



Schools and Education in Germany



A guide for refugee parents and other parents newly arrived in Germany

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This text is written in plain language. It is guided – with some concessions – by the rules published by the Netzwerk Leichte Sprache (German plain language network). Based on plain language principles, gender-appropriate language has not been used. All references to persons include all genders. The abbreviated language style is used for editorial reasons and does not represent a value judgement.

Introduction

Dear parents and legal guardians,

School is an important time in the life of children and young people. It influences children for the rest of their lives. This means: experiences at school are important for later in life as well. This is why children and young people need special support during this time.

This guide gives you an overview of the legal basis for schools and education in Germany.

You will get to know the German education system: the different types of school, education pathways, and educational qualifications.

You will find out what you as a parent or legal guardian need to pay attention to during your children's schooling and vocational training.

There will be tips to ensure that your children get the right start at school or in their vocational training.

Talking to a counsellor can be very helpful in answering personal questions about your children starting or being at school. This guide is not intended to replace such a conversation. It is there to offer you the basic facts about schools and education in Germany. For your children's benefit.

Make use of the counselling services that are available. Make contact with one of the counsellors near you.

1. Rights and entitlements

Who can go to school in Germany?

Access to education is a human right. This means: every person has the right to go to school. The United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948 states: **Everyone has the right to education.** It doesn't matter where people are from. Or where they are staying. This also applies to Germany.

Do children have to go to school?

Yes. Germany has **compulsory education (Schul-Pflicht)**. This means: children must go to school. This obligation applies to all children in Germany. It applies equally to boys and girls.

For refugee children with a residence permit, compulsory education usually begins when they move out of the refugee reception centre. This happens after 3 months at the latest.

The refugee reception centre is an accommodation facility where refugees first live after they arrive in Germany.

Children have the right to go to school. This right is independent of residency status.

In Germany, compulsory education usually lasts for **12 years**. It is divided into **compulsory full-time education** and **compulsory vocational training**, also called compulsory part-time education. In rare and exceptional cases, the period of compulsory education may be shortened.

Compulsory full-time education

Compulsory full-time education begins with enrolment at school. Children are usually enrolled at the age of **6 years**. It ends after 9 or 10 school years. This varies from one federal state (Bundesland) to another. Young people are usually **15 or 16 years** old by the time it ends.

Compulsory vocational training

Young people who begin an **apprenticeship or traineeship** after year 9 or 10 must regularly attend classes at a **vocational college (Berufs-Schule)**. They are subject to **compulsory vocational training**. It usually lasts for **3 years** and coincides with the **completion of the apprenticeship or traineeship**.

They usually attend vocational college (Berufs-Schule) once per week, or in blocks of several weeks during the school year. This depends on the type of apprenticeship or traineeship. The rest of the time, apprentices and trainees learn the practical skills they need for their occupation at the workplace.

Compulsory vocational education does not apply to young people who are attending another type of school. Other types of school include, for example, grammar school (Gymnasium), technical college (Berufs-Fachschule) and university (Hochschule). But, the same applies to these students, too: compulsory education only ends after 12 years.

Some young people must attend **workforce preparation courses** at vocational colleges. This applies to young people who

- Cannot start an apprenticeship or traineeship
- Are not attending another type of school
- Have not yet reached a certain age.

All children and young people in Germany have a right to education. Compulsory education (Schul-Pflicht) applies to children from ca. 6 years of age.

Attending school is free.

Education is an important prerequisite for actively participating in society. At school, children and young people learn German.

They also learn the basics for a future occupation.

School is an important place for children. They experience new things together there. School gives children structure in everyday life. This is especially important for children who have newly arrived in Germany.

2. What types of school and what education pathways exist in Germany?

The German school system is divided into three stages: primary stage, secondary stage I, and secondary stage II. For each stage, there are different types of school with various education pathways. The education pathway refers to the school-based education that leads to a specific educational qualification.

In Germany, the federal states (Bundesländer) regulate school education. For this reason, different terms or regulations may be used in each state.

Primary school (**Grundschule**) – usually from age 6 to 10 years

Grundschule is also called Primarstufe (primary stage – primary means: first).

For the first four years of school, children attend **primary school (Grund-Schule)**. In the federal states of Berlin and Brandenburg, this period is 6 years.

Learning together at primary school builds social skills. Social skills are what people use to get along with each other. As much as possible, all children should have the same opportunities to be successful in obtaining an educational qualification.

Parents cannot freely choose the primary school their child will go to. Usually, children are allocated a place at a primary school. The school is chosen to be as close as possible to where the parents live.

In primary school, children learn reading, writing, and arithmetic. They also learn other basic facts. For example, about the natural environment and the history of the region in which they live.

Practical skills are also taught. For example: how to behave in road traffic. Or swimming.

