GISo
Gesellschaft | Individuum | Sozialisation

ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR SOZIALISATIONSFORSCHUNG

DISPLAYING FAMILY AND CITIZENSHIP – FAMILIAL NEGOTIATIONS THROUGH THE LENS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SWITZERLAND

Oxana Ivanova-Chessex, Anja Sieber Egger and Gisela Unterweger

Zurich University of Teacher Education
Email: oxana.ivanova@phzh.ch
URL: https://phzh.ch/en/about-phzh/organisation/people/person-detail/?username=oxana.ivanova
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0690-8960

Zurich University of Teacher Education
Email: anja.sieber@phzh.ch
URL: https://phzh.ch/en/about-phzh/organisation/people/person-detail/?username=anja.sieber
ORCID https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5588-8105

Zurich University of Teacher Education
Email: gisela.unterweger@phzh.ch
URL: https://phzh.ch/en/about-phzh/organisation/people/person-detail/?username=gisela.unterweger
ORCID https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2542-7575

Citation suggestion:

Ivanova-Chessex, Oxana/Sieber Egger, Anja/Unterweger, Gisela (2026): Displaying Family and Citizenship – Familial Negotiations through the Lens of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Switzerland. In: Gesellschaft – Individuum – Sozialisation. Zeitschrift für Sozialisationsforschung, 7 (1). DOI: https://doi.org/10.26043/GISo.2026.1.5

Link to the article:

https://doi.org/10.26043/GISo.2026.1.5

Dieses Werk ist lizenziert unter einer Creative Commons Namensnennung – Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen 4.0 International Lizenz.

DISPLAYING FAMILY AND CITIZENSHIP – FAMILIAL NEGOTIATIONS THROUGH THE LENS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SWITZERLAND

Oxana Ivanova-Chessex, Anja Sieber Egger and Gisela Unterweger

Societal crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic both expose and intensify existing social inequalities. In Switzerland, public appeals such as "Stay at home now. Save lives" positioned family members as civic and moral actors, linking health responsibilities with normative ideals of "good" parenting and family life. This article investigates how families navigated these overlapping demands during the first lockdown in spring 2020. Drawing on qualitative family interviews, the study applies governmentality theory and the sociological concept of displaying family to analyse how families constructed legitimacy in relation to hegemonic norms and to show the performative nature of this construction. Two case studies – a single mother caring for a child with vulnerable health and a migrant family with precarious legal status – demonstrate how expectations of "good citizenship" and "good family" intersected and, at times, conflicted. Children's perspectives occasionally disrupted parental narratives, exposing tensions between collective family displays and individual experience. The analysis highlights how biopolitical governance shaped everyday family practices under unequal conditions.

Keywords: Displaying family, displaying good citizenship, COVID-19, family interviews, subjectivation, health crisis

1. INTRODUCTION: "STAY AT HOME NOW. SAVE LIVES."

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe in March 2020, the Swiss Federal Council, via the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH), appealed to the population's responsibility and discipline with the slogan "Stay at home now. Save lives." ("Bleiben Sie jetzt zu Hause. Retten Sie Leben."). The message was spread through television, radio, mass media, social media, and via pictograms and posters in public spaces. In German, the appeal was formulated in the imperative and directed at a generalized "Sie" (the polite form of "you"), addressing all citizens and residents. The appeal focused on two required actions – "staying at home" and "saving lives" –, which were brought into a causal relationship. In order to fulfill the moral mandate of saving people's lives, citizens were called on to (simply) stay at home. The implication was that leaving the house would endanger the lives of others. This causality gave the appeal an ethical dimension, appealing to the conscience of individuals to persuade them *not* to do something. Thus, the COVID-19 policy deployed the essential question of life and death to regulate everyday action, in an attempt to govern human bodies in a particular way. Addressing people as dutiful and obedient constituted them as political subjects with corresponding rights and duties – as citizens, irrespective of their legal residence status.

An increasing number of studies on the experiences of families during the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed how daily lives were changed by uncertainty and required new negotiations (Budde et al. 2025). Surveys in different international contexts reported rising parental insecurity and anxiety as well as increasing pressure on parents and caregivers (e.g. Li et al. 2020; Kurata et al. 2021). For children, experiences of parental distress, job precarity, and non-standard work schedules have been linked to lower levels of well-being (e.g. Han/Hart 2022). During the pandemic, this coincided with spending more time with their families. Some children experienced this time, especially with siblings, as

positive (Langemeyer et al. 2020), while for others, being thrown back on their own families meant feelings of loneliness and distress (Alt et al. 2020). A family could become a place of protection, support, and deceleration, but also a place of increasing risks of domestic violence, poverty, and precariousness (e.g. Mantovani et al. 2021).

In Switzerland, the closing down of schools during the pandemic was associated with an increase in depressive symptoms, anxiety, and stress among children and adolescents, with girls and those with pre-existing conditions most affected. Family support emerged as the strongest protective factor, while school-related pressures, lower resilience, and differences in quality of life between the German-speaking and the Italian- and French-speaking regions highlighted notable regional disparities (Dändliker et al. 2022).

In this paper,[1] we ask how political appeals in the context of a health crisis work when they are entangled with the unequal positionings and living conditions of families, and how much scope these politically generated discursive spaces give families to make their own choices. We approach this question by focusing on families' experiences with children's education during the COVID-19 period, based on insights from 19 family interviews. After outlining the theoretical framework (2), we explain the context and methodological framework of the study (3), followed by the results of our hermeneutical analyses based on two selected cases (4). We conclude by reflecting on varying vulnerabilities emerging at the nexus between family norms and political interpellations[2], and by considering the relevance of our findings for other health crises (5).

