



What should children know about families?

Primary school children's views on family diversity

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Background and Relevance

- Families are diverse and complex (e.g., family structures, gender roles, everyday family lives, economic and cultural diversity).
- Primary schools in Austria are required to address family diversity in their curricula.
- Scholarly knowledge about how children conceptualize family diversity is limited (Kirkland et al. 2019; Lee-Hammond et al. 2015; Peregrina-Nievas et al. 2025; Vandebroek 2021).

Research Aim and Research Question

- This contribution aims to provide insights into the attitudes, values and meaning-making of primary school children regarding family diversity.
- Research Question: How do primary school children conceptualize family and family diversity, and what do they consider as essential to know about families?

Participatory Research Design

Sample:

- 87 children in primary schools (aged 8 to 11)
- Six different classes
- Urban and rural Austrian region

Data collection in 24 workshops, including:

- Focus groups
- Concept Cartoon discussions
- Collection and analysis of artefacts
- Research diaries

Data analysis:

- Thematic analysis (Froschauer & Lueger, 2003)
- Documentary method (Bohnsack, 2013)



Primary School Children's Views on Family Diversity

(1) Definition and meaning

- Belonging to a family is defined by kinship and/or emotional connection.
- The nuclear family is a central point of reference.
- Families can take many different forms, for example in terms of size, composition, gender and biological relation.
- Families are essential for survival.
- Families are social systems in which people spend time together and engage in shared activities.

(2) Economic diversity

Families have unequal resources in various areas:

- Finances
- Living and housing conditions
- Leisure activities

(3) Cultural diversity

Families are different with regard to:

- Traditions
- Celebrations
- Language
- Food
- Appearance (e.g. clothing, skin color)

(4) Emotions and negotiation

- Positive emotions are seen as natural and obligatory.
- Conflicts are perceived as undesirable and should be resolved as quickly as possible.
- Cohesion, mutual support, respect and honesty are emphasized as essential family values.
- Family role division is conceptualized in a conservative manner (e.g. regarding the division of labor).

(5) Worries and fears

- Families are potentially fragile.
- Transitions can cause anxiety.
- Families can be threatened by violence, loss, grief, war and displacement.

Conclusion

The results show that children's ideas about families are manifold, differentiated, and often surprising. The participants primarily view family diversity in terms of structural and socio-economic characteristics, but also emphasize differences in values, negotiation processes, and communication. Despite these differences, the respondents' constructions are united by the idea that families are an essential part of life, providing children with the security they need. The respondents predominantly hold heteronormative ideas about families.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of integrating children's perspectives in participatory sociological research and emphasize the need to acknowledge their views when teaching children about families. The results will inform the development of didactic materials for primary schools, integrating children's understanding of family diversity, providing potential for critical reflection, and extending children's knowledge of families and their diversity.



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