The children also learn social skills in their class group. This helps them get along with others.

Intermediate stage (secondary stage I) – usually from age 10 to 16 years

The intermediate stage is also called secondary stage I (secondary means: in second place).

The intermediate stage has several education pathways. These pathways are tailored to students' interests and abilities.

The 3 basic education pathways are:

- General secondary school (Haupt-Schule)
- Intermediate secondary school (Real-Schule)
- Grammar school (Gymnasium).

These education pathways are offered by different school types in the individual federal states.

There are schools that specialise in one particular education pathway. For example: general secondary school (Haupt-Schule or Mittel-Schule), intermediate secondary school (Real-Schule), grammar school (Gymnasium).

There are types of school that combine the general and intermediate secondary pathways (Haupt-Schule and Real-Schule). For example: trade school (Werk-Real-Schule in Baden-Württemberg).

Then, there are types of school that combine all 3 education pathways. For example: comprehensive school (Gesamt-Schule), community college (Gemeinschafts-Schule), high school (Ober-Schule), district school (Stadtteil-Schule).

At these school types, all students are taught together at first. They only separate into different education pathways later. Or only for certain subjects.

It means that these schools offer more time before an educational qualification to work towards is chosen. Special support programmes assist students at these schools. Learning together and social skills are especially important.

The general secondary education pathway (**Haupt-Schule** or **Mittel-Schule**)

The general secondary pathway consolidates knowledge acquired at primary school (**Grund-Schule**). Mainly practical skills are taught here.

The aim is to prepare students for choosing an occupation, and for the dual education mode used in vocational training. Many occupations in Germany are taught in dual mode.

Dual education mode means that there are 2 places where vocational training takes place: the workplace for acquiring practical skills, and school-based learning at vocational college.

Vocational colleges teach the theoretical knowledge needed for the occupation. Subjects such as mathematics, German, and English are also taught there.

The general secondary (**Haupt-Schule**) qualification, usually obtained at the end of year level 9 or 10, is the **general certificate of secondary education (Haupt-Schul-Abschluss)**. Students are usually 15 or 16 years old at this stage.

In some federal states, this school-leaving certificate has a different name. For example: **Berufsbildungs-Reife** or **Abschluss der Mittel-Schule**.



Possible next steps:

This general secondary school qualification allows **access to dual-mode vocational training**.

The chances of obtaining an apprenticeship or traineeship are particularly good for certain occupations. These are:

- Occupations in mechanics. For example: machining technician.
- Occupations in hospitality. For example: food and drinks attendant.
- Occupations in industrial production and trades. For example: cabinet maker or hairdresser.
- Occupations in the construction industry.

Those achieving good grades in their school-leaving certificate can also go on to year level 10, or to an institution for further vocational education. For example: a **technical college (Berufs-Fachschule)**.

A technical college (Berufs-Fachschule, BFS) is a full-time attendance school.

The entry requirement for technical college is a certificate of general or intermediate secondary education.

Technical colleges offer a range of education pathways. For example: vocational foundation training, obtaining the entry qualification for advanced technical training (a type of intermediate secondary education certificate), or a certificate in one of the recognised occupations that are taught in school-based vocational training mode.

The intermediate secondary education pathway (Real-Schule)

In this intermediate secondary pathway, students learn more theoretical content than in the general secondary pathway (Haupt-Schule). Theoretical content is learned mainly by thinking. Less through experience. But students also learn practical skills at this type of secondary school.

The intermediate secondary pathway aims to prepare students for vocational training or further education.

The intermediate secondary (Real-Schule) qualification, usually obtained at the end of year level 10, is the **intermediate certificate of secondary education (Mittlerer Bildungs-Abschluss)**. This educational qualification is also called Real-Schul-Abschluss or Mittlere Reife. Young people are usually 16 years old at this stage.

Possible next steps:

The intermediate certificate of secondary education (Mittlerer Bildungs-Abschluss) allows **access to almost all occupations taught in dual mode**.

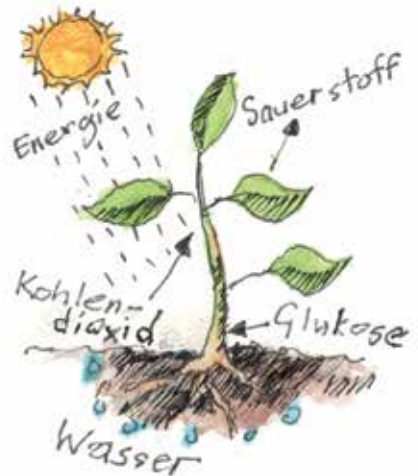
It also allows access to **school-based vocational training**.

Under certain conditions, an **extended intermediate certificate of secondary education** may be obtained.