2. GOVERNMENTALITY AND DISPLAYING FAMILY – THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

To sharpen the perspective on the experiences of health crises in families, we use two theoretical approaches: the theory of governmentality (Foucault 2010; Duncker 2020; Krach 2021) and the concept of displaying family (Finch 2007; Almack 2008; Walsh et al. 2020), as developed in sociological family studies. The theory of governmentality as conceived by Foucault (2010) enables us to understand political appeals and measures during a health crisis as specific forms of governing with a regulative and subjecting function (Duncker 2020), oscillating between the individual's control of the self and the biopolitical (state) control of the population. In this sense, health policy measures for crisis management and population protection govern people's bodies and establish a "regime of the self" (Bröckling 2007, 61), which drives individuals to take responsibility for their lives (Bröckling 2007, 61). This regime is dependent on "a disciplined population whose individuals control their movements on their own (avoid unnecessary journeys and contacts), follow hygiene regulations and isolate themselves at home in the event of a possible illness" (Duncker 2020, 92f.). Such disciplining takes place pastorally, i.e. through appeals to the "conscience of individuals", "their civic discipline", and "solidarity" (Duncker 2020, 93): the individual is expected to fulfill the nationally formulated task to "be a good citizen and help keep the curve flat" (Duncker 2020, 94) and to "stay at home" and "save lives." The idea of exercising and demonstrating self-discipline in everyday life – to implement government measures to contain the spread of the virus – lies at the core of what we refer to as being interpellated and positioning oneself as a "good citizen". We juxtapose this notion of subjectivation as a

[1] The paper is based on the research project "Kindheiten und Schule im (Post-)Lockdown (KiSPoLock)" (Childhoods and School in [Post-]Lockdown [KiSpoLock Study]) (Sieber Egger/Unterweger 2022). This work was supported by the Zurich University of Teacher Education, Switzerland. The research has resulted in the podcast "Sch*** Corona. Kinder erzählen aus der Pandemie" (Sh** Corona. Children Talk about the Pandemic) (Sieber Egger et al. 2022) funded by the Mercator Foundation Switzerland and the Ethics Commission of the Catholic Church of the Canton of Zurich.

[2] We use 'interpellation', a term coined by Althusser, in Butler's sense (1997, 2-6). Butler distances herself from a deterministic understanding of the term and stresses its often paradoxical roles in processes of subjectivation.

good citizen with another concept, namely that of displaying family.

From a sociological family studies perspective (Collins 1998; Finch 2007; Daly 2017), we argue that political interpellations during the pandemic reinforced and complicated existing norms of family and parenting, adding another layer to the task of doing and displaying family. Highlighting the processes of *doing* rather than *being*, we understand family as a culturally and historically variable nexus of norms and social practices (Morgan 2011), which modulates "social arrangements between generations and genders, collectives and individuals, people and things" (Knecht 2003, 52). We follow critical family studies by stressing that the hegemonic ideas of a "normal family" (Collins 1998, 62; Fegter et al. 2015, 5), conceived as "middle-class, white, heterosexual, cisgender, monogamous, settled, healthy and capable" (Fitz-Klausner et al. 2021, 7), structure family practices. From this theoretical perspective, notions of a particular normality function as unarticulated, taken-for-granted normative assumptions of how family ought to be – "a grid of legibility" (Butler 2004, 42) that defines the parameters by which family practices will be understood as socially recognizable and legitimate, or as deviant. In this manner, family-related norms influence the positions of families within wider social contexts and regulate the way they are addressed as conforming to or deviating from the norm. Material objects, practices, specific forms of interaction, and narratives could function as manifestations of this positioning as a more or less "normal family". For the family members, this constitutive element of the norms means specific efforts to performatively conform to these norms as closely as possible – to *display* the norms (Finch 2007; Dermott/Seymour 2011). Finch (2007, 67), who introduced this concept for sociological family analyses, uses the term to describe a process in which "individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and relevant audiences that certain of their actions do constitute 'doing family things' and thereby confirm that these relationships are 'family' relationships." Drawing on the assumption of Finch (2007, 71) that *all* families require forms of displaying and claiming to be read as family, Heaphy (2011, 20) states that "[d]emands to display, and investments in it, are likely to vary for different kinds of families […] and within families." Display, Heaphy (2011, 21) argues, "is linked to the power and politics of relational life." Families that are further from the hegemonic norm of the "good", "proper" and "normal" family are especially likely to strive for recognition, validation, and legitimation of their display (Finch 2007, 71f.; Heaphy 2011, 30). Following Butler (2015), we interpret these investments in displaying as a relational and socially situated vulnerability, rendered performative through the very demands and interpellations families face. Vulnerability is therefore not a characteristic of individuals or groups but rather emerges as "political effects, unequally distributed effects of a field of power that acts upon and through bodies" (Butler 2015, 145). In this light, practices of displaying reveal the simultaneity of subjection and empowerment: vulnerability emerges at the nexus between the impossibility of evading (unwanted) interpellations and the capacity to engage with the conditions of one's own societal positioning.

Research on LGBTQ* parents describes display work as a normalization strategy to avoid othering (Riegel 2021; Anzengruber et al. 2022). For migrant parents, it serves to gain recognition in the host country by aligning with state-defined family norms (Walsh 2018). Heaphy (2011) highlights single-parent families as particularly vulnerable to failing such displays, while for working-class families, family intelligibility secures key legal, economic, and social advantages. In this way, family displays can be understood as political, "because they are linked to inclusions and exclusions from relational 'citizenship'" (Heaphy 2011, 31), defined not only via legal parameters but also via social and cultural fulfillment of required societal norms. According to this, recognition as a "proper", "good", and "normalized" family can be understood as being related to a status of belonging within a particular socio-political context, a status of "full relational citizenship" associated with "legal, sociocultural and economic benefits […] such as state sponsored financial and social supports; immigration, adoption and parenting rights; community and expert supports; representational rights and so on" (Heaphy 2011, 32).

The intersection of family norms and interpellation as a political subject in the context of the pandemic is the focus of the following analysis. We aim to explore how displaying practices during the COVID-19 health crisis relate to the power matrix, and to analyse families' performative response to family norms on the one hand and political interpellations during the pandemic on the other.

