observational studies, which directly record the interaction of the family. This development is linked to improved methodology within the framework of observational studies. Coding systems have been devised, and, instead of simple tape recordings and/or direct observation with no technical aids, video recordings are now used (this provides, above all, the opportunity to assess the meaning of non-verbal behaviour). Various independent observers, trained in coding systems can be appointed and critical evaluations can then be made.

Normally, an artificial situation is created for these observational studies (for example, in the family's living room, or in a laboratory), in which the family assemble and communicate and/or interact with one another on the basis of specified conversational stimuli or tasks. This interaction is, as a rule, recorded onto video (and/or tape recorder), then later coded by various people. Admittedly, these studies are often predominantly a summative

assessment of dimensions of communication, which have not, it has to be said, been carried out by the participants themselves, but by the researchers, often in teams at a later stage. That means, that the majority of them are also concerned here with an approximate level of lengthy communication units (cf. Kreppner, 1997; Vuchinich/Angelelli, 1995), for example, evaluating a conversational sequence per provided theme or within a defined time unit. Many limit themselves to very specific aspects, for example, who speaks to whom, or who is frequently interrupted, without thereby taking other characteristics of communication into account (e.g. Haley, 1964).

Careful, microanalytical evaluations of communication sequences are found less often.<sup>3</sup> The main reasons for this are that analyses of this type are very time consuming, and the microanalytical coding systems are unreliable.

In the following, an overview of the characteristics of communication, which are assessed as favourable and/or unfavourable, will be put together, on the basis of (social-) psychological observational studies (of couples and families) which have previously been carried out. Studies which compare communication in ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ families, or ‘happy’ and ‘unhappy’ couples, or those, which analyse interaction in ‘normal’ families. It should be noted that there is no unified opinion about which speaking qualities and which listening qualities are important for successful communication and problem solving (Hahlweg, 1986; Trenholm/Jensen, 1992). For this reason, we will concentrate here on those aspects, which have been confirmed many times in the studies and work about interpersonal communication and/or interaction. Before we list the various characteristics of communication, we should point out that carrying out an assessment of interaction is not, of course, as simple as might be suggested by the listing of favourable and unfavourable aspects of communication. It is clear that there is no ‘perfect communication’, just as there is no ‘perfect’ family. There are arguments and conflicts even in well functioning families, which would nevertheless fit into the characteristics of communication, which have been classified as unfavourable on a general level. Similarly, a positive characteristic of communication (for example, praise) can even become an unfavourable characteristic if it is overused (for example, constant and excessive praise). In accordance with that, the following enumeration of favourable and unfavourable characteristics of communication is to be understood, not as absolute, but rather as relative.

## Favourable characteristics of communication and interaction

Expressions of agreement and acceptance, such as “Yes, I agree”, “Hmm, we could do that in that way” etc., appear again and again in the specialist literature as positive characteristics of communication (Broderick, 1993; Floyd/Markman, 1984; Hahlweg, 1986; Vu-

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<sup>3</sup> These views relate to (social-) psychological studies of communication. We have not included the tradition of qualitative analyses of conversations, which has developed in linguistics and in the social sciences.

chinich/Angelelli, 1995). Agreement and acceptance, can, however, be expressed on a non-verbal plane and have a favourable effect on interaction, for example, in the form of nodding, etc.

Other characteristics of interaction, which can be characterised as beneficial are as follows:

- emotionally supportive statements/praise, as, for example, “I can understand that” or “I think the way you do that is good” (Broderick, 1993; Brunner/Huber, 1989; Floyd/Markman, 1984; Noller, 1995; Hahlweg, 1986; Karraß/Hausa, 1981; Olson et al., 1983; Thomas, 1996; Vuchinich/Angelelli, 1995);
- positive physical contact and/or positive non-verbal behaviour, for example, stroking, taking someone’s hand, embracing (Floyd/Markman, 1984; Hahlweg, 1986);
- ‘I-statements’/opening up of oneself and/or expressing desires and intentions, as, for example, “I think it would be nice if we could all go away together” (Floyd/Markman, 1984; Pearson, 1989);
- frequent spontaneous agreement (Doane, 1978; Hehl/Eisenriegler, 1986; Helmersen, 1983);
- statements which encourage autonomy/independence, as, for example, “What were your ideas about that?” or “Try that again by yourself” (Noller, 1995; Pikowsky/Hofer, 1992);
- being able to listen/being attentive (Berlin, 1975<sup>4</sup>; Hahlweg, 1986);
- giving the others time and attention (Karraß/Hausa, 1981; Peterander, 1993);
- conversation distributed equally within the family/group (Doane, 1978; Elke, 1986);
- clear and consistent statements (Broderick, 1993; Floyd/Markman, 1984; Olson et al., 1983; Peterander, 1993; Thomas, 1996);
- paraphrasing, as, for example, “You said that you would find that difficult” (Floyd/Markman, 1984; Hahlweg, 1986);
- enquiring/clarifying, as, for example, “What did you mean exactly?” or “I don’t think I quite understood that, can you explain it to me again?” (Berlin, 1975<sup>5</sup>; Floyd/Markman, 1984);
- shared laughter/humour (Floyd/Markman, 1984; Peterander, 1993);
- constructive solving of conflicts/effective strategies for solving problems (Elke, 1986; Olson et al., 1983; Thomas, 1996) and
- providing feedback (Floyd/Markman, 1984; Hahlweg, 1986).

## Unfavourable characteristics of communication and interaction

Above all, negative, attacking and critical expressions, such as “You can’t do that anyway” or “Who wants to talk to you about your problems?”, are mentioned as unfavourable char-

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4 Cited in Hahlweg (1986).

5 Cited in Hahlweg (1986).

acteristics of communication (Bodenmann, 1999; Broderick, 1993; Hahlweg, 1986; Jacob et al., 1981; Floyd/Markman, 1984; Karraß/Hausa, 1981; Noller, 1995; Pikowsky/Hofer, 1992; Vuchinich/Angelelli, 1995). There are, for example, a lot more critical and devaluing expressions in families with an ill family member and/or in problematic marriages, than in healthy families and marriages. According to Hahlweg (1986), this is the indirect expression of negative feelings and prevents constructive solutions to conflicts. The latter correspondingly appears among the characteristics of unfavourable communication (see below).

Often, the characteristics of communication, which are assessed as unfavourable, are the lack or the opposite of the aspects of interaction, which are seen as positive. Correspondingly, other characteristics of interaction, which are seen as harmful in the literature, are as below:

- negative non-verbal behaviour, as, for example, avoiding eye-contact or turning away (Floyd/Markman, 1984; Hahlweg, 1986);
- a lot of ‘you-statements’ (i.e. saying little about yourself, constantly talking about others), as, for example, “You definitely wouldn’t join in” (Hahlweg, 1986; Vuchinich/Angelelli, 1995);
- infrequent spontaneous agreement (Doane, 1978; Hehl/Eisenriegler, 1986; Helmersen, 1983);
- over-protective, over-involved expression (Noller, 1995; Tarullo et al., 1994);
- not listening/being disinterested (Berlin, 1975<sup>6</sup>; Hahlweg, 1986);
- ignoring others (Broderick, 1993; Doane, 1978);
- unequally divided conversation (Doane, 1978; Elke, 1986);
- unclear/incongruous expressions/double bind (Broderick, 1993; Hahlweg, 1986; Olson et al., 1983);
- creation of coalitions among family members (particularly across the generations) (Doane, 1978; Minuchin, 1990);
- stereotyped patterns of behaviour (Degenhardt, 1996; Doane, 1978; Elke, 1986);
- digressing from topics (Hahlweg, 1986; Helmersen, 1983);
- no constructive solutions to conflicts/ineffective problem-solving strategies (Degenhardt, 1996; Elke, 1986; Helmersen, 1983; Olson et al., 1983) and
- threats, as, for example, “If you started smoking, there’d be what-for, I can tell you!” (Broderick, 1993; Vuchinich/Angelelli, 1995).

*Table 2* shows an overview of the favourable and unfavourable characteristics of communication, which are to be found in the literature. The first eleven rows show opposing aspects of communication, the rest are independent of one another.

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6 Cited in Hahlweg (1986).

Favourable characteristics of communication	Unfavourable characteristics of communication
Agreement/acceptance Emotional support, care Positive physical contact, positive non-verbal behaviour 'I-statements'/opening up one's self, expressing desires and intentions Frequent spontaneous agreement Expressions which encourage autonomy and independence Ability to listen, attentiveness Giving time and attention to the others Equally divided conversations Clear consistent statements Constructive solutions to conflicts/effective problem-solving strategies	Refusal/rejection Attacks, criticism, turning away, devaluation Negative non-verbal behaviour 'You-statements' Infrequent spontaneous agreement Overprotective, over-involved Not listening, disinterested Ignoring the others Unequal division of conversations Unclear, incongruous expressions/double bind No constructive solution to conflicts/ineffective problem-solving strategies
Paraphrasing Enquiring, clarifying Shared laughter Giving feedback	Creating coalitions (especially across the generations) Stereotyped patterns of behaviour Digressing from topics Threats

Table 2: Characteristics of communication, which are frequently mentioned in the literature as favourable or unfavourable

The significance of the characteristics of communication, which we have mentioned, is also reflected in the fact that they are used within the majority of the coding systems, which have so far been developed (Eickhoff, 1999). Indeed, it is only in very few of these coding systems that an evaluation of the coded characteristics has been undertaken. However, the results of the studies, in which the coding systems are employed, support the demonstrated organisation and lead to the conclusion that we are dealing with a central aspect of communication.

# 1.3

## The association between characteristics of relationships and characteristics of communication within the family



An examination of favourable and unfavourable characteristics of relationships and the corresponding characteristics of communication make it clear that the transition between the two aspects is partly fluid. *Acceptance*, *understanding* and *sensitivity* on the relationship plane are reflected on the communication plane in *sensitive*, *empathetic* and *accepting expressions*. The connection between the two planes, however, is not always clear and, up to now, little attention has been paid to the empirical planes. There have, indeed, been attempts to combine the characteristics of relationships and communication with their practical recording (for example, through the interaction of dimensions of communication in the “Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems” by Olson, 1979, and the development of an appropriate rating scale by Thomas, 1996), but research in this connection has, up to now, been very neglected. Frequently, family members (or observers) have been questioned about generalised assessments of the family atmosphere and/or behaviour in the family. This often proves to be insufficient, as precise information about individual behaviour and patterns of interaction is particularly important especially for therapeutic and preventive work to enable changes to be made. Correspondingly, it is not very surprising that the majority of microanalytical communication studies originate from the area of clinical psychology, and the therapeutic setting often serves as an observational situation.

However, let us return to the question of whether the connection between the perceived family atmosphere (from a child’s perspective) and real communication within the family is as clear as we suspect. Do families, which children experience as stressful, communicate differently from those that children experience as supportive? How do empathetic, understanding, accepting, attentive and interested parents come across in comparison with parents who show a lack of these characteristics, on a communicative level? A definite answer to this question cannot be found in the studies and work on the theme of family atmosphere and family communication, which have appeared up to now. Hence, with this study, we want to build a bridge between the family environment as perceived by the child and the communication which actually takes place in the family.

# 1.4

## Structure of the study

The idea for the project was based on identifying personal parent-child-environments, owing to a longitudinal study carried out in 1993 representative for Germany (Zinnecker, 1997). In this representative family study, 700 fathers and mothers and their children aged between 10 and 13 were interviewed in a standardised way. To answer the question of to what extent these family environments are reflected in the family's communication, a new sample survey of 840 children between 12 and 16 (average age, 13.3) was made by means of a questionnaire. It was made up of Year 7 pupils from 16 secondary schools, in a city (Cologne) and a medium-sized town in western Germany (Siegen), which were seen as representative of the two towns. With the new data, the two family types, which most clearly differed from one another (the *partner family* and the *conflict family*), were replicated. In addition to that, an exact characterisation of these family environments was undertaken, using diverse variables. In doing this, the severe pressure on children from conflict families with regard to cigarettes and alcohol could be replicated.

To investigate communication within these types of family, the next step was to find exemplary partner families and conflict families. The family carried out a discussion together using the selected thematic stimuli. The family groups – consisting of mother, father and the children, who had been questioned – were recorded on video during the discussion, then evaluated by their dominant communication patterns, by means of a specifically developed coding system. This coding system was, on the one hand, orientated towards the favourable and unfavourable aspects of communication which have been described (see *Section 1.2*), and on the other, it took into consideration – following Thun (1981) and Watzlawick (1990) – various planes of communication.

In order to get even more information about the families, in addition to the observed communication behaviour, a focused interview was also carried out with each family member. This dealt, first of all, with validating the conversational situation ("Was the conversation typical for you/your family?, We noticed that . . . , Is that typical?" etc.), with the real communicative situation ("What is it like, if your child/you has/have something on your mind?" etc.), and with the themes of addiction and drugs (own consumption, attitudes towards them, parenting measures etc.)

The evaluations concentrated on the following points:

1. Replication of the original family types;
2. Characterisation of the family types, especially with regard to alcohol and drug consumption and smoking, particularly in children;
3. Determining a microstructure in communicative behaviour, which differentiates individual conflict families and partner families;



4. Evaluating various communicative abilities and communicative structures of the families, including dangerous themes;
5. Describing problematic communicative structures.





**SURVEYS ON THE RELATIONSHIP  
BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILD FROM  
THE CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE**

## 2.1 German Survey of Children and Cologne-Siegen Survey

The German Survey of Children was conducted using four measuring points in time (with an interval of one to two years between the times); only the first wave from 1993 and the children's data are of interest in this publication. The latter were used to produce the typology of families mentioned at the beginning. This led to a whole host of interesting results (see *Section 2.2*), so a further sample survey was carried out with slightly older children, in order to replicate the results for this age group and investigate new connections in the content.

The second sample survey, the so-called Cologne-Siegen Survey, involved 840 German and foreign children from the seventh class in 16 secondary schools in Cologne and Siegen. The age of the children ranged from 12 to 16. The data were obtained from the classes in summer 1998 using questionnaires. A description of the samples from both surveys is given in *Table 3*.

	German Survey (1993)	Cologne-Siegen Survey (1998)
<b>Age</b>	10–13 years (average age 11.8 years)	12–16 years (average age 13.3 years)
<b>Sex</b>	359 girls (51%) 344 boys (49%)	423 girls (50%) 418 boys (50%)
<b>Place</b>	502 (71%) from West Germany 201 (29%) from East Germany	442 (53%) from Siegen 399 (47%) from Cologne
<b>Nationality</b>	100% German	81% German 19% of foreign origin
<b>Type of school</b>	Special school: 2.3% Comprehensive school: 6.6% Secondary modern school: 32.9% Secondary school: 14.8% Grammar school: 26.8% Other: 16.6%	Special school: – Comprehensive school: 11% Secondary modern school: 19.7% Secondary school: 33.3% Grammar school: 35.8% Other: –

Table 3: Description of samples from the German Survey of Children and the Cologne-Siegen Survey

Following the trend in research, those affected, that is the children, were questioned in the investigation of upbringing and conditions of development. On the basis of this data regarding children and young people, family environments were identified which will be presented below. As we are dealing with the development or maldevelopment of children, data coming directly from the children may be considered to be more valid than if only assessments made by the mother or father were available. Triangulation of the child's and parents' perspectives would be desirable and informative, but was not undertaken here.