3. STUDY CONTEXT AND RESEARCH APPROACH

The study underlying this analysis, "Childhood and Schooling in (Post-)Lockdown: Experiences of Children and their Families During the COVID-19 Pandemic" (Sieber Egger/Unterweger 2022), began in Switzerland in early summer 2020 – at a time when the Swiss government declared a state of emergency (the so-called "extraordinary situation") and gradually adopted a package of measures to combat the pandemic. It was the time just after the closing of schools between March 16 and May 10, 2020. Compared to other European countries, schools were closed for a fairly short period, only eight weeks. Gatherings of more than five people were prohibited. Other measures, such as the temporary closing of leisure facilities, restaurants, and shops, restrictions on visiting rights in hospitals and nursing homes, and severe restrictions on mobility, were also part of the actions taken during the "extraordinary situation". Masks did not become mandatory until late summer 2020.

Shortly after schools reopened in early summer 2020, we conducted 19 family interviews (Thiel/Götz 2018), each involving at least one child between 8 and 12 years of age. The aim was to capture, document, and analyse the experiences of families during the school lockdown in Switzerland in a timely manner. The contact with the families was mediated through schools in diverse urban neighborhoods. Many of the families we eventually reached struggled in one way or another for recognition as a "normal" family in terms of hegemonic norms – be it because of their status as migrants, their health condition, their class affiliation, or their family form, e.g. single parenthood. The interviews were conducted in an open setting with one or two parents and at least one child present at the same time. In many cases, siblings also participated. In the analysis for this article, we not only considered the explicit statements in which adults and children described how they dealt with the manifold challenges of the early pandemic. We also – and even predominantly – examined the latent content of the conversations by applying the techniques of hermeneutic data analysis as outlined by Wernet (2006). The focus lies on how families negotiated and positioned themselves in relation to the health policy regulations introduced during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Switzerland.

4. NEGOTIATIONS AND POSITIONINGS WITHIN FAMILIES AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PANDEMIC – EMPIRICAL RESULTS

To present empirical results on how families negotiated and positioned themselves at the beginning of the pandemic, we selected two families whose displaying of family was shaped by interactions within the family on the one hand and by the need to respond to societal expectations, political demands, and government regulations, each involving different possible divergences from hegemonic norms, on the other. Using these examples, we explore the constraints, possibilities, and contradictions involved in subjectivation as a "good citizen" while displaying "good family" – a dynamic that, as we will show, affects children and adults in different ways.

4.1 The Pürro Family:3 Health Risks and State Requirements

Andrea Pürro and her two sons Gabriel and Yannis live in a large Swiss city. Andrea is divorced from the children's biological father. Since the divorce, the father has cared for them every second weekend. That changed with the 2020 lockdown, when the mother suspended these visits because the father still had (physical) contact

[3] All names, places, and other possible references that might make it possible to identify the interviewees have been anonymized.

with people through his work. At the end of January 2020, Andrea married her boyfriend Marco. Marco moved into the family's apartment two months later, very shortly before the Swiss government declared a lockdown in March 2020. Yannis was ten years old at that time and was in fourth grade in the public school in the neighborhood. He is a child with Down's syndrome, which positioned him within a group defined as medically vulnerable in the context of COVID-19. His brother Gabriel, two years younger, was in second grade at the same school. Andrea has a degree in social work and is a member of the management board of a charity organization. Andrea, Gabriel, Yannis, and the maternal grandmother were present at the interview.

In the interview, a specific dynamic builds up between the mother and her son Gabriel. This dynamic shows a discrepancy regarding the display of family. From the beginning of the interview, it is noticeable that Gabriel repeatedly interrupts his mother's narrative and representation of her family, making his experiences and positions clear in these interruptions. The first time he heard about COVID is one such point of contention: Gabriel locates this "first" in an extra-familial context, in a peer relationship within a special educational needs program. This disconcerts and surprises his mother, who presents herself as having been directly concerned by the disease and alert to its spread from early on, due to the health situation of her older son and the vulnerable clientele at her work. Prompted by the approaching threat, she initiated protective measures – both at work and at home. By drawing on her expertise, she creates a story that is dominated by the leitmotif of dealing with the crisis appropriately. She depicts herself as confident, competent, and able to confront the looming crisis, both at home (with the help of the doctors) and at work (with the help of protective measures). She presents herself as the center of the family or even as the equivalent of her family (she *is* the family) and as a successful mother and professional who is in control of the situation. The mother therefore latently invokes a norm that makes the *family* the legitimate and socially recognized place of health education – and not a peer relationship of her son. Gabriel's insistence on his "first time" in the peer context outside the family puts the mother under pressure to legitimize her parental actions. To maintain her display of a good family – a place where intimate and even threatening matters are discussed and where situations of insecurity are addressed together and in harmony –, she reacts to her son's statements with justifications. This is interesting insofar as Gabriel presents himself as an actor outside the family at a moment when the family is called upon as a place for the negotiation of critical information.

Another interesting point in the interview is the mother's strikingly simultaneous references to official guidelines for containing the pandemic and to family rules, for example in the following sequence:

Andrea: We really kept very strictly to the FOPH's guidelines,[4] *simply because of Yannis. We were very isolated //mhm//. Really, we were a mini system of four. They didn't even go to their daddy for a month because their daddy had to work externally and so on. […] So we were a bit, […], in our own little micro world. […] but in the long run, I don't think it would be so healthy.*
Gabriel: //I was only allowed to watch when the others were playing…//. […]
Andrea: Were playing?
Gabriel: … my friends.
Andrea: Yes, there were families who managed it very casually.
Gabriel: And that's where my friends are. […][5]

In this sequence, Andrea seems to identify strongly with the governmental measures, partly because her concerns as the mother of a healthy but vulnerable son coincide with the governmental requirements. She presents herself as a citizen who wants to do everything right in this exceptional situation. Her constant concern for Yannis's health issues coincides with the radical restriction of social contacts mandated by the government. By bringing her ex-husband and the father of her two sons into the picture, she indirectly refers to the norm of an intact nuclear family – husband and wife with two children –,

[4] FOPH: Swiss Federal Office of Public Health

[5] The interview excerpts were translated from Swiss German by the authors.

which she failed to fulfill because of her divorce. By striving to keep the boys' relationship with their father alive, she displays her willingness to follow good parental practice under these circumstances – "good" in this situation meaning maintaining as unburdened a relationship as possible between the children and their father. The "isolation – micro world – not so healthy in the long run" and the suspension of visits to the father can only be presented as legitimate because of Yannis's health risks. This is linked to displaying "good" mothering: Andrea does everything she can for the (physical) well-being of her vulnerable son, even if this leads to sacrifices and isolation for her and her other son Gabriel. At the same time, she can rely on state measures and, as someone who strictly adheres to government regulations, she can legitimize her decisions as those of a "good citizen".

This sequence suggests a contrast with other families, who display a "relaxed management" of the situation. Later in the interview, Andrea remarks that she had not found a single family in the entire neighborhood that implemented the measures with the same consistency and strictness as she did. On the one hand, she thus occupies a unique position and that of a powerful woman who has everything under control despite the vulnerability of her family constellation (as the divorced and remarried mother of a medically vulnerable son). On the other hand, however, there is a hint of disappointment because she could not rely on other families. She misses the solidarity and acceptance of responsibility proclaimed by the government.

Her son Gabriel intervenes with brief interjections. There is a short negotiation of the burden: Gabriel wants to show that he has made the weightiest sacrifice in the situation by only being allowed to watch his friends play from a distance and not being part of their interactions. A little later in the interview, Andrea finds words of praise for her younger son and how well he adhered to the measures:

Andrea: [A]nd I really think that he handled it really well with Corona //mhm//. So sometimes it was almost a bit scary when all his buddies were jumping around and we said, we'll stay, we'll just go into the forest. And you can't now. [...]

Here, Andrea maneuvers noticeably between enforcing the governmental measures in the family and realizing that her assertive and restrictive actions are hard for at least one of her sons, namely Gabriel. She acknowledges Gabriel's sacrifices and frames his achievement positively. She describes the degree of his adjustment as "a bit scary", as if it exceeded what can or should be expected of a child his age. Nevertheless, her overriding motive is to maintain control over social contacts, which she repeatedly links to state measures. In her narrative, then, the display of good motherhood in relation to her vulnerable son – expressed through protecting, caring for, and isolating her son in this exceptional situation – overlaps with that of being a good citizen – expressed through observing social distancing rules – in ways that mutually reinforce each other. With this close interweaving, however, she navigates a fine normative line in her display of good motherhood towards her younger son, Gabriel. This tension becomes even more evident in a later exchange during the interview, when an explicit dispute in the family is evoked. The attempts of the son to be heard and recognized as a member of the family with a distinct perspective become manifest:

Andrea: And then I really struggled with myself. Well, we had really long //
Gabriel: Fight
Andrea: ... and also some difficult //
Gabriel: Fight
Andrea: ... hospital and intensive care unit stories with him [meaning Yannis].
Gabriel: Fight
Andrea: [...] That means I, well, I had to //
Gabriel: Fight
Andrea: ... also process this with my therapist //
Gabriel: Mom, we had a fight.
Andrea: ... and so on. But afterward, we got through this phase relatively well. And I was a bit relieved when the school closed. [...] I was a bit relieved because I couldn't really assess what an infection would mean for him. [...]
Gabriel: But mom, a fight.
Andrea: I think you're going to hold that against me for the rest of your life (laughs). We did, it was a bit mean, wasn't it? [...] And in this first phase, we really did have a few arguments ... Arguments in all kinds of constellations. So, we shouted at the children, the children shouted at

me, the children just "bickered" with each other. […] Me and Marco had two or three real arguments.

Andrea complements the image of a mother who proactively tries to avert the impending danger with a reflective note that addresses her fear and its rational processing in a therapeutic setting. The process is portrayed as successful, with the comment that the family managed this phase relatively well. In Andrea's opinion, the school closing also contributed to a certain degree of relaxation. She creates a harmonized familial "we", allowing no space for disputes. At the same time, however, this is an empowered "we", which enabled the family to cope with "this phase" and the threats posed by Yannis's condition. This is meant to be a tale of a united, harmonious family, but Gabriel persistently brings in his own experience, challenging the normative ideal of a family that stands together in difficult times and copes with everything as one. His descriptions threaten the harmonious family "we" created by the mother's narrative. Gabriel's repeated one-word interjection, "fight", compels the mother to respond to him.

She must adapt her narrative to maintain the image of an empathetic mother. She does so by focusing on the difficulties experienced during a sensitive phase of family reorganization with her new husband, Marco. The "fight" sequence ultimately reveals a gap between the mother's portrayal of harmonious family life and the son's attempt to insert his counter-narrative into the "we" story, thereby challenging her socially and politically expected performance of responsible family and citizenship. According to Heaphy (2011, 27), the risk of failing family display is especially high for single-parent families. For these families, "class, gender, ethnicity and age are combined with family form in constructions of feckless mothers, absent fathers and irresponsible single-parent families who 'sponge' on the state" (Heaphy 2011, 27). Single mothers like Andrea are subjected to these constructs, but simultaneously reinforce them with their own narratives.

To expand this picture, we turn to the Qurban family. Here too, we see differences in the experiences of the parents and the children and how they meet political and normative expectations as a family and as citizens.