This must be qualified by pointing out that a child's personal environment is of course not only determined by the father and mother. However, the influence of grandparents, siblings and other people with a close relationship to the child will not be considered in this study.

## 2.2 Four family environments and their characteristics

Zinnecker (1997) identified various family environments on the basis of the children's details in the German Survey of Children in 1993. The criteria which were used to identify these family types were:

- empathetic mother/father (e.g. “My mother/my father notices straight away if I am scared of something.”),
- acceptance of advice from parents (e.g. “How good is the mother's/father's advice on the question of why there is war and injustice in the world?”),
- heated discussions with the mother/father (e.g. regarding bed times, friends etc.),
- supervision of school by the mother/father (e.g. “My mother/father asks me regularly how things were at school, asks about my homework etc.”),
- cultural and sporting activities together with the mother/father (e.g. “We play sport together.”),
- inconsistent style of upbringing (e.g. “Sometimes my parents are pleased when I'm nice to them, sometimes they can't stand it at all.”),
- consistent strict style of upbringing (e.g. “My parents punish me for things which I'm not allowed to do and don't make any exception.”),
- harmonious family atmosphere (e.g. “In our family things are harmonious and peaceful.”).

The children's replies to these criteria were divided into four family environments using a personal cluster analysis:

- Firstly, the parents of *partner families* were identified, whom the children find empathetic, who are interested in the child's school affairs, whose advice is accepted by their child and who do a lot with the child in their free time. In addition, the child considers the general atmosphere in the family to be harmonious, and discussions on subjects which could possibly lead to conflict (such as bedtimes or with which friends the child spends his free time) do not take place at all, or in a very relaxed form. 17.6% of all the children were classified as belonging to this group.
- Parents of *conflict families*, on the other hand, were perceived as less empathetic and less interested in the child's school affairs. The atmosphere in the family was less harmonious, discussions were more heated and the family did things together less often. 28.2% of the children made statements which corresponded to this group.
- The third group was made up of the parents of *control families*. They are characterised by the fact that, although they are perceived as empathetic, they exert strong control, particularly in school affairs. The style of upbringing is described as consistent. The relationship between father and child appears to be more difficult. 31.2% of the children were classified as belonging to this family environment.
- A fourth group, the *relaxed parents*, exerted little control, did a lot of things together (especially the father with the children), and was characterised by a less consistent style of upbringing. 23% of the children can be assigned to this group.

Zinnecker (1997) states that these types of family represent different risks and resources for the children while they are growing up. In particular, partner families and conflict families represent contrasting family environments, which correlate very strongly with certain data concerning the children's development. These were therefore to be replicated and examined in more detail with the newly obtained data in this project. For this reason, criteria concerning education were removed from the survey, as they were only significant in distinguishing the two other types of family.

Using the data obtained from the 840 children in Cologne and Siegen (1998), the partner and conflict family types were replicated without problems. The only difference was that the fierceness of the discussions no longer clearly divided the types of family, as before. The other two family clusters were structured slightly differently, as the variables concerning education were not considered. These two types could be described as average clusters (no outstanding characteristics with regard to the variables examined by us) and as discussion clusters (this type is particularly characterised by heated discussions in the family). Table 4 illustrates the results of the cluster analysis; the deviation from the mean is given in standard deviations.

In the sample, 262 (31.2%) of the children were assigned to the partnership cluster, 100 (11.9%) to the conflict cluster, 285 (33.9%) to the average cluster and 193 (23.1%) to the

discussion cluster. Interestingly, the relationship between partnership and conflict families had reversed in comparison to the original study. There, there had been 198 parents of conflict families (28.2%) compared to 123 (17.6%) parents of partner families.

	Happy cluster	Average cluster	Discussion cluster	Stress cluster
Empathetic mother	++			--
Empathetic father	++			-
Acceptance of advice from mother	++			-
Acceptance of advice from father	++			---
Heated discussions with mother	+	+	---	-
Heated discussions with father		+	--	-
School supervision by the mother	+			---
School supervision by the father	+			---
Cultural and sporting activities with mother	+	-		--
Cultural activities with father	+	-		-
Hobbies and sport with father	+			--
Harmonious family atmosphere	++			---

+++ = more than one standard deviation above the mean;  
 ++ = more than two thirds of one standard deviation above the mean;  
 + = more than one third of one standard deviation above the mean;  
 - = more than one standard deviation below the mean;  
 -- = more than two thirds of one standard deviation below the mean;  
 --- = more than one third of one standard deviation below the mean. An empty cell indicates that the deviation is less than one third of one standard deviation from the mean).

Table 4: Types of family from the child’s perspective (Cologne-Siegen Survey, 1998); deviation from the mean in standard deviations

In addition to the criteria above, the Cologne-Siegen Survey revealed another dimension which distinguished the two family environments: the respect the parents have for the child. This dimension is composed of the following statements: “When something in the family has to be decided, my parents let me join in the decision making.” “My parents are interested in my opinions.” “If my parents have a discussion with me, they do it in such a way that I have the feeling that they still think of me as a child.” “When they want to do something but I don’t feel like it, I still have to do it.” With these statements it was established that children from partner families feel that their personality is respected more than children who find their families stressful.

The unification of these various aspects and of the six dimensions – empathy, acceptance of parental advice, heated discussions with the mother/father, school supervision by the mother/father, cultural and sporting activities together, harmonious family environment – makes this investigation particularly valuable. Usually the dimensions which are considered important are only examined individually and their effects analysed. A combination of the dimensions to particular family environments is therefore a more unusual, but definitely a more productive approach.

## 2.3 Characteristics and developmental risks of children from partner and conflict families

In the original sample survey in 1993 it was seen that children of conflict families are exposed to greater risks to development than children of partner families. The differences between the two family environments are demonstrated below using the characteristics of the children, structure of the family, consumption of drugs/cigarettes/alcohol and the educational qualifications of the children and parents.

### Characteristics of the child

Place of residence (originally East or West; now Siegen or Cologne), age, sex, number of siblings, type of school and nationality (German vs. non-German; only relevant to the Cologne-Siegen Survey) of the child did not differ significantly with regard to the types of family. This was seen in the nationwide survey as well as in the new sample survey. The original sample survey also showed that the size of the place of residence and the subjective sense of belonging to a social class (neither of these characteristics were investigated in the Cologne-Siegen Survey) did not represent distinguishing characteristics between the two clusters. These 'non-differences' are of great importance as they show that the differences between the two family environments do not depend on many factors external to the family members. This points to the internal characteristics of family life.

### Family structure

The internal structure of the family, however, differs considerably when the two contrasting family environments are compared. This applies to both samples. In order to obtain an impression of the family structures within both family environments, an overview of the distribution of family constellations with regard to the family types is given for the Cologne-Siegen Survey in *Table 5*. Only constellations which are present in both clusters are considered. (The constellation of father, stepmother and at least one grandparent, for example, could not be found either among partner families or among conflict families).

From the table it can be inferred that both natural parents definitely live more frequently in partner families (with or without grandparents), while single mothers predominate among conflict families. All the other constellations appear not to differ with regard to family type, although it must be pointed out that the number of cases is very low (between one and seven per cell). The two other family types (discussion and average clusters) – in terms of their family constellations – generally occur in the middle, that is between partnership and conflict clusters.

Cologne-Siegen Survey		
	Partner family	Conflict family
Single mother	6.7%	20.0%
Single father	2.0%	2.1%
Both natural parents	73.7%	60.0%
Both natural parents and at least one grandparent	11.0%	3.2%
Mother and stepfather	2.7%	4.2%
Mother and grandparent(s)	0.4%	1.1%
Father and grandparent(s)	0.8%	3.2%
Mother and partner	2.0%	1.7%
Pearson Chi-square: $p < .01$		

Table 5: Division of family structure into partner and conflict families (Cologne-Siegen Survey)

## Smoking, alcohol and drugs

The consumption of cigarettes, alcohol and drugs plays a very particular role in the comparison between conflict and partner families, as in this respect there are extremely large differences in behaviour between the children from both family environments.

In the original sample survey, 37% of all children from conflict families stated that they smoked, while only 14% of all children from partner families consumed cigarettes. In the Cologne-Siegen Survey the number of children who smoke is considerably larger, as the children are on average 1.5 years older. Here, 66% of all children from conflict families said that they smoke cigarettes (in comparison with 30% from partner families). With regard to alcohol consumption, the relationship was similar. It was also shown here that the proportion of children from conflict families who consume alcohol was significantly larger than among children from partner families (61% vs. 39%). The results of the Cologne-Siegen Survey regarding smoking and drinking alcohol are presented in *Figure 1 (p. 36)*.

The two remaining clusters, as expected, lie between the conflict and partnership clusters with regard to the consumption of alcohol and cigarettes.

The consumption of harder drugs was not investigated in the original survey. However, it was considered in the Cologne-Siegen Survey, which showed that children of conflict families are also ahead when it comes to illegal drugs. 13% of all children from stressful family environments said that they consumed hashish or marijuana, while only 5% of all children from partner families do this. With hard drugs (heroin, ecstasy, cocaine etc.) the

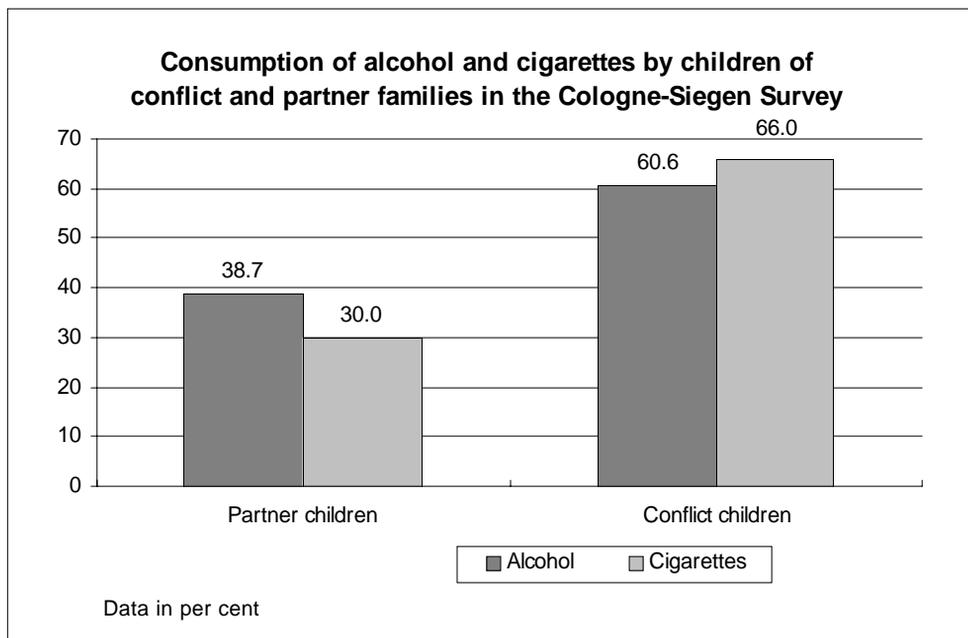


Figure 1

numbers were 8% and 3% respectively. As the children were in the seventh class, we are dealing with relatively low numbers, so the differences are concentrated on small groups of children.

The results regarding the behaviour of the families during discussions were particularly interesting when the subjects of smoking, drinking and drugs were involved. Children of partner families either have very heated discussions or very calm discussions with their mothers on these subjects, while conflict families are somewhere in the middle ( $p < .01$ ). This is also illustrated in *Figure 2*.

This difference was also seen in discussions with the children's fathers, but the level was too low to be significant.

There were no great differences between the subjects; that is, if families have heated or calm discussions about drinking alcohol, they generally do the same when talking about drugs or smoking cigarettes.

On the one hand, these results would lead us to assume that a very relaxed or a very involved style of discussion between mother and child (on the subjects of alcohol, smoking and drugs) proves to be favourable. The involved/heated style of discussion could also be due to the fact that, for example, the mothers smoke and the children do not find this good.

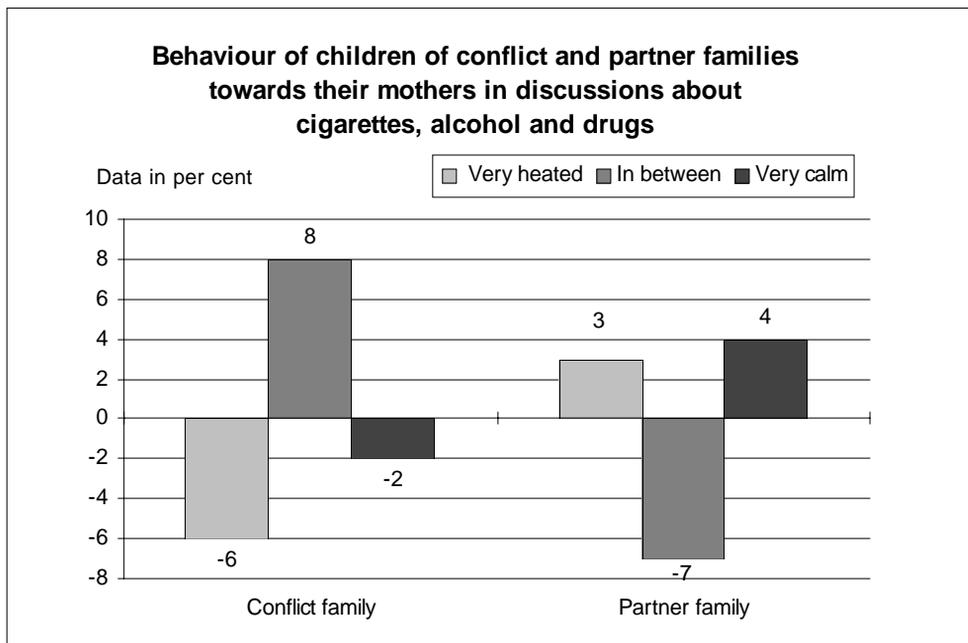


Figure 2

This hypothesis is supported by statements from the family interviews. On the other hand, however, the results suggest that there are no characteristics specific to addiction. At the level of the discussions at least, a distinction could not be made between cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. This may mean that we do not need to differentiate between the three components with regard to protective factors either.

## Education and school (child)

As already mentioned in the section on characteristics of the child, the type of school the child attends does not play any part in the characterisation of partner families and conflict families, but it does affect the qualifications with which the child aims to leave school. Children from partner families aim for higher leaving qualifications than children from conflict families (Pearson Chi-square:  $p < .05$ ), although there is no difference in their school marks (at least in mathematics and German). Children of partner families also rate their performance at school higher in comparison with children of conflict families (see *Table 6*).

In addition, it can be inferred from the statements made by children of partner families in Cologne and Siegen that they have a more positive attitude towards school and more confidence in their school performance, and also study more frequently outside school than children from conflict families.