4.2 The Qurban Family: Playing Football and Being Good Citizens

The Qurban family – father, mother, and five children – live in a medium-sized Swiss city. At the time of the interview, the father had been living in Switzerland for seven years. His wife and children had followed him about two years later. Khaled Qurban had trained as a car mechanic in Switzerland after working for the military in Iran. Because of a knee injury, he wanted to start training as a bus driver. Aisha Qurban provided the care work for the family and was learning German intensively. Khaled and his twelve-year-old son Assadullah were the main interviewees, but for a short time, the other four children and the wife also participated in the interview. At the time of the interview, the family had an insecure residence permit and was receiving social welfare benefits.

During the interview, it is striking how the father presents himself – much like Andrea Pürro – as the "knowledge hub" of the family: he follows the news and then passes on what he has learned to his children and wife. He explains his approach to dealing with the threat in this passage:

Khaled: And we always heard the news on TV every day, every evening. I talked to my children, to my wife. […] And I also made a note in my cell phone for a while. Every day I looked at that and I explained to my children, yes, please … First, they don't go outside anymore, they don't go play with other children, and uh, if you go with another child nearby or maybe another child [is] a bit sick, if they get this disease, then you bring that sickness home and we don't know, then you go to school. All my five children go to school. […] And uh, every day I have an hour with my children. Half an hour during the day, half an hour at night, I explained this virus, this illness. […] When school was uh … closed. At that time, we were at home. And uh, we uh … [code-switching; talks to his wife] mountains, mountains?
Aisha: In the mountains.
Interviewer: Ah, yes, in the mountains?

Khaled: Yes. We went to the mountains twice a week. And eat there and children play football. Alone, there are no people there.[6]

This statement illustrates the father's exemplary conduct: he gathers and processes relevant news for his family, strictly implements health policy instructions, and ensures his children comply with them. He emphasizes the effort invested in explaining in detail everything related to the virus and its implications for everyday routines, thereby combining the role of a responsible, caring father with the normative expectations of good citizenship in pandemic times. Khaled's behavior is informed both by his awareness of the health risks for a family with five school-attending children and by the constraints of their insecure residency status. This status also shapes what can be narrated about their life during the pandemic. Educational conversations with the children, trips to the mountains, and strict adherence to the rules exemplify the practices that are socially and politically expected of an ideal citizen and father. Like the Pürro family, however, Khaled's role as the family's primary source of knowledge about COVID-19 is quietly challenged by his son Assadullah, whose interventions, unlike Gabriel's, are subtle rather than confrontational.

He introduces his sources of alternative knowledge:

Interviewer (addressing Assadullah): And how was that for you? When did you find out about Corona?
Assadullah: Uh, my father told me too, and my teacher. Or um, sometimes when we were watching TV. […] The news from Germany and Switzerland was on four channels. And what the seven federal councilors said about what they are leading during Corona or something[7]*. For example, I have a laptop and um (unintelligible), 'so when I turn on the laptop and search for something […] when I'm studying, we have our own homepage. You can study there if you want to go on it. There are, um, like newspapers, for example, so in the Corona time, when everyone was still at home, um there were a lot of things about Corona and stuff. And that it started in China. So, the first time I already knew in my laptop.*
Interviewer: Okay. What, so you did research it yourself then?
Assadullah: Mhm. Mhm. Yes.

Assadullah initially confirms his father's narration, naming him first as a source of information, alongside his teacher. But then the son elegantly shifts to another topic, his laptop. It seems to be of great importance to him, as he also picks up on the subject several times later in the interview. It is a precious thing, "with touchscreen and everything, rather expensive", and he protects it from his siblings. The laptop connects him to school but also to the outside world. And it offers him knowledge that goes beyond what he hears from his father: Assadullah refers to four relevant TV channels, not just "news on TV", and he knows about the role of the seven Swiss councilors guiding the nation through the pandemic. So just like Gabriel, who is referring to a peer as a source of knowledge, Assadullah also has access to a knowledge base outside the family. In contrast to Andrea Pürro, though, Khaled does not seem to be bothered by his son's statement.

The family attaches a great deal of importance to sports activities, in line with the hegemonic norms of (family) life in Switzerland. Because of the restrictive governmental regulations, the sports fields remained closed. Playing football subsequently became something they missed during lockdown, as Khaled describes:

Khaled: We have a football field nearby. My three sons go there to play football. But during this time [lockdown] the ground was closed. […] It had a sign that you are not allowed to play here. Not even in twos, or fours, or fives. You are not allowed to come.

The communication on the signboard, just like the communication of other (official) pandemic measures and rules via other media, is something that Khaled notices and seems to take very seriously. At the same time, the repeated reference to football during the interview is interesting. The large family with five children risks being

[6] The authors' translation from German.

[7] In the original German text: «… was sie beim Corona führen oder so»

read as deviating from hegemonic family norms. The reference to football, which is legitimized by the majority society, is a way of claiming normality in the context of migration and a fragile societal positioning, as well as in the context of dominant family and parenting norms.

Assadullah takes up the thread and elaborates on his father's remarks, giving more technical details. At the same time, he carefully relativizes the strictness that his father has claimed with regard to following COVID-19 measures:

Assadullah: Well, we didn't play as much football as we do now. […] For example, we played football in the forest. And sometimes in the afternoon when there were no people there in the football field. There are two football fields. One, it's artificial turf and there are gates and everything and stuff. They closed all the gates there during Corona time. […] But there's a lawn next to it with real grass, so it's not artificial grass. And that's where me and my mum, well my mum and my brothers and sisters would go to play sometimes, or me and my dad and stuff.
Khaled: Yes, we made two teams. […] In the evening, when all the people are at home, and when it was not dark. And we were there half an hour, forty minutes playing with children. Not staying at home always, it is sad, yes.

The sequence illustrates a subtle negotiation between father and son. The son follows the father's remarks but nuances his rigorous statements. He talks about his passion, for which he must seek permissible opportunities during the lockdown, for example by making do with family members as teammates. The whole family, in Assadullah's depiction, can now be integrated into a practice that the father first introduced as a boys-only activity. The father, on the other hand, makes sure that the spaces opened up in his son's narrative nevertheless comply with governmental guidelines, emphasizing that social distancing and the numeric limitation to a family household were respected. In this way, father and son both articulate their respective needs and concerns in a fine-tuned interplay, without directly contradicting each other. Unlike the case of the Pürro family, the son is not undermining or directly challenging his father's display of being a good citizen while displaying good parenting. He is, however, subtly adding his perspective to it. Regarding migrant parents, Walsh (2018) conceptualizes the family display as a "strategy for achieving recognition and validation in the host country." Migrant families "feel driven to display family: to display in line with State-defined familial norms; to minimize their position as other; and to promote connectivity […] in the host community" (Walsh 2018, 80). Migrant families "feel pressured to show their family: to present themselves in accordance with the family norms defined by the state, to minimise their position as outsiders and to promote their connection […] with the host society" (Walsh 2018, 80). In the Qurban family's accounts, this displaying is exacerbated by the health crisis.

5. INTERSECTIONS OF FAMILY NORMS AND POLITICAL INTERPELLATIONS AS CITIZENS DURING HEALTH CRISES

We have demonstrated how negotiations and positionings within the interviewed families take place in response to political regulations during a health crisis. The families' narratives about the early months of the pandemic are shaped by an ongoing struggle to construct an image of themselves as "good families" and "good citizens". Based on the case analyses, we conclude by highlighting three key aspects.

First, the governmental measures and the interpellations of good citizenship resonate differently with the family members according to the specific *vulnerabilities of the families*, which are produced, accentuated, or perpetuated in specific ways in the pandemic contexts. In the pandemic context, the vulnerability of the Pürro family is mainly associated with the older son's fragile health and the mother's non-standard (divorced, remarried) situation. The mother acts and narrates in the discursive context of "good parenting", most notably the protection of the vulnerable child in the context of a health crisis. At the same time, however, she refers to societal norms and demarcates her family life from the hegemonic constructions of single-parent families (Heath 2011, 27). The son, on the other hand, points out that this "displaying good family" contradicts the conflictual family dynamics as he perceives them, exposing tensions within the constructed ideal.

The situation of the Qurban family differs. On the one hand, their vulnerability arises from their fragile legal position in relation to Swiss migration law and a (discursively) cultivated "deportability" (De Genova 2002), referring explicitly to the interpellation of the "good migrant resident" (Walsh 2018). Their displaying of family is influenced by a racialized migration regime that is shaped by the demand for assimilation and the pressure to be "good" and "grateful" migrants (Tietje/Tuider 2019). On the other hand, this fragile citizenship status intersects with the necessity to conform to the dominant family norm of a nuclear family with father, mother, and two children. Since the Qurban family is a large family with five children, this exacerbates the vulnerability of their position.

Secondly, the practices of political responsibilization during the health crisis seem to evoke particular normative facets of displaying family. During a health crisis, family is displayed as a protected, safe, and stable place in the context of an external threat (a). In our empirical examples, the construction of a well-functioning family becomes clear. In the context of the invisible threat of a pandemic, family boundaries are tightened and the family is celebrated as a safe and stable place that offers protection. The practices of family display are dominated by a harmonious, capable, and powerful familial "we" (b). This "we" becomes a mode in which the narrated experiences become legible as *familial experiences*. Individual insecurities and specific interests of the family members are resolved in the familial "we". It is supposed to withstand or successfully overcome the difficult external circumstances of life. The idea of family is related to norms of parenting, namely the parent who is confident, able to cope and in control (c). Central to the familial "we" is the displaying of a good mother or a good father – a competent, controlling parent who responds to the specific needs of the children and who can act appropriately even in situations of crisis.

We conclude *thirdly* that the way families react and the narratives they produce within the discursive and social context of a health crisis lie at the intersection between representing a good family and representing good citizenship. Parents strive to present themselves as acting appropriately as good citizens and good parents during the pandemic, or as aligning their actions with hegemonic norms of parenting or citizenship. The children's statements make their parents' efforts clear: they do not appear to be under the same pressure as their parents to display hegemonic norms of citizenship.

What are the necessities that led to the development of this display in the two families of the sample? The health crisis can be understood as a context that calls families to existential responsibility – e.g. through the measures formulated by the FOPH with the slogan "Stay at home now. Save lives." Families as the addressees of these appeals are put to the test: can they manage this? In this context, parents are expected to be the (responsible) powerhouses of the family and at the same time reliable, disciplined citizens – albeit with different residential/legal statuses, which have their own impact. Thus Andrea Pürro not only protects her son but (unlike the neighboring families) fulfills the civic duty of "saving lives", at work as well as at home. Similarly, Khaled Qurban struggles to fulfill the normative expectations and conform to the image of a "well-integrated" parent under regimes of migration (Walsh 2018). The personal intentions of both families become inseparable from public interests, and this becomes an ideal condition for the unfolding of biopower, for the entanglement of biopolitical, disciplinary, and pastoral techniques of governmentality (cf. Fangerau/Labisch 2020, 104/111 ff.). Vulnerabilities in the context of hegemonic norms regulate families' options for dealing with the pandemic, the steps they must take to avoid falling through the "grids of social legibility" and recognition. The tensions between the exigencies of the crisis, interpreted through the lens of normative hegemonic ideals, and the everyday needs and wishes of parents and children become especially clear in the discursive situation of the family interviews. Children and parents constantly negotiate not only their differences but also their commonalities, thereby displaying normatively expected forms of family and citizenship within their respective set of constraints and possibilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a magnifying lens, highlighting dynamics in family life that are shaped by state-guided health governance and biopolitical interventions. Crises of this kind –

ranging from epidemics to climate-related health threats and issues like antibiotics resistance – place families under intensified pressure, requiring them to negotiate visibility, compliance, and social expectations. Our findings show how families actively interpret and respond to these pressures, displaying and negotiating positions that can be affirming, complicit, or resistant, depending on their social positionings and resources. While the empirical material focuses on the COVID-19 pandemic, the patterns observed are not pandemic-specific. They reveal processes through which families engage with governmental norms, recommendations, and surveillance, continuously negotiating their own agency and social positioning. In this sense, the pandemic illuminates broader mechanisms and implications of biopolitical regulation, making visible how families navigate, contest, and reproduce expectations in health crises – insights that can inform future research and remain relevant for other public health challenges.