Child's estimation of performance	Partner families	Conflict families
Lower third	5.0%	19.4%
Middle third	65.5%	67.9%
Upper third	29.5%	20.5%
Pearson Chi-square: $p < .001$		

Table 6: Children's estimation of performance in comparison with other pupils in per cent, in relation to partner and conflict families (Cologne-Siegen Survey)

## Parents' Education

The school leaving qualifications of the mother do not have any significant influence in the distinction between partner families and conflict families. This result was confirmed in both surveys. However, the school leaving qualifications of the father – at least in the new sample survey – proved to be highly significant (Pearson Chi-square:  $p < .01$ ). The nationwide survey also showed at least a tendency towards this difference. The results concerning the final qualifications of the father (from the Cologne-Siegen Survey) can be seen in *Table 7*.

Father's school-leaving qualifications	Partner families	Conflict families
No qualifications	7.0%	14.5%
Secondary modern school	25.6%	44.7%
Secondary school	23.6%	18.4%
Academic standard required for entrance to university for applied science	7.9%	3.9%
University entrance qualification	36.0%	18.4%
Pearson Chi-square: $p < .01$		

Table 7: School-leaving qualifications of the fathers (according to the children) in partner and conflict families (Cologne-Siegen Survey)

## Summary

The results show that there are definite differences between the types of family. Children in conflict families smoke more, drink more alcohol, take more drugs, estimate that their performance at school is poorer, are less motivated with regard to school affairs and aim for lower school-leaving qualifications than children in partner families. Children of partner

families also live with their biological parents more often than children of conflict families. The latter live with only one parent more frequently than average (generally with the mother). This proves to be problematic only when the child's relationship with this parent, the only one available to them, is problematic (Stecher, 1996).

Age, sex, nationality, type of school attended, number of siblings, place of residence, subjective sense of belonging to a social class and level of education of the mother do not play any part in distinguishing the two family types. Only the school-leaving qualifications of the father are, on average, higher in partner families than in conflict families. Partner families also discuss drugs, cigarettes and alcohol differently from conflict families – either very calmly or extremely fiercely.

In summary it can therefore be said that desirable characteristics for education and socialisation occur more frequently in children of partner families than in children of conflict families. These results cannot be put into a causal context on the basis of the data available, which only represents a cross-section. We can only assume that the atmosphere found stressful by the children – in accordance with stress research (Lazarus/Folkman, 1987; Schneewind, 1991) – can be considered to be a cause, as relationships within a family play a considerable part in overcoming the many changes and challenges which young people encounter during puberty (Noller, 1995). Helmersen (1983), for example, emphasises that drug abuse among children often serves to take their minds off other problems in the family. Smoking, drinking alcohol and taking drugs can be regarded as a way of dealing with the demands of life, tasks necessary to development and situations of psychological and social stress to which the children are exposed – in their family as well (Fend, 1990; Nordlohne, 1992). The separation of the parents (which occurs more frequently in conflict families), the possibly strained financial situation (owing to lower school-leaving qualifications of the father in conflict families or because there is a single parent) and the poorer performance of children from conflict families at school can be classified as such situations of stress. Conversely, it must be assumed that the strategies adopted by the children to overcome stress, which are considered unfavourable, function in turn as a cause of stress in the family, so there is probably interaction between the two factors (stressful atmosphere in the family and unwelcome strategies adopted by the children to overcome this). However, a causal connection has not yet been investigated.

Furthermore, it is not clear how the family atmosphere described by the children actually appears in the families. Processes of interaction and communication in the family are not necessarily represented accurately using statements made by the participants. The question remains of how the processes of communication between parents and children appear in reality. For example, how can communication in conflict families be described in comparison with communication in partner families? Do the two types of family described by the children as stressful or supportive differ in their interaction? These questions are to be investigated with the help of case studies.



# **STUDY ON COMMUNICATION IN THE FAMILY**



The question at the heart of the study on communication in the family is this: do families in which the children consider their family environment to be full of conflict and less helpful communicate differently from families in which the children perceive the family environment to be supportive and harmonious?

In order to answer this question, examples of conflict and partner families in the Cologne-Siegen Survey were sent letters and asked if they would be prepared to participate in the study. One condition was that it had to be a German family with both biological parents living at home. For the purpose of selecting the families, the children were asked to think of a code name<sup>1</sup> before filling in the form and to enter this on the form. In this way, the families and the child could be identified by their code names on another visit to the school without sacrificing anonymity. This was also guaranteed by the fact that the children were allowed not to respond when their code names were called. The decision whether their families would participate in the investigation was therefore left to them. However, most of the children responded and were very curious about the envelopes which were distributed in the class. In each envelope there was a letter to the children and a letter to the parents, each of which described how the study would be conducted. The children were asked to give the letter to their parents. A stamped return envelope and a pre-printed reply form (on which they could indicate with a cross whether or not they were interested in taking part) were also in the envelope. In addition, the families were offered 200 DM for participating in the project.

Letters were sent to 149 families in total, of which 19 initially declared themselves willing to participate in the project. After a conversation on the telephone, however, three families backed out, and in six other families there proved to be other reasons (the father not having any time, etc.) which prevented participation in the project. As the total number of conflict families was smaller, it was particularly difficult to find families of this type to participate in the study on communication.

Finally, we obtained three conflict families and four partner families for the study on communication. Three average families were also included, who were to form a control group.

Each of the ten families were paid two visits:

1. For the recording of two family conversations (one as a triad, that is mother – father – target child, and one as a dyad, that is just the parents together) and
2. For focused interviews, which were carried out with each family member individually.

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<sup>1</sup> The code names chosen by the children were encoded again for this publication, for reasons of anonymity. However, an attempt was made to preserve, as far as possible, the character of the original, which was itself quite meaningful.

# 3.1

## The communication situation

The families were each visited twice between July 1998 and December 1998. Of the four partner families, there were two with a son and two with a daughter, while there were two sons and one daughter among the conflict families. Both visits to each family were made by the two scientific researchers on the team.

### First visit – family conversation

During the first visit the family (mother, father and the child interviewed by us) were asked to hold a discussion, which was recorded on video and cassette. The decision to make a video recording in addition to the tape was due to the consideration that non-verbal behaviour could be significant, and as we wanted to know what the family members did when another family member was acting as the main participant. If only a tape recording had been made, too much valuable information would have been lost.

For the conversation itself, the family were asked to go to the place where they would normally sit when they were together (this was either in the living room or at the dining table). Eight cards with various subjects were set down and the family had to discuss them. The selection of subjects was made on the basis of the studies on family communication carried out by Kreppner (1991) and on the basis of our knowledge from everyday life and literature on the subject of which topics are important during puberty for young people and their parents in Germany.

Before the discussion began, the course that the conversation would take was explained briefly to the family. The following points were emphasised:

- the cards should be read aloud by one member of the family,
- the family members should try to imagine themselves in the situation described on the card,
- each card should be discussed for about two minutes, although this should only serve as a guideline,
- the family should move on to the next card by themselves,
- the family should try as hard as possible to forget or ignore that we were present.

During the conversation the camera team disappeared with a monitor into a neighbouring room or behind a sofa. At any rate, it was usually possible to move out of sight.

In most cases the families sat in a semicircle (around the dining table or, in easy chairs/on the sofa, although the actual seating arrangements varied considerably and were some-

times influenced by the position in relation to the camera. Some children who would perhaps have preferred to be farther away from their parents had to move up because of the camera. In most cases the mother or the child then took control and read the cards aloud or at least distributed them. In some families, however, the family members took turns and in one family the father took charge. In general the families gave the impression that they did not have any major problems with the situation. After the family discussion we were sometimes told that it had not been very easy for one or other of the participants to imagine themselves in the problem situations (particularly if they were of no relevance to the family at present), but in general all the families dealt with the situation without any problems. The time required varied considerably: the discussions lasted between seven and 34 minutes (average duration of a discussion: 15 minutes, taking into account the control families 16 minutes).

With regard to the allocation of roles during the family discussions, it was established that in general the children and the mothers were equally often the main speakers, but that their contributions were significantly shorter. This is in keeping with the findings made by Hofer (1996), who emphasises that even at this age children are still inferior discussion partners, despite the much-cited 'negotiation household'. It was also shown that on average the mothers spoke more than the fathers and the daughters more than the sons. This distribution points to sex-related behavioural roles in modern families.

It was remarkable that the first impression of the atmosphere in the families did not provide any information about the family type. In some families, the observers felt that a pleasant or neutral atmosphere prevailed, while in some triads the atmosphere was felt to be less pleasant. However, this difference did not depend on whether the family was a partner family or a conflict family. The tension of the family members, the orientation of their bodies towards the other family members, the formation of coalitions and interest in events did not differ significantly between the families or the types of family. This made the need for microanalysis clear, as obviously at first glance no significant differences could be recognised. At this level – without a detailed analysis of communication – the triads seem to be characterised more by similarities than by differences.

After the triad discussion the child was asked to leave the room and the parents were given a second set of topics (also typical subjects for puberty, such as alcohol, school, drugs, food, moving house, first boyfriend/girlfriend). The assessment of these dyad discussions has not been included in this publication.

## **Second visit – focused interview**

During the second visit (as a rule one to two weeks after the family discussion) the family members were each questioned individually in a focused interview.

The oral interviews were particularly concerned with the validation of the family discussion and with attitudes, consumer habits and opinions regarding addiction and drugs. Most of the parents were very willing to give information and made our task very easy – with a few exceptions. In contrast, the children were not so talkative, particularly the sons.

Before we deal with the results of the study on communication, the families on which the case studies are based are briefly presented in the following section.

## 3.2 The families

*Table 8* gives a brief overview of all the families investigated, with details regarding the sex, age and type of school attended by the child, occupation and training of the parents and number and sex of the siblings (All information relates to the time of the interview).

Family (code and type)	Sex/age of the child	Type of school attended by the child	Occupation/training of the parents	Siblings
<b>Ladybird</b> (Partner)	Girl 13	Grammar school	Father: technical employee/ university entrance qualification Mother: housewife (doctor's receptionist)/ academic standard required for entrance to university for applied science	Twin sister
<b>Sperling</b> (Partner)	Boy 13	Grammar school	Both parents interpreters/ university entrance qualification	Only child
<b>Powerpoint</b> (Partner)	Boy 14	Secondary school	Father: bricklayer/no qualifications Mother: dentist's receptionist (now housewife)/ no qualifications	Younger sister
<b>Lukas M.</b> (Partner)	Girl 13	Grammar school	Father: sports teacher/ university entrance qualification Mother: teacher/ university entrance qualification	Only child

Family (code and type)	Sex/age of the child	Type of school attended by the child	Occupation/ training of the parents	Siblings
<b>Big Mäc</b> (Conflict)	Boy 12	Comprehensive school	Father: team leader in a sheltered workshop (undergoing professional rehabilitation measures)/ secondary modern school Mother: administrative employee/secondary school	Younger brother
<b>Flipper 3</b> (Conflict)	Boy 13	Grammar school	Father: mechanical engineer/ university entrance qualification Mother: trained pharmacist's assistant/secondary school	Older sister
<b>Cats</b> (Conflict)	Girl 13	Grammar school	Father: bus driver/secondary modern school Mother: housewife/ secondary modern school	Two younger brothers
<b>Sugar</b> (Average)	Girl 13	Grammar school	Father: teacher/ university entrance qualification Mother: secretary/ university entrance qualification	Only child
<b>Kim</b> (Average)	Girl 13	Grammar school	Both parents psychotherapists/university entrance qualification	Younger brother
<b>Linus</b> (Average)	Boy 13	Grammar school	Father: engineering draughtsman/ university entrance Mother: nursery school teacher, taking university entrance qualification now	Younger brother qualification

Table 8: Overview of the central characteristics of the families investigated in the study on communication in the family

In summary it was established that the families were easy to compare on the basis of their external characteristics, even if some of their details were different. Admittedly, it must be taken into account that almost all the children attended a grammar school and that most of the parents also had university entrance qualifications. As the type of school and at least the mother's education were of no importance in the formation of clusters, we correspondingly have a higher level of education for the case studies in our sample survey in comparison to the survey group.

## 3.3 Quantitative results of the case studies

A code plan was developed for the investigation of communication structures in the families. This was based on knowledge from specialist literature (especially psychological) and on information obtained from a discussion with experts. In this personal consultation with Mr Kreppner at the beginning of the study, we were made aware of possibilities and problems in communication studies. In concrete terms, we adopted his method of giving the families various cards with particular subjects which have to be discussed for about two minutes. His ideas proved stimulating, and we took over some of the cards word for word. In addition, we organised part of our coding system on the basis of Kreppner's work (1996). This means that besides a microanalysis, we also made assessments on 'the level of the cards'. The level of the cards means that certain aspects of interaction in the family were evaluated with regard to a longer sequence (that is, as long as the family discussed the subject on a card). At this level, the following were assessed for each person:

- the tension (identical to Kreppner),
- physical orientation (how a family member turns their body towards another member and to whom they turn, also identical to Kreppner),
- strategies for solving conflict,
- closeness to the process (interest in events),
- bonds between the partners (in the form of a coalition),
- the atmosphere in the family,
- the person who reads/picks up the card (comparable to Kreppner) and
- the time required by the family to discuss each card.

In addition to these macroanalytical assessments of the communication situation, we were also particularly interested in detailed information about the communication structures within the family. While searching for communication studies concerned with the micro-analytical aspects of communication, we came across the study by Elke (1986). She investigated ten 'not abnormal' families with children aged between 11 and 15, with the aim of developing a coding tool which would '*distinguish between the variety of communication phenomena in the family, subdivide them and explain the concepts precisely*' (Elke, 1986:1). Within this coding system, Elke differentiates between *utterance* and *turn*. According to Elke (1986), an *utterance* is '*the smallest functional-intentional unit of a contribution to a discussion made by one speaker, regardless of its linguistic structure; that is, an utterance can consist of less than one sentence or several sentences, if it is/they are sufficient/necessary to realise a distinct intention*'. A *turn*, on the other hand, is the uninterrupted contribution made to a conversation by one person. A turn therefore consists of at least one utterance and is useful for systematisation. If the mother says: "I think that's a good solution. Okay, let's carry on", that is a turn, but there are two utterances, as firstly the intention of agreement and expression of opinion is pursued, and in the second sentence the intention of actively

proposing. Accordingly, we can code utterance by utterance who is doing what and saying what and what intention is being pursued. The following categories serve this purpose:

- who is communicating,
- with whom,
- the subject (regarding the card, regarding a solution, another subject),
- peculiarities (e.g. particularly quiet, particularly loud, external disturbances, ironic remarks etc.),
- verbal and non-verbal level of contribution (e.g. questions, approval, denial, appeal, factual information etc.) and
- the verbal and non-verbal function of the relationship (e.g. attack, agreement, humorous comment, acknowledgement, doubt, threat etc.).