REFERENCES

Almack, Kathryn (2008): Display Work: Lesbian Parent Couples and their Families of Origin Negotiating New Kin Relationships. In: Sociology, 42 (6), 1183–1199.

Alt, Christian/Lange, Andreas/Naab, Thorsten/Langmeyer, Alexandra (2020): Re-Familialisierung durch temporäre De-Institutionalisierung von Kindheit in Zeiten der Corona-Pandemie: Konsequenzen für Einsamkeitsgefühle. In: Theorie und Praxis der Sozialen Arbeit, 4 (71), 304–310.

Anzengruber, Maria/Riegel, Christine/Schubert, Pia (2022): Unterschiedlich verschieden. Diskriminierungserfahrungen von LSBTIQ* Eltern und deren Kinder. In: Chamakalayil, Lalitha/Ivanova-Chessex, Oxana/Leutwyler, Bruno/Scharathow, Wiebke (Eds.): Eltern und pädagogische Institutionen: Macht- und ungleichheitskritische Perspektiven. Weinheim: Beltz Juventa, 201–220.

Bröckling, Ulrich (2007): Das unternehmerische Selbst: Soziologie einer Subjektivierungsform. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.

Budde, Jürgen/Lengyel, Drorit/Böning, Caroline/Claus, Carolina/Weuster, Nora/Doden, Katharina/Schroedler, Tobias (Eds.) (2025): School in Distance – Childhood in Crisis: Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Well-being and Living Conditions of Children and Adolescents. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien.

Butler, Judith (1997): The Psychic Life of Power. Theories in Subjection. Stanford University Press.

Butler, Judith (2015): Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Butler, Judith (2004): Undoing Gender. New York: Psychology Press.

Collins, Patricia Hill (1998): It's All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation. In: Hypatia, 13 (3), 62–82.

Daly, Mary (2017): Parenting: Critical Insights from a Sociological Perspective. In: Betz, Tanja/Honig Michael-Sebastian/Ostner, Ilona (Eds.): Parents in the Spotlight: Parenting Practices and Support from a Comparative Perspective. Opladen: Barbara Budrich, 41–56.

Dändliker, Lena/Brünecke, Isabel/Citterio, Paola/Lochmatter, Fabienne/Buchmann, Marlis/Grütter, Jeanine (2022): Educational Concerns, Health Concerns and Mental Health During Early COVID-19 School Closures: The Role of Perceived Support by Teachers, Family, and Friends. In: Frontiers in Psychology, 12, 1–20.

De Genova, Nicholas (2002): Migrant "Illegality" and Deportability in Everyday Life. In: Annual Review of Anthropology, 31 (1), 419–447.

Dermott, Esther/Seymour, Julie (2011): Displaying Families: A New Concept for the Sociology of Family life. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Duncker, Simon (2020): Das Corona-Dispositiv. In: Arnold, Clara/Flügel-Martinsen, Oliver/Mohammed, Samia/Vasilache, Andreas (Eds.): Kritik in der Krise: Perspektiven politischer Theorie auf die Corona-Pandemie. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 87–102.

Fangerau, Heiner/Labisch, Christine (2020): Pest & Corona: Pandemien in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder.

Fegter, Susann/Heite, Catrin/Mierendorff, Johanna/Richter, Marina (2015): Neue Aufmerksamkeiten für Familie: Diskurse, Bilder und Adressierungen in der Sozialen Arbeit. In: Neue

Praxis: Zeitschrift für Sozialarbeit, Sozialpädagogik und Sozialpolitik, Sonderheft 12, 3–11.

Finch, Janet (2007): Displaying Families. In: Sociology, 41 (1), 65–81.

Fitz-Klausner, Sebastian/Schondelmayer, Anne-Christin/Riegel, Christine (2021): Familie und Normalität. Einführende Überlegungen. In: Schondelmayer, Anne-Christin/Riegel, Christine/Fitz-Klausner, Sebastian (Eds.): Familie und Normalität: Diskurse, Praxen und Aushandlungsprozesse. Opladen: Barbara Budrich, 7–23.

Foucault, Michel (2010): The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Han, Wen-Jui/Hart, Jake (2022): Precarious Parental Employment, Economic Hardship, and Parenting and Child Happiness amidst a Pandemic. In: Children and Youth Services Review, 133, 1–14.

Heaphy, Brian (2011): Critical Relational Display. In: Dermott, Esther/Seymour, Julie (Eds.): Displaying Families – A New Concept for the Sociology of Family Life. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 19–37.

Knecht, Michi (2003): Die Politik der Verwandtschaft neu denken. Perspektiven der Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie. In: Bulletin Texte, 26, 52–70.

Krach, Sebastian (2021): Kritik der Biopolitik: Überlegungen zur biopolitischen Gouvernementalität in Zeiten des Coronavirus und die Möglichkeit ihrer Kritik. In: Zeitschrift für Praktische Philosophie, 8 (1), 149–180.

Kurata, Sawa/Hiraoka, Daiki/Adlan, Aida Syarinaz Ahmad et al. (2021): Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Parenting Stress Across Asian Countries: A Cross-National Study. In: Frontiers in Psychology, 12, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.782298

Langemeyer, Alexandra/Guglhör-Rudan, Angelika/Naab, Thorsten/Urlen, Marc/Winklhofer, Ursula (2020): Kindsein in Zeiten von Corona: Ergebnisbericht zur Situation von Kindern während des Lockdowns im Frühjahr 2020. München: dji.

Li, Jianghong/Ohlbrecht, Heike/Pollmann-Schult, Matthias/Habib, Filip Elias (2020): Parents' Non-standard Work Schedules and Children's Social and Emotional Wellbeing: A Mixed-Methods Analysis in Germany. In: Journal of Family Research, 32 (2), 330–356.

Mantovani, Susanna/Bove, Chiara/Ferri, Paolo/Manzoni, Paola/Cesa Bianchi, Anna/Picca, Marina (2021): Children 'under lockdown': voices, experiences, and resources during and after the COVID-19 emergency. Insights from a survey with children and families in the Lombardy Region of Italy. In: European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 29 (1), 35–50.

Morgan, David H.G. (2011): Locating „Family Practices". In: Sociological Research Online, 16 (4), 174–182.

Riegel, Christine (2021): Familie jenseits der heterosexuellen und zweigeschlechtlichen Norm: Ambivalente Prozesse der Normalisierung und Anerkennung. In: Riegel, Christine/Schondelmayer, Anne-Christin/Fitz-Klausner, Sebastian (Eds.): Familie und Normalität, Diskurse, Praxen und Aushandlungsprozesse. Opladen: Barbara Budrich, 95–112.

Sieber Egger, Anja/Unterweger, Gisela/Ivanova-Chessex, Oxana/Popović, Jelica (Realisation) (2023): Podcast-Serie „Sch*** Corona – Kinder erzählen aus der Pandemie" [Sh*** Corona – Children Talk about the Pandemic] [Podcast-Episode]. Zürich: Pädagogische Hochschule Zürich. Online verfügbar unter: https://phzh.ch/ueber-die-phzh/themen-und-taetigkeiten/projekte/kindheiten-und-schule-im-post-lockdown/ (27.10.2025).

Sieber Egger, Anja/Unterweger, Gisela (Project lead) (2022): Kindheit und Schule im (Post-)Lockdown (KiSPoLock) – Erfahrungen von Kindern und ihren Familien während der Covid-19-Pandemie. [Childhoods and School in (Post-)Lockdown (KiSpoLock Study) – Experiences of Children and Their Families during the Covid-19 Pandemic] [Research project]. Zürich: Pädagogische Hochschule Zürich. https://phzh.ch/ueber-die-phzh/themen-und-taetigkeiten/projekte/kindheiten-und-schule-im-post-lockdown/

Thiel, Christian/Götz, Susanne (2018): Mehr als nur reden: Methodische Betrachtungen zu Interviews mit Familien. In: Sozialer Sinn, 19 (1), 45–75.

Tietje, Olaf/Tuider, Elisabeth (2019): Post-Migration-Society, Willkommenskultur und Flucht: Unsichtbares rekonstruieren – Nicht-thematisiertes analysieren. In: Burzan, Nicole (Ed.): Komplexe Dynamiken globaler und lokaler Entwicklungen. Verhandlungen des 39. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie in Göttingen 2018. https://publikationen.soziologie.de/index.php/kongressband_2018/de/issue/view/33

Walsh, Julie (2018): Migrant Family Display: A Strategy for Achieving Recognition and Validation in the Host Country. In: Sociological Research Online, 23 (1), 67–83.

Walsh, Julie/McNamee, Sally/Seymour, Julie (2020): Family Display, Family Type, or Community? Limitations in the Application of a Concept. In: Families, Relationships and Societies, 9 (3), 345–360.

Wernet, Andreas (2006): Einführung in die Interpretationstechnik der Objektiven Hermeneutik. Wiesbaden: VS Springer.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

Author Notes:

Oxana Ivanova-Chessex is a senior researcher at the Centre for Childhood in Education and Society at the Zurich University of Teacher Education. Her research and teaching focus on education in the context of power relations and societal inequalities, on school-family relations, and on teacher education that is attentive to power and difference. She draws on subjectivation theory, postcolonial theory, and intersectionality and works with qualitative-reconstructive methods, particularly biographical research.

Anja Sieber Egger is a professor of educational science with a focus on educational anthropology at the Zurich University of Teacher Education (PHZH). Since 2013, she has co-directed the Centre for Childhood in Education and Society. Her research and teaching concentrate on the new social studies of childhood, with a focus on posthumanist and new materialist perspectives, as well as on issues of difference, inequality, and power relations in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Methodologically, her work draws on ethnography, grounded theory, and biographical approaches.

Gisela Unterweger is a senior researcher and co-leader of the Centre for Childhood in Education and Society at the Zurich University of Teacher Education. In her research and teaching, she focuses on issues relating to everyday school culture, with a particular interest in power relations and constructions of difference. She also applies posthumanist and new materialist perspectives to school spaces and practices in her predominantly ethnographic studies of childhood in educational institutions.

Contact

Oxana Ivanova-Chessex
Zurich University of Teacher Education, Research and Development
Research Center Childhood in Education and Society
Lagerstrasse 2
CH-8090 Zurich
Email: oxana.ivanova@phzh.ch
URL: https://phzh.ch/en/about-phzh/organisation/people/person-detail/?username=oxana.ivanova
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0690-8960

Anja Sieber Egger
Zurich University of Teacher Education, Research and Development
Research Center Childhood in Education and Society
Lagerstrasse 2
CH-8090 Zurich
Email: anja.sieber@phzh.ch
URL: https://phzh.ch/en/about-phzh/organisation/people/person-detail/?username=anja.sieber
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5588-8105

Gisela Unterweger
Zurich University of Teacher Education, Research and Development
Research Center Childhood in Education and Society
Lagerstrasse 2
CH-8090 Zurich
Email: gisela.unterweger@phzh.ch
URL: https://phzh.ch/en/about-phzh/organisation/people/person-detail/?username=gisela.unterweger
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2542-7575