The division into level of contribution and level of relationship makes it clear that we have differentiated between various levels of communication following Watzlawick (1990) and Schulz von Thun (1981). Firstly, it is about the formal, linguistic level, and on the other hand about what each statement made by one person means in regard to their relationship with the other family member(s). It was also important to us to record what was happening on a non-verbal level during the conversation. Because of this, we recorded not only the non-verbal behaviour of the main participant, but also that of the family members who were listening or taking minor roles. Consequently, the behaviour of all three family members was recorded/encoded for every utterance. This work was carried out by four different people, whereby two people always analysed a video independently of each other. Finally, a third person compared and balanced the two coded versions.

Following this, the results of the coding work were added up and assessed from case to case, that is, statements could be made such as “The mother of this family turns to the child during 60% of her utterances” or “30% of all statements which the father makes are attacks”. The fact that the conversations in our partner and conflict families (and also in the control families) contained between 110 (minimum) and 615 (maximum) utterances made it clear that the total amount of data available as a basis for these calculations was very large.

## **Who communicates in which role?**

For each utterance a separate decision was made for each member of the family as to which role was being played. Is this person the main participant, a subsidiary participant, the participant who was interrupted, participating at the same time, a participant making an accompanying response or a pure listener?

### **Dominance**

At first it must be established whether the main participant's role is independent of the family type examined. Usually, the mother dominates, but for each family type (conflict, partner and average), there was also an example of the father or even the child dominating.

This is evident not only when we consider the number of utterances, but also when we take into account the number of words spoken with no child in any family taking on a dominant role at this level. The dominance of certain members of the family is therefore not an indicator of either family type. The role of the main participant is also independent of the topic being discussed. If you compare the distribution of roles with the different cards, there is no definite pattern.

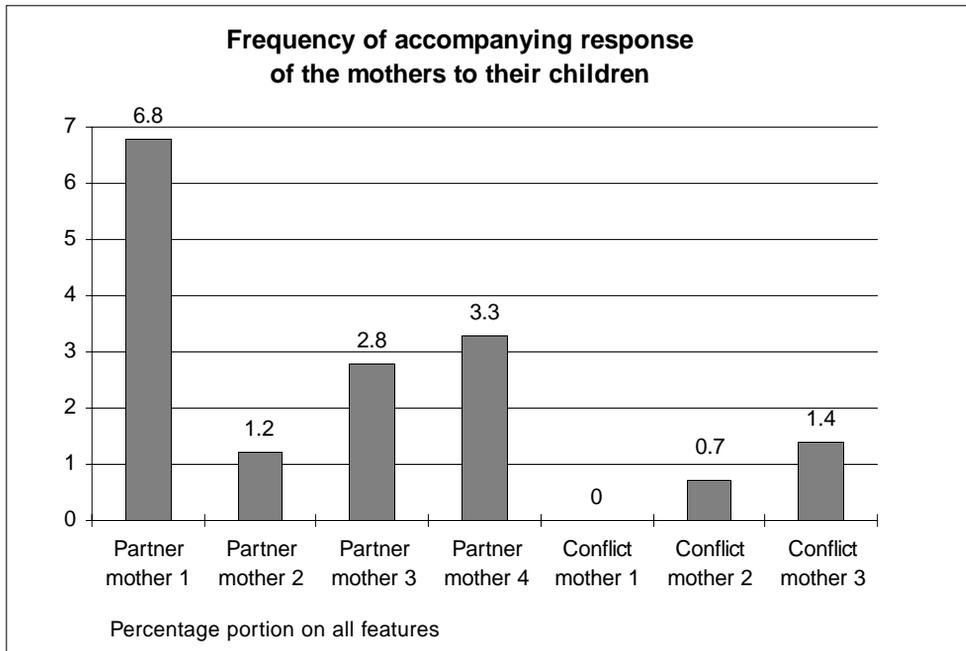


Figure 3

### Accompanying response (Back Channel Response)

However, the differences dependent on the participant's role are shown in the interruptions and the accompanying response. Here, it is clear that the mother in the partner families more frequently gives her children an accompanying response (such as a nod, "hmm" or something similar) than a mother from the conflict families (*Figure 3*). We also find this tendency with the fathers, although the difference is not so evident here. The average fathers and mothers are half way between both family types and the variance between the families is extremely large.

### Interruptions

It is also shown that the conflict mothers are more frequently interrupted by the fathers and the children than the partner mothers (*Figure 4*).

The mothers from the average families are in between, i.e. they are more frequently interrupted than the partner mothers, but less than the conflict mothers.

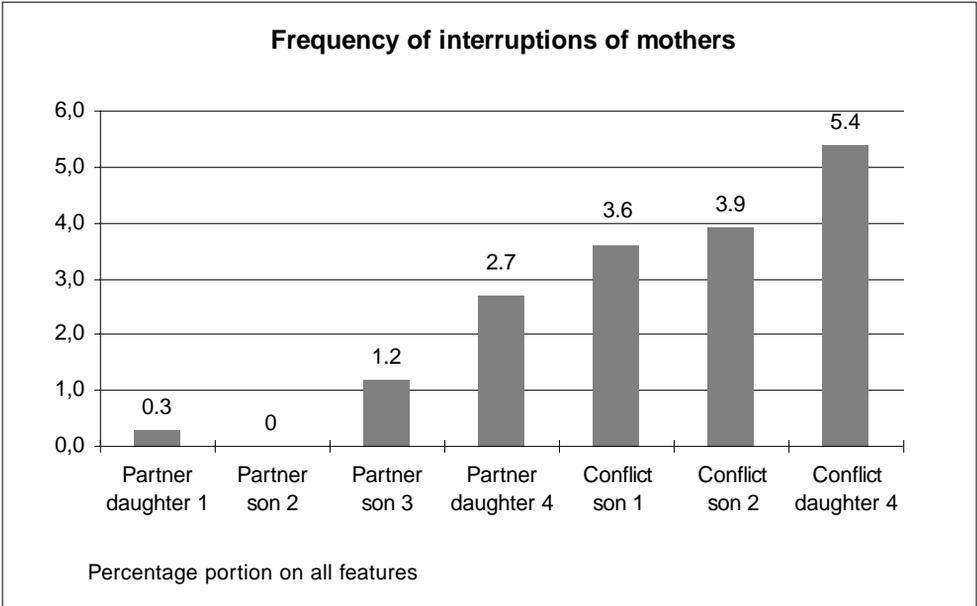


Figure 4

### Interpretation of the results

The accompanying response of the partnership parents suggests that they are more interested in their child and want to let him/her know that. By the response, the child is also encouraged to continue to speak and to express his/her opinion. This supposition is supported by the fact that partnership children – in contrast to conflict children – report in the questionnaire that their parents show an interest in their opinion (“My parents are interested in my opinion”).

The frequent interruptions of the conflict mothers suggest that their utterances are less valued. Father and child are not interested in what the mother says but would rather express their own point of view.

## To whom is communication made?

### Child-centredness

From the question as to whom the family members communicate with, it is clear that mothers from partner families react in a very child-centred way compared with mothers from families with a very stressful environment. This result is made clear in *Figure 5*.

This difference cannot be established with the fathers. The mothers from the average families were again in the middle, and it must also be noted again that the variance within this family type is very high.

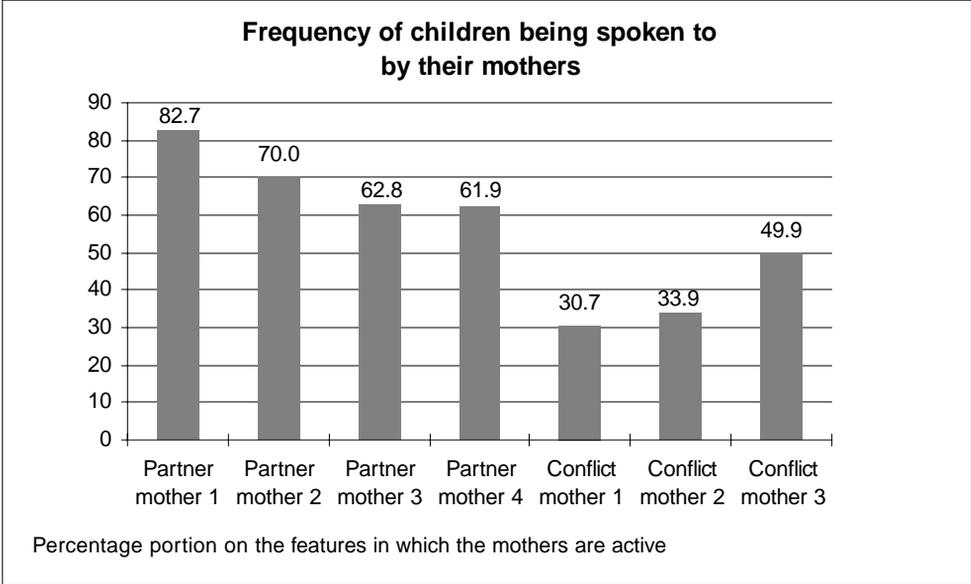


Figure 5

### Reactions to the camera

A further result from this category is that fathers and mothers from conflict families turn to the camera much more frequently than the parents from families with a favourable family climate (Figure 6). The latter hardly do this at all, while conflict parents at least do turn to

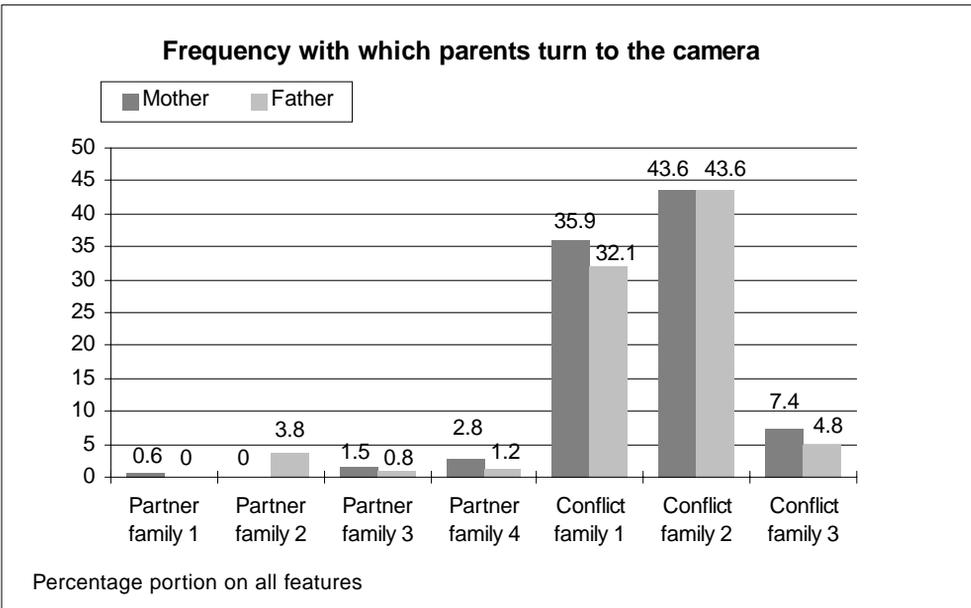


Figure 6

the camera in up to more than 40% of utterances. The parents from the average families count as partner families in this case, as they also do not turn to the camera.

How frequently the children turn to their fathers and mothers cannot be used as a differentiation characteristic of the two family types. Also, the frequency with which the mothers turn to the fathers, and vice versa, does not differentiate the family types at this level.

### **Interpretation of the results**

The child-centredness of the partnership mothers leads to the conclusion that the partnership mothers take a great interest in including the child in the family conversation. They repeatedly turn to the child to let them know their opinion or to ask the child their opinion. This conclusion is also supported by the item on the questionnaire “My parents are interested in my opinion” and the item “When something in the family has to be decided, my parents let me join in the decision making”, and this is ticked more often by the partnership children than by the conflict children.

Regarding the reaction to the camera, it is almost suggesting that the conflict parents rather want to present their family, rather than really interacting with the family. Talking to the camera is at the same time a justification and a way of “leaving the field”.

The conflicts are not dealt with by the family, but the triad splits up, turning outwards. The parents are then more or less “out of role”. This lack of solidarity, however, serves to present a perfect picture of the family to the outside world, by stressing that, of course, they talk to each other when there are problems, or that, of course, there are no problems with alcohol or drugs in the family. In contrast to this, the partner parents do indeed get to grips with the topics within their family. They react *among themselves* and not to the camera.

### **Which useful verbal means of communication are used?**

In the code plan developed for this project, reference was made to Watzlawick (1990), and a differentiation was made between purposeful speech and speech to do with relationships (contributory or relationship language), as we also assumed that each utterance had significance on at least two levels. The purposeful speech is related to the formal/thematic level of communication which ignores the level of the relationship. On the other hand, the level of the relationship includes the ways and means the members of the family use to express their relationship to one another. An example is used to illustrate both these levels. In response to the drugs question, a son says: “ I don’t know what *you* would do, but *I* would behave quite normally”. At the contribution level, this is a statement (first part/utterance) and an explanation of a point of view (second utterance). At the relationship level, this statement/explanation of a point of view implies (especially when you also include the non-verbal aspect) that the son thinks the parents will not behave normally, and he wants to distance himself from this. This expression can be coded at the relationship level as well as being an attack/criticism.

## Questions

Looking at the purposes for which speech is used, the partnership mothers ask more questions than the conflict mothers (the mothers from the average families are again between the two family types). However, this is only the case if you work out the average values. With the three partnership mothers, between 32% and 34% of all purposeful utterances are questions to the child, while between 5% and 20% (5.1%, 11.1% and 20%) of conflict mothers' utterances are. One partnership mother is an exception with only 11.5% questions. If you take the father's utterances into account, there is no difference between partner and conflict families in the percentage of questions asked.

## Expressions of opinion

A further difference at the contributory level also exists in the expression of opinions. Mothers from the partner families express their opinion more frequently than mothers from conflict families (e.g. "I found it difficult to talk to your girlfriend's parents"). This difference is demonstrated in *Figure 7*.

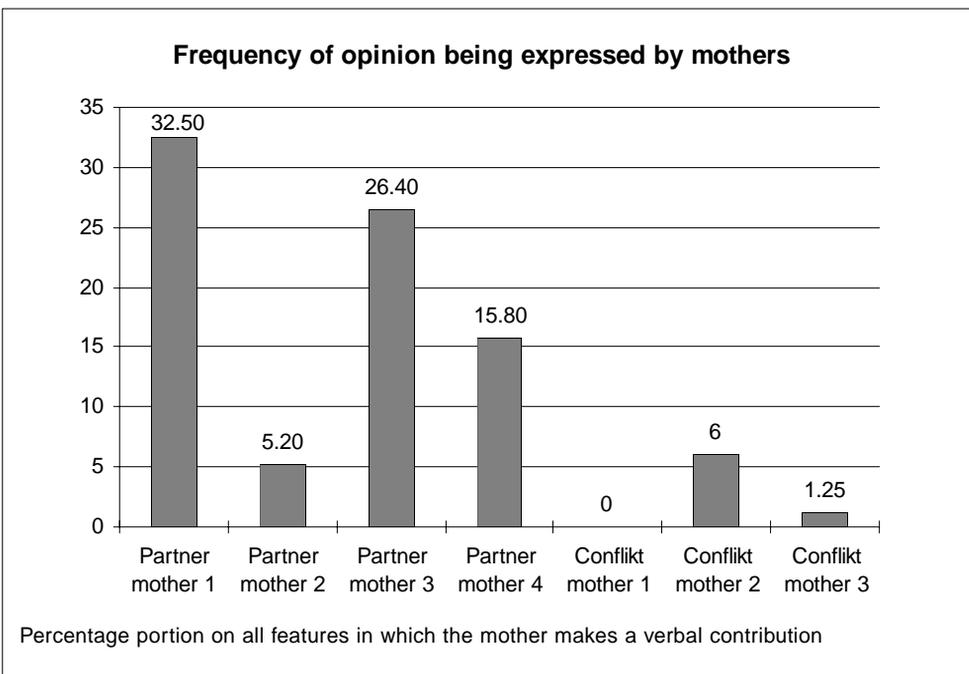


Figure 7

The mothers from the average families are in the middle even here. All other categories (e.g. expressing suppositions, dissention, affirmation, using clichés, making appeals, paraphrasing, etc.) occur with more or less equal frequency within both family types and can therefore not be considered to be characteristics of a family type.

## **Interpretation of the results**

The frequent questions of the partnership mothers to their children lead one to conclude that they are interested in their child's opinions. With their questions, they provoke expressions of opinion and show that they take the child seriously as an equal partner in the conversation when solving the problems set. This interpretation is also supported by the reports of the children in the questionnaire (compare *p. 33*). It is also significant that the conflict children, when compared to the partnership children, agree more often with the statement on the questionnaire: "If my parents have a discussion with me, they do it in such a way that I have the feeling that they still think of me as a child."

Regarding the expressions of opinion, we suppose that, here, the mothers are revealing/making clear their point of view without forcing the other members of the family to commit themselves. This aspect is definitely covered under "revealing oneself" if you look at the communication indicators described favourably in the subject literature, and this is normally evaluated as very positive.

## **Which useful means of communication are used at a non-verbal level?**

### **Non-verbal affirmation**

The level of contribution is maintained by verbal and non-verbal means. For non-verbal statements, parents in partner families show non-verbal affirmation (i.e. nodding etc.) more frequently than parents from conflict families. The parents from control families (i.e. average families) come somewhere between the values of these two types of family. It is interesting to note that there are no differences between the families as regards non-verbal *dissension*.

### **Interpretation of the results**

Recognition and interest are also expressed by a non-verbal expression of affirmation. As with the accompanying response, we can assume that attention, interest and support are to be communicated to the child by nodding. All three aspects are also to be found among the characteristics of communication called favourable in *Chapter 1.2*.

### **Laughter**

Laughter proved itself to be the most important aspect of non-verbal communication. Initially, we found that laughter itself (i.e. who laughs and how often) did not present a definitive difference. The individual family members of both types of family laugh with differing frequency, and could not be characterised. This was also true of families in the average cluster. An overview of the proportion of utterances in which individual members of the conflict and partner families laugh is given in *Tables 9 and 10*.

Conflict family 1			Conflict family 2			Conflict family 3		
Mother	Father	Child	Mother	Father	Child	Mother	Father	Child
7.3%	8.2%	2.7%	11.2%	7.2%	17.1%	10.4%	6.1%	16.1%

Table 9: Percentage of utterances in which the members of the conflict families laugh

Partner family 1			Partner family 2			Partner family 3			Partner family 4		
Mother	Father	Child									
11.4%	8.8%	10.4%	0.6%	2.9%	1.7%	6.8%	5.5%	5.6%	9.3%	9.3%	12.3%

Table 10: Percentage of utterances in which the members of the partner families laugh

At this level, therefore, a strict pattern cannot be recognised. However, if one looks more closely at who laughs with whom, then differences certainly become visible. As can clearly be seen in *Table 11*, partner families laugh together more often (all laugh together) than conflict families do. The percentages for average families are on average even higher than for the partner families, but – as for the other characteristics – there is a lot of variation between the individual families.

Family type:	Partner 1	Partner 2	Partner 3	Partner 4	Conflict 1	Conflict 2	Conflict 3
All laugh	33.3%	25%	21.7%	47%	20%	13.8%	20%

Table 11: Frequency with which all members of the family laugh together (percentage of all utterances in which there is any laughter in each family)

We determined that, in general, the situations in which all family members laugh together are mostly those in which a family member makes a joke (e.g. describes an absurd situation, and what they would do if they were in the situation described on the card), in which misunderstandings are resolved and amusing criticism is given, or attention is brought to one’s own or another’s weaknesses which are known by the whole family (e.g. that the child would not be obedient anyway; that a family member would never forgo alcohol; that a family member always wants to watch soaps, etc.). In addition, the question about television and exchanging roles was generally laughed at.

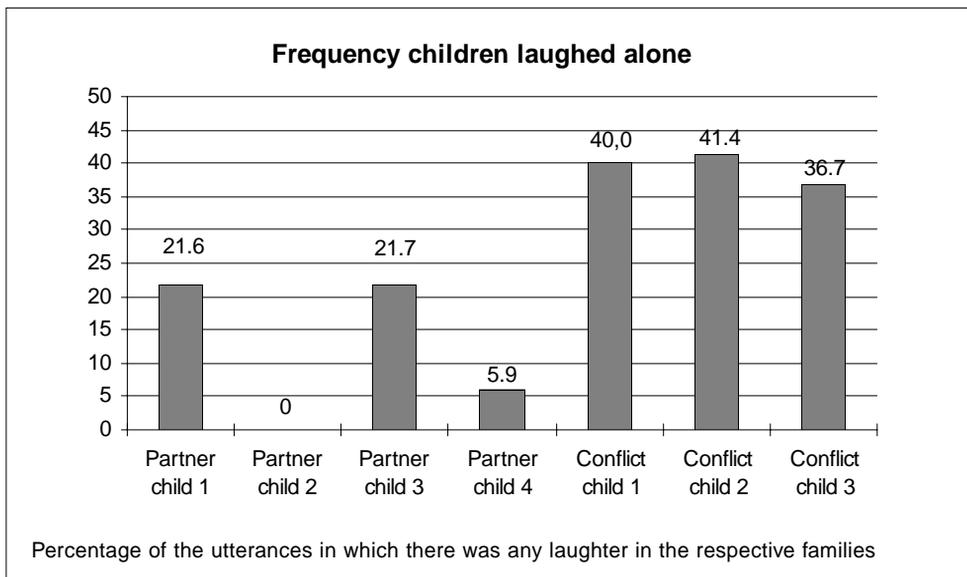


Figure 8

The difference between the two family types becomes particularly clear when one considers the category “child laughs alone”. Here it is obvious that children from conflict families laugh alone (i.e. father and mother do not join in) much more often than children from partner families. This is clearly portrayed in *Figure 8*.

The results for children from the average families are again found between the two types of family. With fluctuations around the 20% mark, they are closer to the partner families for this category.

### Laughter quality

The differences were not only shown quantitatively. On analysis of the conversation quality, it becomes clear that the children from partner families – if they laugh alone – usually laugh at themselves or at a joke of their parents. In contrast, children from conflict families often wrap up criticism or uncertainty in laughter (e.g. “Yeah, yeah, your films are always crap, but so what” or “Why should I tell you about that?” or “It’s quite hard to say what I would do”). This difference is looked at more closely in the context of the qualitative case studies (see *Section 3.4*).

### Interpretation of the results

Communal laughter has the function of producing accord: *together instead of against or over one another*. Partner families appear to have greater consensus on what they find funny. They have a common sense of humour and there are certain topics which typically come up in the family and are laughed at, one could say, by tradition. Even when jokes are occasionally made at the expense of other family members, they too can join in the laugh-

ter, because no barriers have been breached. This is not the case for conflict families, where predominantly the children laugh on their own. They have their own sense of humour which is not shared with their parents. Their laughter can signify distance and is often combined with cynicism. Rather than laughing with their parents, they laugh at their parents.

In the questionnaire, this difference between partner and conflict families was reflected in the responses to the statement “There is a sense of harmony and peace in our family”. Children from partner families affirmed this statement far more frequently than those from conflict families.

## Which verbal means of communication are used for relational messages?

The various relational messages can firstly be generally classed as positive or negative messages, so that we can examine at this level whether members of partner and conflict families make use of positive or negative relational messages more or less frequently. Positive relational messages are e.g. compliments, agreement, humorous utterances, assurances of understanding, etc. Negative relational messages, on the other hand, might be for example rejections, commands, threats or attacks.

### Positive relational messages

On the side of the parents, we found that parents from partner families direct more positive relational messages to their children than parents from conflict families. This difference is illustrated in *Figure 9* (p. 58).

The figure shows that one conflict mother and one partner couple deviate from a definite line; the general tendency is nevertheless obvious.

Even for this category, the control families are found in the centre ground. The high variance between the families results in one family tending towards the partner families, another towards the conflict families, whilst the third family is actually in the middle.

### Negative relational messages

Differences of this type cannot be established for negative relational messages. This is not the case, however, when we turn our attention away from the parents to the utterances of the children. Here we find that children from conflict families express negative comments to their parents far more frequently than children from partner families (*Figure 10*, p. 58). It is noticeable that the negative relational messages of the children are between 40% and 60% for at least one parent. That means that about half of all utterances that children from conflict families direct at their parents, or at least at one parent, are negative relational messages. In contrast, for children from partner families, the numbers only come to between 11% and 39%. It is interesting to note that the figures for the children from the av-

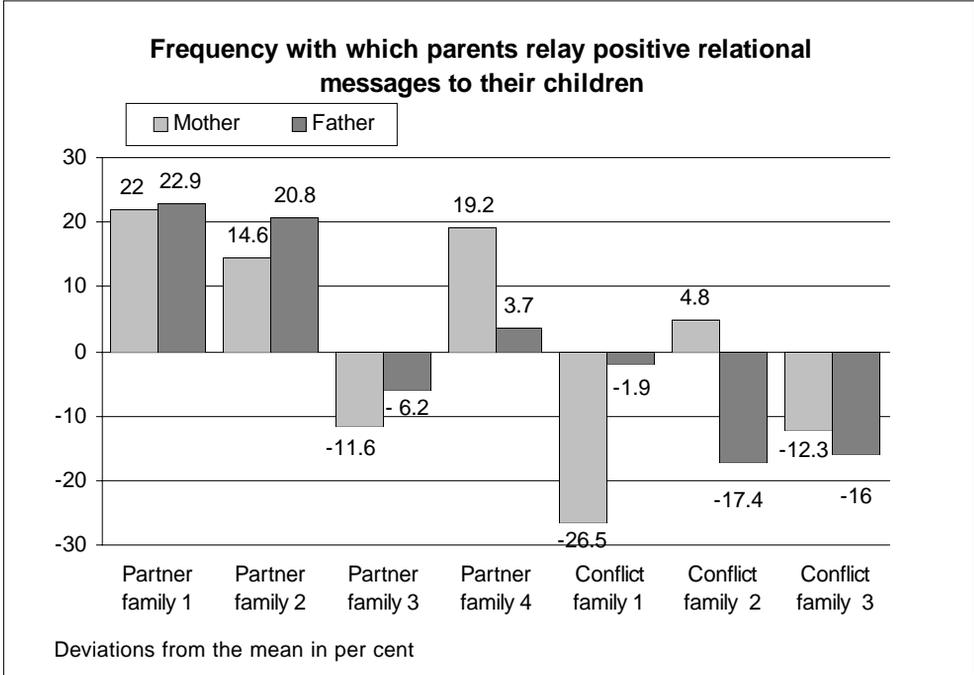


Figure 9

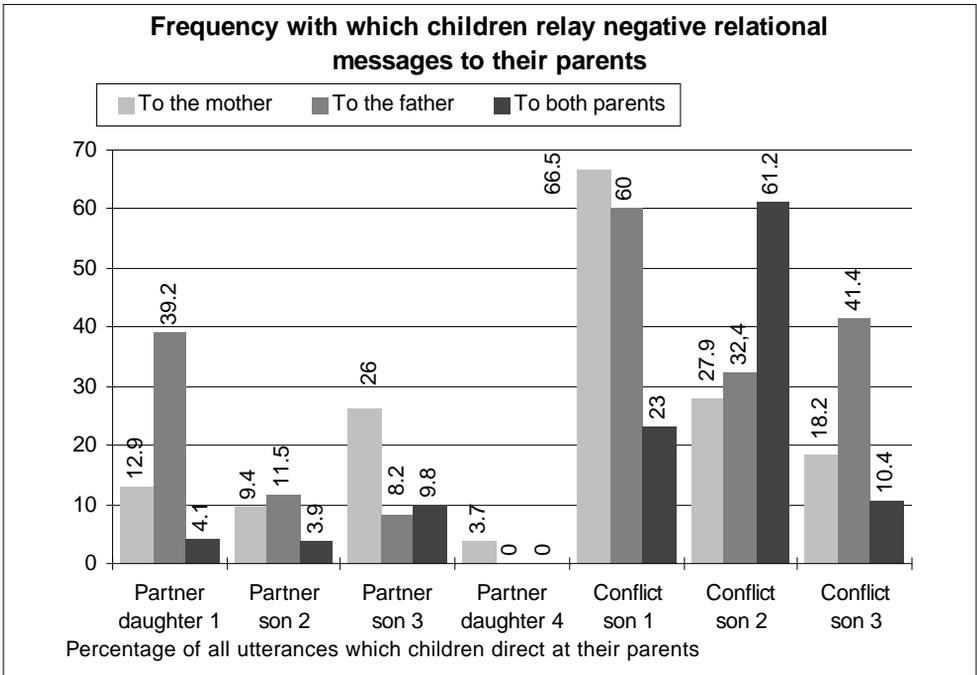


Figure 10

erage families are also very high, i.e. between 42% and 67% (this is the case for at least one parent). These negative relational messages which children from conflict families direct at their parents are also reflected in the fact that these children direct more utterances at their parents which can be classified as an attack. Whilst respectively 33.3%, 61.2% and 9.1% of the utterances of the children from conflict families to at least one parent can be classified as an attack, the number of attacks by the children from partner families fluctuates between 0% and 7.1%. The number of attacks by the children from average families is also on the low side (between 0% and 11%). In addition, the relational messages of the children from the control families which are generally categorised as negative, are not necessarily from the negative category attack, but rather, as it turns out, from the category rejection.

### Interpretation of the results

The significance of the positive messages which the parents from partner families direct at their children is obvious. Through praise, agreement, and assurance of understanding, the child receives, amongst other things, attention and support. These are two aspects which are repeatedly mentioned as protection factors for growing up (cf. *Section 1.1*). Here, the harmonious family atmosphere noted by the children from partner families in the questionnaire is reflected. In addition, in the questionnaire, children from partner families claimed that “When I have done something well, my parents show me that they are proud of me”.

In contrast, the frequent negative utterances of the children from conflict families show that the family atmosphere is, of course, not only determined by the parents. The children make their contribution too and give the parents few(er) chances to develop a positive relational atmosphere. Through their criticism and rejection, they express distance to the parents and non-acceptance.

### Challenge to get involved

A positive category which divides the two types of family is the category *challenge to get involved*. Parents from partner families challenge their children to get involved far more often, i.e. they ask for their opinion, for their intentions and needs. This difference is more marked for fathers than for mothers (*Figure 11, p. 60*).

The average value for the parents from the control families is located between the conflict and partner families. Due to the high degree of variance, one family is more similar to the partner families (father 34%, mother 31%), whilst the other two families are more similar to the conflict families (values of the respective fathers and mothers were between 2% and 10%).

This difference for the category *challenge to get involved* also exists with the children. If they come from a family with a stressful family atmosphere, they are less interested in the needs and opinions of the parents than if they come from a family with a supportive and warm family atmosphere. This is illustrated in *Figure 12 (p. 60)*.

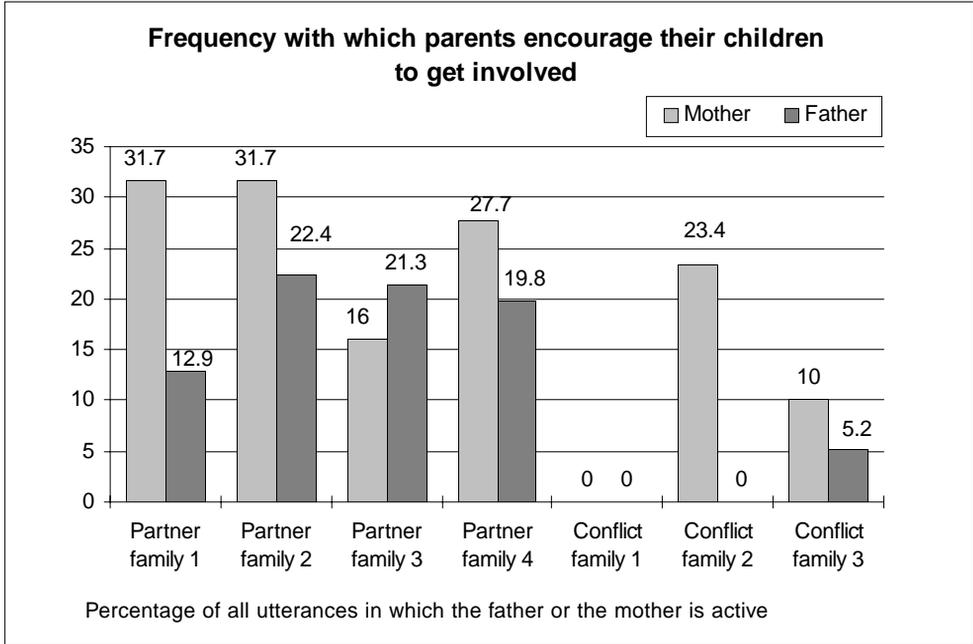


Figure 11

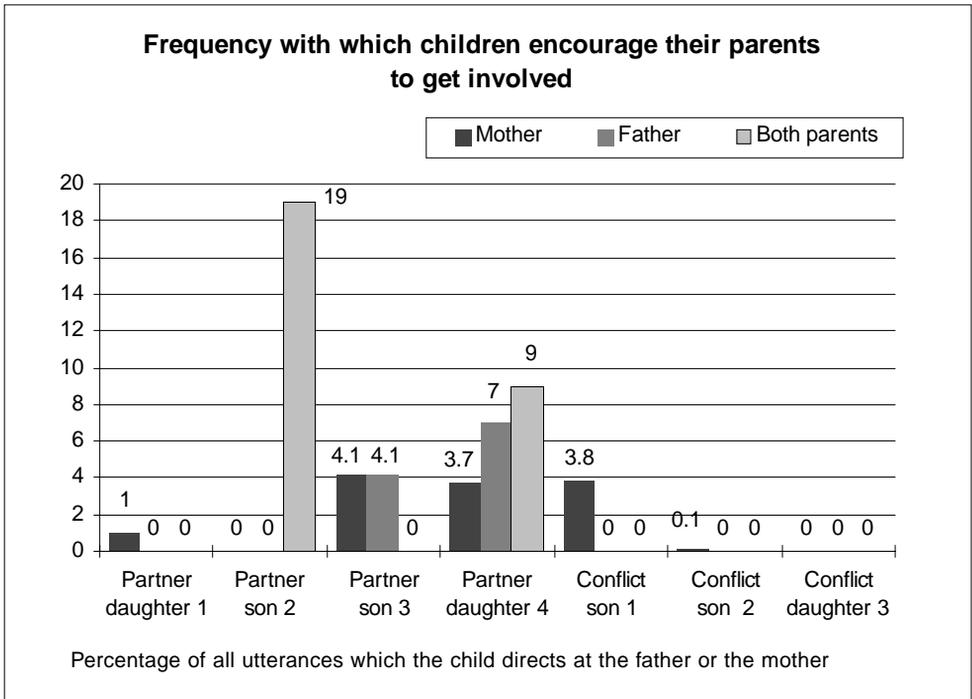


Figure 12

The result from the average families comprises one child who challenges his parents to get involved, and two children who do not do this at all, and therefore the average result here is again between the two types of family.

### Interpretation of the results

The challenge to another family member to get involved expresses recognition of that person. Their opinions and ideas are valued. The family communicates with each other and every family member is listened to. In particular, the challenge to a child to get involved reflects support of the child's independence and autonomous behaviour – an aspect which is repeatedly called a very basic protection factor in the literature (cf. *Section 1.1*). The level of regard and respect the parents have for the children is also reflected in the questionnaire. Expressions to be mentioned here, which were more frequently agreed with by children from partner families than those from conflict families, were: “If there is a decision to be made in the family, my parents let me join in the decision-making process” and “My parents are interested in my opinions”. In contrast, children from conflict families said “When my parents discuss something with me, they do it in such a way that I still feel like a child.”

## Which non-verbal means of communication are used for relational messages?

The non-verbal means of communication are less explicit at the relational level. A large part of non-verbal behaviour is inconspicuous or ambiguous for the purposes of categorisation. As a result, the figures in this category are small, and correspondingly there are fewer differences, or only minor distinctions, which can be determined. The two single aspects which are worth discussing here are the categories *non-verbal agreement*, and *indecisive*.

### Non-verbal agreement

All partner family members agree with one another non-verbally more often than members of families with a stressful family atmosphere. The conflict families (all family members) scored below one percent (average: 0.3%), whilst individuals from the partner families agree non-verbally in up to 12% of all utterances (average: 4.2%). The control families' result is again in the middle ground with 2.2%.

With respect to non-verbal disagreement, there were no differences between the types of family.

### Interpretation of the results

At the contribution level non-verbal agreement correlates with non-verbal affirmation. The interpretation of non-verbal affirmation (see *p. 54*) can therefore also be applied to non-verbal agreement.

## **Ambiguous non-verbal behaviour**

It is conspicuous that the mothers from the conflict families have markedly higher results for the category *indecisive*. Their results lie between 86.2% and 90.7% (average: 90%) whilst for partner families the figures are between 73.7% and 88.6% (average: 80.7%). The non-verbal behaviour of mothers from partner families is easier for observers to interpret apparently than that of mothers from conflict families.

With an average of almost 89%, mothers from the control families are more similar to mothers from the conflict families.

## **Interpretation of the results**

The fact that it was more difficult for the observers to classify the non-verbal behaviour of mothers from conflict families than that of mothers from partner families suggests that the children could also find it difficult. In this context we should mention that one of the characteristics given in *Section 1.2* as a good characteristic of communication is the sending of clear, congruent messages. When clear non-verbal signals are used to support verbal utterances, every utterance gains additional clarity. Accordingly, ambiguous non-verbal behaviour instead supports unclear messages, and could confuse other members of the family and make clear comprehensible communication more difficult.

## **Conflict resolution strategy**

The strategies for resolving conflicts were allocated at a card level, i.e. which conflict resolution strategies the individual family members had used for every topic were identified. The category seemed particularly important to us because constructive conflict resolution and/or spontaneous agreement are two characteristics which are repeatedly referred to as especially important, good aspects of communication in the literature on family communication.

For the definition of the category *conflict resolution strategy*, we focused on a study by Vuchinich (1987) which observed “healthy” families during the evening meal and examined who started conflicts, how long they went on for, and who concluded them. The last aspect was of particular interest to us. For our categorisation system we used the subcategories he developed on the basis of the above study: unity, compromise, stand off (conflict was concluded without a resolution: agree to disagree), dominance, submission (giving in) and retreat. We added the dimension *actively proposing versus non-proposing* (i.e. a differentiation is made depending on whether the person makes resolution suggestions or not) and the categories *problem not understood* and *no participation in conflict resolution*.

If one compares the two types of family with regard to how they resolve conflicts, it initially looks as if there are no compelling differences. It is not the case that conflict families typically resolve their conflicts in one way, whilst partner families typically go about it in a different manner. Such a statement could at most only be made for individual families. If, however, one picks out topics which can be labelled as taboo topics (smoking, alcohol,

drugs, shop-lifting), then very significant differences emerge. Whilst partner families reach a spontaneous consensus a total of six times on these topics (each family at least once), the conflict families are never spontaneously in agreement on these topics. In addition, the children from conflict families take part in the conflict resolution less frequently when the conflict concerns the above topics. Whilst children from conflict families do not take part on eight (of twelve) occasions, this was only the case once (of sixteen) with the children from partner families. This is also illustrated in *Table 12 (p. 64)*.

These results are striking, but should still be interpreted with caution, since the conflict resolution strategy is a very complex category and consensus of the coders was lower for this category than for any other category.

The average families are again located in the middle ground: they have a consensus for three cards (of eight) and the child does not take part in the conflict resolution for three cards (of eight).

### Interpretation of the results

The frequent spontaneous consensus in partner families draws us to the conclusion that dealing with problematic topics is actually not all that problematic in these families. Everything can be discussed and the members share the same views on many things. Even for topics such as drugs and cigarettes, the parents deal with the topics – even if in a firm way – to some extent humorously. Therefore the child is not forced into a corner and can freely express his opinion.

In contrast, in conflict families the children withdraw and do not make any effort to find a common solution to the “taboo” topics with their parents. Nor are they actually asked to give their opinion or suggestions for a solution (cf. *challenge to get involved*). Accordingly, this again shows that the poor family atmosphere is produced by both the parents *and* the child, and there is not a single direction of causation.

The interpretation of the conflict resolution strategies is in part confirmed by the children’s answers in the questionnaire. Items such as “there is often friction in our family” are affirmed less often by children from partner families for example, whilst items such as “There is a sense of harmony and peace in our family” and “in our family we can talk about anything” are affirmed more often by them than by children from conflict families.

### Summary

The above results clearly show that with respect to communication structures there are differences between partner families and conflict families. All aspects we have mentioned are listed again below, and we differentiate between whether the characteristics are demonstrated by the mothers, the children, both parents or the whole family.

Topic	Conflict family 1	Conflict family 2	Conflict family 3	Partner family 1	Partner family 2	Partner family 3	Partner family 4
<b>Drugs</b>	M+F: AP, win through  C: no participation in resolution	M: AP, wins through  F: no participation in resolution  C: AP, gives in	M+F: AP win through  C: NP, gives in	M+C: AP, compromise  F: NP compromise	General consensus	M+F: AP, win through  C: AP, gives in	Problem not understood
<b>Cigarettes</b>	M: AP wins through  F+C: no participation in resolution	M: AP, wins through  F+C: no participation in resolution	M: NP, gives in  F: AP, wins through  C: AP, no resolution to conflict	General consensus	F+M: AP, win through  C: NP, gives in	Problem not understood	M+C: consensus  F: no participation in resolution
<b>Alcohol</b>	M+F: consensus  C: no participation in resolution	M: AP wins through  F: no participation in resolution  C: AP, gives in	Problem not understood	M+C: AP, compromise  F: AP, retreats	M: no participation in resolution  F+C: AP, compromise	M: AP wins through  F: no participation in resolution  C: NP, gives in	General consensus
<b>Shop-lifting</b>	M+F: consensus  C: no participation in resolution	M: AP wins through  F+C no participation in resolution	M: AP, gives in  F: AP wins through  C: no participation in resolution	General consensus	M+F: consensus  C: no participation in resolution	General consensus	M+F: AP, wins through  C: AP, gives in
<p>M = mother, F = father, C = child.  AP = actively proposing (i.e. the person actively introduces new suggestions).  NP = not proposing (i.e. the person does not introduce new suggestions).</p>							

Table 12: Conflict resolution strategies of the families or family members for the topics drugs, cigarettes, alcohol and shop-lifting.

## Mothers

- Mothers from conflict families are interrupted more frequently than mothers from partner families.
- Mothers from partner families behave in a more child-centric manner than mothers from conflict families.
- Mothers from partner families ask their children more questions than mothers from conflict families.
- Mothers from partner families express their opinion more often than mothers from conflict families.
- Mothers from conflict families act in a more ambiguous manner at a non-verbal level than mothers from partner families.

## Children

- Children from conflict families laugh on their own more frequently than children from partner families.
- When children laugh on their own, the children from conflict families tend to laugh to cover up criticism or uncertainty, whereas children from partner families tend to laugh at their own or someone else's jokes.
- Children from conflict families direct more negative relational messages to their parents than children from partner families.
- Children from conflict families attack their parents more frequently than children from partner families.
- When children are challenged to get involved, the contributions of children from partner families are more constructive than those of children from conflict families.
- In conflict families, the children take part in conflict resolution far less often (when it concerns a taboo topic) than children from partner families.

## Parents

- Mothers from partner families, and to some extent fathers from partner families too, give their children more accompanying feedback than mothers from conflict families.
- Parents from partner families give non-verbal affirmation more often than parents from conflict families.
- Parents from conflict families speak to the camera more than parents from partner families.
- Parents from partner families direct more positive relational messages to their children than parents from conflict families.

## Whole family

- Partner families laugh together more than conflict families.
- All members of partner families challenge the others present to get involved more often than members of conflict families.
- All members of partner families agree with each other non-verbally more often than members of conflict families.

- Partner families are more often of the same opinion as regards taboo topics than conflict families.

### **No difference between the different types of family**

- dominance in the family,
- atmosphere in the family,
- tension of the family members,
- coalition formation,
- body language,
- interest in events,
- frequency with which individual family members laugh.

These results concur with many aspects which are mentioned in the literature (see *Section 1.2.*). Characteristics of communication which are classified as good appear more often in partner families than in conflict families (frequent spontaneous consensus, agreement, laughing together, encouragement of independence e.g. by asking for others' opinions, child-centredness e.g. by giving the child attention, etc.), and/or these characteristics are found to be lacking in conflict families more often than in partner families. There are also some new aspects, such as the solitary laughter of the child from conflict families, so that its criticism and uncertainty are under wraps, or the qualitative differences which were mentioned.

The results suggest that there is a definite connection between the family atmosphere – which is perceived by the child as positive or negative – and the respective communication structures within the family. The assessments made by the children in the questionnaire prove correct in detail. If the children claim that their parents do not take them seriously, it is reflected for instance in the fact that their parents do not ask for their opinion, give them little feedback, and direct a large proportion of their utterances to the people behind the cameras “who can be taken seriously”. This confirmation of the children's statements supports and strengthens the tendency in family research to gather assessments from children and classify them as valid.

In addition to the results listed, there is a series of “non-results”. These are particularly determined at the macro level (division of the discussions via eight cards). As a result, we claim that established differences are not necessarily visible at first glance. For example, the atmosphere in the families or the individual family members' level of interest in events cannot be differentiated clearly between the types of family. It is only at the micro level – by means of thorough, time-consuming microanalysis – that the characteristics of the partner and conflict families emerge. A detailed analysis of the communication is therefore worthwhile.

The extra expense which is caused by using video recordings is justified by the results. Thanks to video, it is possible to determine non-verbal characteristics of communication

which – as used to supplement verbal communication – differentiate the two types of family. In addition, we can describe the behaviour of those who do not act as the main player during their utterance/turn. In this way we broaden the spectrum of differences in communication of partner and conflict families.

Where, however, do the average families fit in? The results for the control families usually clearly come between those for partner and conflict families, although the variation between the families is generally very high. If one considers each family in isolation, then it becomes clear that they fluctuate, so-to-say, between the two types. With one characteristic they resemble the partner type more closely, with another the conflict type instead. This means that the average family does not manifest all characteristics to an average degree, instead, some aspects turn out to be very positive whilst others are evaluated as negative.

The interesting results should act as an incentive to examine other families and their communication behaviour in order to verify the differences found, and to check the hypotheses which were formed on the basis of our findings. It would also be worthwhile to examine children from other types of school in addition to the grammar school. Our sample consisted for the most part of children from academic secondary schools. Even if the formation of a cluster is itself independent from the type of school the child attends, it could have an effect on communication in the family. On evaluating the results, one must also not forget the high selectivity of the sample. This was caused by the high drop-out rate.

## 3.4 Qualitative individual case studies

The quantitative evaluations of the case studies are very meaningful and illuminate the differences between the types of family. Despite this, much information is obliterated, and there is the danger of losing sight of the actual family. Therefore, by means of a detailed qualitative description of one partner family and one conflict family, we hope to convey a more accurate picture of what these families are like. For this, we brought together information gathered in the questionnaire, the family discussion itself and statements from the interviews, which were carried out with individual family members some one to two weeks after the family discussion. By bringing these different sources together it is possible to create a comprehensive portrait of the family from various perspectives.

On the one hand, we have our own impressions and the observations which we made during the family discussions and the interviews. On the other hand, we have the evaluations of the characteristics of communication and the statements made by every family member with respect to their own family and its members, about their attitude towards addiction and drugs and their own consumer habits. To supplement this, we have the information supplied by the children in the questionnaire. On a scale of one to four (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree) they evaluated their parents' behaviour (empathy, competence at giving advice, common activities, interest in school matters, intensity of discussions, awareness of the child) and the family atmosphere. The synthesis of these different sources forms the basis of the following family portraits.

The choice of which families to portray was not easy, since every individual family is, in its own way, interesting and unique. However, as we had to make a decision, we chose the Flipper 3 family as the conflict family because it manifests the typical characteristics of family conflict particularly strongly. In addition, the son is a consumer of alcohol, and smokes cigarettes and hashish. In contrast, the Lucas M. family represents the classic partner family with a good and abstaining daughter whose parents are her main mentors.

### 3.4.1 Portrait of the conflict family Flipper 3

Contact is made and an appointment arranged with the Flipper 3 family exclusively through the mother. She is also the one who opens the door for us and takes charge of the "introduction ceremony". She then calls the father and the son. The father appears and also greets us in a friendly manner. The son hangs around in the background at first, then sits down on the sofa without explicitly greeting us. No one speaks as we assemble the equipment, and – unlike on other occasions – no one offers us a drink.

## The persons

### The son

The son is almost 14 years old and is in year 7 at a grammar school. He is very tall for his age and, like his father, has short, dark hair and dark eyes. During the family discussion he wears a dark pullover and beige trousers, which correspond to the current demands of fashion for year seven pupils. He is relatively slim. Occasionally he has asthma attacks and receives medication. He has a 16-year-old sister.

### The mother

The mother is 40 years old, has middle school diploma, and did an apprenticeship as a pharmacist's assistant. She is tall, slim, has short, light brown hair and wears glasses. She is sportily dressed and, like the father, wears indoor shoes.

### The father

The father, 47 years old, is a mechanical engineer. He originally comes from Turkey. He too is slim and is dressed entirely in black during the family discussion.

## The discussion situation

### Details of the scene of the discussion

Family Flipper 3 choose the seating arrangement in the living room as the location for the event. The son is the first to take a seat on the sofa without a word. The mother sits down to his right and the father to his left. Both parents leave a lot of space between themselves and their son. Finally, the mother takes the initiative and reads the first card. The father, who has already got out his reading glasses, puts them away again. Both the father and the son sit on the sofa with folded hands, and give us the impression that they are waiting to see what will happen next.

Generally, the atmosphere is somewhat tense, and we get the impression that the family are rarely in the living room together to talk.

Since the cable of our monitor is not long enough to disappear into an adjacent room, we go behind an armchair so that we are out of sight.

### Roles of the participants

In the Flipper 3 family, the mother is clearly the dominant person. As became clear in the individual interviews, this is also recognised by all family members as characteristic for the family situation: *That's right, women talk more* (father). The son likewise confirms the female dominance. This would have been heightened if the daughter had taken part in the discussion: *My sister is about as talkative as my mother* (son). The mother does indeed talk the most during the recorded family discussion. However, she talks at the camera more than with her family.

The son contradicts what is being said now and again, which is generally ignored or laughed at. In the interview, the mother said that her son had been a bit more restrained during the discussion. *He is otherwise very open, sometimes cheeky, and always a bit provocative* (mother). Noticeably, the son is the only member of the family who does not address the camera. Instead he keeps himself withdrawn most of the time, or directs negative comments at his parents, often hidden behind a laugh.

The father takes very little part in the discussion. This could be due to language difficulties, but is more probably due to the fact that in every day life he communicates very little with the mother and son. At some points it seems as if he wants to relate to the camera and poke fun at his own family. The communication between the father and son, and between the mother and the father is barely constructive. The father's comments often seem out of place, as if he does not exactly know what the discussion is all about. At the same time it seems that he would like to appear humorous and put himself in a good light – however not necessarily as a good father (which is frequent in the other families) – but much more as someone who is detached from his own family.

### **Dealing with the tasks**

The family work through the cards relatively quickly. The discussion only lasts for ten minutes, however, it is not really a discussion but is much more used by the mother as an opportunity to explain the situation in the family, and her views, to the camera team. The father and son generally only make short comments, and the latter occasionally “commands” the mother to go on to the next card. This instruction is always followed by the mother (she is consequently the one who reads the cards – all except for the second one). The family gave us the overall impression that it was difficult for them to really come into contact with one another.

The mother, father and son are slightly tense throughout the discussion, but the tension is not so strong that it reduces interaction. Whilst the mother participates in the discussion with constant interest and enthusiasm, the father withdraws during the taboo topics drugs, cigarettes, alcohol and shop lifting, and his participation is as good as non-existent. In contrast, the son shows little interest during the topics cigarettes, clothing and shoplifting. As a result, the mothers debates the cigarettes and shoplifting questions more or less on her own with the camera. (It seems as if the father and the son resign themselves to “let mother talk”.) It is therefore very surprising that the family (or the mother) spend the most time on the shoplifting card (139 seconds). The Flipper 3 family spend the shortest amount of time on the clothing question.

With respect to the conflict resolution strategy, the following picture is given: the mother works though four cards on her own, whilst the father does not participate in conflict resolution at all. The son gives in twice and does not take part in conflict resolution twice. They are in consensus on the television and clothing questions, and the question on role exchange is not understood.

## Relationships with each other

The relationships between the individual family members can primarily be deduced from the interviews. In the answers to questions such as “What have you done when your child (you) has (have) a problem?” or “Can you remember the last time you had an argument with your child (your parents)?”, the family members have generally explained a lot about their relationships to each other.

### The father’s viewpoint

In the interview, the father voices the opinion that he has to accept that the relationship with his son is not particularly good. *It’s a law of nature. Fathers and sons don’t get on very well. And: there is definitely a certain power struggle.* The son wants to be an equal of course, but sometimes he goes too far.

The main source of disagreement currently is the son’s school performance, which – in contrast to his sister – is not satisfactory. The father criticises the son for being *lazy*, only achieving *40 percent* and also tending to blame teachers or other circumstances for his poor performance instead of looking for the cause in himself.

### The mother’s viewpoint

In the interview, the mother says that she feels responsible for the upbringing of the son. She claims to have better contact. *I think I’ve simply got more contact with the children. Yes. He (my husband) sometimes comes in very late, he doesn’t always even see the children every day.* She sees the communication between the father and the son as somewhat blocked, her husband has an authoritative attitude, and the son is immediately prejudiced whenever the father wants to say something to him. He would rather come to her with problems.

Current arguments revolve predominantly around school, because *I think that he doesn’t do enough school work.* For his part the son says *I shouldn’t nag and grumble all the time.* The last conversation relating to this conflict took place at lunchtime on the day of the interview.

The mother had already visited a child guidance clinic with the son. The reason: *problems with school, him not accepting it when any kind of demand was made of him, that he always tried to find loopholes.*

### The son’s viewpoint

In the questionnaire, the son confirmed that he was closer to his mother. She was the only one he trusted to give him competent advice on certain problems, for example if he was doing badly in a subject at school or with planning his life – although not for the area of leisure. He assessed the family atmosphere as mediocre. It was not very harmonious, each person did their own thing and you could not talk about everything. However there were

also no great *friction* and there was mutual support. In other respects, he demonstratively distanced himself from his parents, both in the written questionnaire and in the verbal interview. His parents were *embarrassing* to him. In the interview he said:

*I otherwise tend to avoid contact with my parents in public.*

(Interviewer: *why?*)

*Well, it's just embarrassing.*

(Interviewer: *why's that?*)

*Because of the way they always make fools of themselves. They always do something embarrassing. We were in town together a few years ago and my mother stopped outside Deichmann's and said to me "Those are really nice sandals aren't they? Do you want a pair?" And she said that loudly as well. Everyone turned around and smiled to themselves a bit oddly. I'd had enough.. Since then I never go to town with my parents. I get them to just give me the money and I go to town on my own with my friends.*

In the questionnaire the son said that he doesn't get any cultural stimulation from his parents, he has acquired no hobbies from them, and there are also no joint activities. This was reinforced in the interview:

*The last time we did something together was, I think, two years ago when we were on holiday.*

*My mother talks to me about school mostly.*

*With my father I talk about things like computers and stuff.*

## Alcohol, cigarettes and drugs

*Flipper 3 is one for trying things out. ...thinking of Flipper's age as well, I think it has started pretty early. Flipper is very early with his experimental behaviour. ...even just thinking of his age... we have already got so many problems with smoking and alcohol, and drugs too I think, yes (mother, interview).*

In the questionnaire, the son claims to have drunk alcohol occasionally in the last year (one to five times). He denies smoking or taking drugs. In the interview, he said more precisely that he *only drank alcohol on special occasions ... and then only in moderate quantities*. Furthermore, he smoked for two years, but gave up a year ago. He had tried cannabis once at a party.

He emphasised that he was in a clique who consumed alcohol, cigarettes and drugs. At one party at his house half a bottle of Raki (40%) was consumed in addition to beer, which led to a conflict at home. *We just had a crate of beer in the cellar and a few bottles were just missing afterwards. I let my friends take them, because, well, it's just like that at this age.*

The group helps him to get experience and to gather information. For example, his friends cast doubts on the information in a brochure on drug prevention which his mother was always giving him. *Cannabis is often, frequently, described as a stepping-stone to harder drugs,*

*but I've got myself some more accurate information, and that's completely wrong. I asked my friends and they have stayed on the normal stuff. Cannabis, cigarettes, alcohol, nothing more.*

The son is confident that he can withstand pressure from his friends. If they were to offer him heroin or cocaine for example: *I would tell them to fuck off!* However, he started smoking at a young age because of the group's influence. When asked why he started smoking, he said: *At first it was just peer pressure. We were at a party and everyone was smoking. And they said to me "just try one".* When asked what his friends would say about his not smoking anymore, he said: *that's their bad luck. I don't care what they say.*

All members of the family are against dramatising the consumption of stimulants. The parents are against strict bans. *(Prohibiting doesn't gain much. I think everyone has got to have their own experiences. We don't think much of abstinence; mother, interview.)*

The mother follows the strategy of, on the one hand, keeping up to date with the level of her son's consumption, and, on the other hand, supplying him with explanatory information on drug-taking. She does indeed estimate his consumption accurately. However, she only has partial success with her son using the power of the arguments in the brochures. She judges her efforts to educate her children about the consumption of stimulants to be on the whole successful.

3

### **3.4.2 Portrait of the partner family Lukas M.**

Making contact and arranging a meeting with the Lukas M. family is also carried out via the mother. On arrival for our first visit we are given a very friendly greeting by the father, mother, daughter and dog. We are offered something to drink and go into the kitchen with the monitor. The family, particularly the parents, are very chatty (before and after the three-way discussion), so we are able to spend more time with the family than usual.

#### **The persons**

##### **The daughter**

The daughter is 13 years old and is in year 7 at a grammar school. She is an only child, but socially very well integrated. She is very pretty, has light brown chin-length hair and is slim and sporty. During the family discussion she wears jeans and a dark blue hooded shirt.

##### **The mother**

The mother is 35 and a teacher. She too is slim, sporty and also has light brown chin-length hair. She wears glasses. Like the daughter and the father, she wears a dark top and jeans.

## The father

The father is 36 and a qualified sports teacher. He has a managerial role in the rehabilitation unit of a health insurance company. He has light brown, short hair and for the family discussion wears a black roll neck pullover. He is also slim and sporty. Both parents are currently working. The family are also strongly involved in a church association and attend church each week.

## The discussion situation

### Details of the scene of the discussion

The Lukas M. family sit around the dining table, not on the seating in the living room. This is understandable, as such a small group in the huge, just finished new building would seem lost and less comfortable and inviting. However, we must first adjust the modern lamp over the dining table so that it provides more than just subdued light.

The seating arrangement adopted is with the daughter between her parents, that is the father sitting to the left of the daughter and the mother to the right. The mother takes the initiative and reads out the first card.

The mother and daughter seem quite tense, but overall the impression made by the family on the observer is that they communicate regularly with each other and cultivate pleasant interaction with each other. In particular the parents listen to each other and are generally united. The opinions of the other family members are listened to with interest and accepted. There is virtually no speaking to the camera.

### Roles of the participants

The mother does not appear to take a dominant position in the family, but she is the one who takes the main responsibility for ensuring that the discussion proceeds meaningfully. She often turns to the daughter and encourages her to make further comments by means of questions or explanations. This impression is also confirmed by the girl in the interview: *... and Mum always talks like that, tells it just as it is, says what is going on.* In addition, the mother is the major contributor to the discussion, with 50%, and also reads out the cards. But generally she never goes on to the next card without making eye contact with the father to ensure that he agrees that the subject on the card has been discussed sufficiently.

The interaction of the mother and the daughter gives the observer the impression of great harmony and a feeling of partnership, but without jeopardising the classical hierarchy between parents and child in any way. This is confirmed by the fact that in her interview the daughter says that she greatly values her mother as an advisor: *So then I talk to Mum. I might be thinking about something in the evening, or for the whole day, or in bed at night, and if I have a problem, then I call on Mum and talk to her about it, what I mean is, I just ask her what I should do, if something is bad, or whether or not I should do something. I just ask her whether I should do it* (daughter, interview).

On the other hand she is given very clear limits: *Well, I am not allowed to take drugs, or to drink a lot, that is I am not allowed to drink at all at the moment, but later, Mum has said, I shouldn't drink much, and I shouldn't smoke. Oh yes, and she says I should never be out on my own late at night. ... I think those are the main things I'm not allowed. ... I wasn't allowed to watch television much and I'm still not allowed. If I do, they just say to switch it off now, and if I don't, they either just switch it off themselves or tell me again, and then I usually switch it off* (daughter, interview).

The father is very restrained during the discussion, but he plays his part and, in a subtle way, this is actually a dominant role. On many subjects he withdraws into himself (for example, role reversal or cigarettes) but, for example when stealing from shops is being discussed, he even takes the initiative and directs the discussion. The father's subtle dominance is also evidenced in that it is he who, by nodding his head, determines whether or not it is time to go on to the next card.

The daughter takes an active part in the discussion, but is never cheeky or emotional. That may be because of the subjects, at least according to the parents: *I think that if the subjects had been more relevant, then we could have had more arguments. It isn't always so peaceful and friendly here* (mother, interview). *If it is a controversial subject, it can get rather emotional* (father, interview).

Overall however, the family does not give the observer the impression that they would not be able to deal constructively with subjects which were difficult for them.

Despite the limited participation of the father in the discussion, the daughter directs over 60% of her comments, at least partly, to her father. The impression is given that it is very important for the daughter to include her father in the discussion. It almost seems that she admires her father. She never contradicts him and does not direct a single negative comment at him.

### Dealing with the tasks

All three family members confirm in their interviews that the subjects on the cards – with the exception of clothes – do not play a large part in the family:

Father: *Such matters are really not an issue. Stealing from shops, drinking, smoking, drugs, these are of interest. We have already touched on these because they came up at school at a parents' day, but otherwise they are of no interest to her. She's more interested in buying clothes.*

Mother: *The subjects were not ones that affect us directly – now, if we were talking about clothes.*

Daughter: *About clothes rather than drugs, because we haven't talked about drugs in class, just smoking, but clothes, what clothes you should wear to go to school, and so on. I would prefer to talk about that.*

The family takes 16 minutes to deal with the seven cards. They are quickest on the subjects of role reversal and alcohol, while drugs and stealing from shops (each over three minutes) take the longest.

The mother and daughter seem very tense during the whole of the discussion, while the father is relatively relaxed. The strain of the female members of the family is at times so intense that the discussion seems rather artificial and one would almost like to release the family from the situation with the camera. However, the mother and daughter appear very committed with all the cards, while the father contributes almost nothing to the discussion of role reversal and cigarettes.

In terms of strategies for solving conflicts, the family twice agrees on a compromise, is once unanimous, twice the problem is not known, once the mother and daughter are united and the father does not participate, and once the parents win through, while the daughter gives way.

## Relationships with each other

### The father's viewpoint

The father says in his interview that his daughter tells him if she has something on her mind: *Oh, whatever she has on her mind, we often sort that out between us while we're driving to school in the mornings. That's always a bit of time that we two have together when she can talk quite happily. Then she tells me what she wants to get off her chest. Often, if we have to talk any more about it, we will sort it out over our meal in the evening* (father, interview). He is not actually at home very much, so there is very little time for discussions. But in his opinion everything of significance is communicated: *... I have the impression that, whatever needs to be discussed is discussed, but I must say that we, at least I, often work quite late in the evenings, so there isn't time for long discussion. We usually make it pretty short* (father, interview).

### The mother's viewpoint

In her interview the mother shows great sensitivity towards her daughter. Furthermore, she talks to her daughter about her problems and helps her to solve them. *I first of all notice a change in her manner – she becomes quieter. L. is an incredibly happy person. She comes in from school at lunchtime every day with a “Hallo” and “I've had fun”, and that is really typical of her, so if there's something wrong, you notice it in her manner. But she needs time before she talks about it. So I have to give her the time. Then maybe we'll go for a walk, or just sit together here, but it's best if we go out, then she'll tell me all about it* (mother, interview).

The mother says there are disagreements (especially on the subject of homework), when they have quite a fight, but in the end they are reconciled. *Yes, she really needs harmony, but then so do we, my husband and me, so we always find a way to solve things. But my bus-*

*band, he is not so good at discussing thing out loud, so it's usually me and my daughter (mother, interview).*

Confirmation that the disagreements are not very dramatic is given in the following statement by the mother: *Bringing up L. has always been easy, so we haven't really needed to stop her doing things. We can always find a way round things by talking about them (mother, interview).*

### **The daughter's viewpoint**

In contrast to the parents, who both claim that the daughter comes to them both with her problems, the daughter answers the interview question of who does she go to when she has problems: *my mother*. In the questionnaire she gives her a high rating for advisory competence in all the subjects mentioned.

She talks to her father about *things to do with school* (interview), and in the questionnaire she gives him a lower rating for advisory competence (in school matters and in relation to clothes) than her mother. Accordingly, it is also the mother who, according to the questionnaire, helps her with her homework.

However, in her view, both parents are interested in her school marks and results and both ask regularly how school was (questionnaire). But she is also interested in other things which are happening: *We talk a lot . . . about problems, about school. So, at lunchtime, sometimes I don't want to talk, but Mum likes me to tell her what's been happening at school, and so on (daughter, interview).*

In the questionnaire she credits both her parents with a high degree of sensitivity when it comes to assessing the daughter's mood. She confirms that there is a good atmosphere and few problems in the family. *In any case, such dramatic events, these are not the kind of problems or events that we have in our family, not the kind of minor things we have in our family (daughter, interview).*

The daughter also states in the questionnaire that she plays sport with her parents, makes music with them, and that she has taken up some of her parents' hobbies.

### **Alcohol, cigarettes and drugs**

In the questionnaire the daughter states that she has tried alcohol, the frequency being given as once to five times in the last year. She says she does not smoke cigarettes, or take hashish or stronger drugs. She stresses that her parents do not want her to and, asked for her own opinion, says in the interview about alcohol: *perhaps the occasional glass of sparkling wine, but not real drinking*. And as for cigarettes . . . *I'm just not interested, I really don't want to smoke. I've tried smoking a cigarette – when we were in year 4, we were*

*forced to by some boys, they were going to beat us up, so yes, I smoked a cigarette, then I knew I really didn't want to smoke* (daughter, interview).

The whole family confirms that no-one in their circle of family, friends and acquaintances smokes. In his interview the father supposes there would be problems if the daughter started smoking, but he is quite sure she will not do so. His contribution on this subject: *I think it is important to be open and talk about it, but also to point out the dangers and possible consequences.*

The mother takes the following position in the interview: *I think basically the family sets the example, and if she doesn't see any smoking at all at home and doesn't have the opportunity, if there is no problem with it in the family, then it's easier for children to say no.* She does stress that one can never know what company the child will keep and what problems might occur during puberty, which might mean that her daughter would at some time resort to cigarettes, alcohol or drugs, but she *cannot imagine it.* She is also quite sure that she would hear of it.

In the interview both parents said they believed that they had successfully imparted a healthy attitude to alcohol, cigarettes and drugs.

The parents themselves do not smoke. They occasionally drink a glass of wine (interview, family discussion). The father is also the only parent from the whole of the communication study who claims that it would not be a problem at all for him to give up alcohol altogether.

### **3.4.3 Comparison of the two families**

From the portraits of the two families it is clear that they represent the typical characteristics of conflict and partner families.

#### **Flipper 3 family**

In the Flipper 3 family the parents speak a great deal to the camera, the son makes very many negative comments, some of them directed laughingly at his parents. The family is never unified on the taboo subjects. The son keeps out of most of the conflict solving, is not asked for his opinion and gets scarcely any signs of response from his parents.

The answers to the questionnaire also correspond to the typical conflict cluster: the parents are only ascribed advisory competence in a few areas, the family atmosphere is classified as moderate and the family does very little together. In particular, the relationship with the father appears to be particularly bad. The son goes his own way; smokes, drinks and takes hashish. But he does exhibit a certain maturity and competence, which suggests that he knows very well what he wants and that he will have nothing laid down or forbidden by his “embarrassing parents”.

This rebellious and distanced position of the son to his parents becomes more and more obvious. While the father accepts this and regards it as normal, the mother still tries to get through to her son. She appears to be at least partially successful in this, since the son does trust her to be able to help him if things are not going well for him.

The parents’ attitude to alcohol, cigarettes and drugs is relatively relaxed. The son is not given any rules, only wishes are expressed, and the son is provided with information as far as it goes.

## **Lukas M. family**

The Lukas M. family on the other hand incorporate the typical features of a partner family. The parents primarily direct their comments to the child and the family is frequently united and laughs a lot together. The child joins in with conflict solving, is asked for her opinion and gets many signs of response from her parents.

In the questionnaire too the daughter states that she considers her parents competent to give advice in most areas, that the family does a lot together and the family atmosphere is harmonious. The parents, especially the mother, are the main persons the daughter speaks to.

The daughter does not smoke, does not drink alcohol and does not take drugs. She is thereby coming up to her parents’ expectations. They make it clear that they disapprove of taking any kind of drugs.

In contrast to Flipper 3 there appears to be little independence in the daughter’s decision-making. Her wishes and opinions appear to be based strongly on her parents. While Flipper 3 provokes his parents and distances himself from them, the Lukas M. girl is generally united with her parents, but appears less self-assured.

Generally it seems that Lukas M. is integrated in the family discussion as an equal partner. She is asked for her opinion and her views are listened to and mostly accepted. An interaction is clearly taking place. In contrast, the parents of Flipper 3 mainly turn to the camera. The son is only rarely spoken to and virtually never asked for his opinion. He is listened

to when he makes a comment, but what he says is generally not discussed. This is no doubt partly because most of his comments are attacks on his parents which do not leave them much scope to react. There is therefore a correlation: the child who is easy to care for is treated as a partner and taken seriously by the parents, while the provoking, rebellious child is not taken seriously and the parents would rather talk to the camera team than their family, that is their child.

# 4

## **IDEAS FOR PREVENTION OF ADDICTION**

In terms of working in the area of addiction prevention, it should first be stressed that most parents generally have very definite and entirely sensible ideas of how to provide their child with a healthy attitude to addiction and drugs. We experience this not just in everyday life, but also clearly through the families' comments. The parents each have concrete and useful ideas on how they keep their children from smoking, drinking alcohol and taking drugs. However, things develop very differently. Presumably it is putting this knowledge into practice via the communication process which makes the difference.

Consequently, particularly the conflict parents require definite guidelines on how they can use the information obtained to change behaviour. This difference becomes particularly clear in the area of *attention to the child* which is reflected at the level of communication in response signs to the child, less frequent interruptions and particularly in the requirement to take part. These communication characteristics give the child the feeling that he/she is being taken seriously by the parents. Consequently, it is suggested that the child reacts correspondingly to the parents. A child who feels that he/she is being taken seriously will most likely interpret parents' requirements not to smoke and not to drink alcohol as the parents being concerned that the child does not come to any harm, or that they want something good for him/her. The child who is not taken seriously, on the other hand, will see such a requirement as a rule and will tend to withdraw further. The interaction between the parents' behaviour and that of the child become very clear and very significant here.

The results also make it clear that an unfavourable family climate is not the responsibility of the parents alone. The children are uncooperative and, because of their negative view of their parents, consider all their parents' behaviour to be directed against them. Consequently it is not sufficient just to provide the parents with behavioural guidelines. They are no longer getting through to the child. The question then arises, whether and how children can be helped to help their parents. Special training in communication aimed at children could be a sensible method of imparting to the child how important it is to send out *I messages* (statements regarding one's own feelings and needs, without reference to you and without reproach), even if such messages are not requested. It is important that the child informs the parents what needs he/she has and what is missing. This in turn makes it easier for the parents to approach the child and adapt their behaviour. We therefore have to start with the level of communication and the child's view of the parents. If the child has a positive view of the parents, he/she is more likely to take on the parents' standards and values. Only in this way can a positive image (an aspect which almost all parents regard as very important) be developed. A child who, for example, finds his parents embarrassing, is unlikely to follow their example in his/her attitude to smoking and drinking. Therefore, at this age, it is not enough to concentrate entirely on advising the parents since they are rejected time and time again by the child who has withdrawn. Access simply through the parents is probably only meaningful if the children are still very small.

If we look specifically at discussions regarding addictive drugs or communication about cigarettes, alcohol and drugs, we have seen that in partner families discussions of these sub-

jects are generally very lively or very calm. Consequently, a very committed and confrontational style of discussion of addictive drugs can be thoroughly positive. Here too it can be assumed that this is only meaningful if the child is taken seriously in this discussion and is allowed to put forward his/her point of view.

The fact that the discussions about cigarettes, alcohol and drugs form a common interest, compared to the other subjects (going to bed, clearing up, etc.), suggests that the families handle the subject of addiction in a similar way, no matter what substances are involved. The parents do vary in their tolerance to the addictive drugs (alcohol being tolerated more than cigarettes, and cigarettes more than illegal drugs), but in terms of what one can do about children taking addictive drugs, they do not differentiate between tobacco, alcohol and hashish.

It should also be stressed that the parents are naturally not the only influencing factor. Particularly with regard to the consumption of tobacco, alcohol and drugs, peers, siblings and the media must also be included.

In many of the families one or even both of the parents are at home very little. From the family discussions and individual interviews, however, it is clear that this does not have to have a negative effect on relations with parents. Naturally there is not very much time to talk to each other or do things together. However, our families make it clear that when this parent is at home and spends so-called quality time with the child, this is generally seen as a partnership-promoting and positive relationship with the child. The most important thing is *not how much time* is spent with the child, *but how* this time together is spent.

Overall, the study provides us with good arguments for a close, reciprocal connection between personal parent-child relationships and the communication process between the generations in the family. Improved communication therefore leads to improved relationships. In turn, good relationships can be regarded as a lasting general protective element. It is suggested that training in communication should be considered as a preventative measure. However, it should be taken into account that it is not just the parents who are responsible for forming the communication situation in the family. It is not sufficient just to talk to the parents, particularly if the children are already going through puberty. The children must be spoken to directly (preferably separately from the parents) and their view of their parents and their style of communication should be a focus of the prevention measures.



# 5

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