For example: when students have received good grades. They can then attend **further education**. There, they can obtain the entrance qualification for study at a technical university, or an entrance qualification for certain university courses. These qualifications allow access to tertiary studies.

The grammar school education pathway (Gymnasium)

In the grammar school pathway, teaching theoretical content is at the forefront. It is intended for children and young people who like and find it easy to learn theoretical content. Practical content is less important.



The goal is to prepare students for tertiary study or advanced vocational training.

In the grammar school pathway, secondary stage I (Sekundarstufe I) consists of year levels 5 to 9 or 5 to 10. It depends on the federal state. This is followed by another three school years. These are called secondary stage II (Sekundarstufe II).

The qualification obtained at the end of the grammar school pathway is the **general tertiary education entrance qualification (Allgemeine Hochschulreife)**.

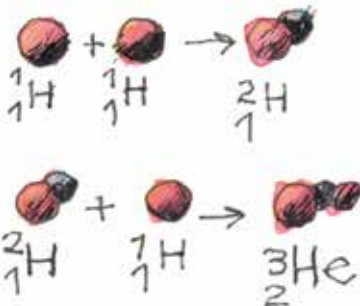
This general entrance qualification for study at university is also called **Abitur**. A student who has passed the Abitur is called Abiturient. Young people are usually between 17 and 19 years old at this stage.

Possible next steps:

The general tertiary education entrance qualification entitles students to study at universities and other tertiary institutions. After completing the grammar school pathway, however, it is equally possible to start an apprenticeship or traineeship. Students holding the Abitur qualification often have the option of reducing the duration of their apprenticeship or traineeship.

Secondary stage II (Sekundarstufe II or gymnasiale Oberstufe) – usually ages 16 to 18 or 19 years

Secondary stage II is attended by young people completing their grammar school pathway at a grammar school (Gymnasium) or at a school that offers all three education pathways. The upper grammar school stage consists of the last 3 years of school.



Schools for children and adolescents with special support needs

Some children with special support needs or a disability can attend one of the types of school described above. The school then supports them with special programmes.

Sometimes, children have severe physical or intellectual limitations. Then, they cannot attend one of the regular state schools. This is the case, for example, when children are unable to hear or unable to see. Or if they have great difficulties with learning. There are separate schools for these children. They know about the special needs of these students. They have smaller class sizes. And the teachers have received special training.

There are no separate schools for children and adolescents who don't or hardly speak any German. Various special programmes are available for these children at the schools described above. This way they can learn German.

What happens at school

The school regularly provides information about things that happen at the school. The class teacher usually fulfils this role at the parents' evening (Elternabend). All parents and the class teacher get together at the parents' evening (Elternabend). The class teacher reports on important aspects of the current school year. You can also approach the class teacher if you are concerned about your child's academic progress.

Important: Schools in Germany do not treat boys and girls any differently. Girls and boys are taught together. This usually also applies to physical education and swimming lessons.

You can also find information about schools on the internet.

For example:

Schule in Deutschland – jetzt verstehe ich das! (School in Germany – now I understand!) at

www.bpb.de/system/files/dokument_pdf/Schule-in-Deutschland_Ansicht-doppelseitig.pdf



3. How can I support my child?

There are various recommendations about how you can support your child before and during school.

Recommendations before starting school

Children can attend a range of early childhood facilities, even before they start school. This **foundation stage (Elementar-Bereich)** is the first stage in the German education system.

The foundation stage includes **child care centres, crèches and kindergartens**. At these facilities, children receive care appropriate to their age. They get the space to play. They are encouraged, and prepared for school.

For many children, the foundation stage is very important for their development. Attending these facilities is voluntary.

It makes no difference in terms of residency status if a child is attending such a facility. Or if they are cared for at home.

Possible advantages of childcare at one of these facilities are:

- The children are in good hands. Parents can run errands or attend appointments with public authorities during this time. They can go to German language lessons or to work.
- Children who don't know German can **learn the language** there.
- Children get to know other children of the same age. They are in a child-friendly environment.

Which type of day care is right for my child?

As parents or legal guardians, it is important that you know the aims and routines at the childcare facility. This is how you can decide whether a childcare option is the right one for your child and for your family. Please also talk to other parents about it.

You can find information about this on the internet. For example:

Videos about childcare options in Germany.

They are available in the following languages: Arabic, English, Dari/Farsi, French, German.



www.youtube.com/channel/UC10FroO4AoHTp8JLM9EUw0g

Brochures with information about childcare centres.

They are available in the following languages: Arabic, English, Farsi, French, German, Tigrinya.



www.bmfsfj.de/resource/blob/120876/aeb4bd50ba2a811c4d5fb2e0a1a56ef9/herzlich-willkommen-in-unsere-kita-data.pdf

You can also obtain information locally – from the facilities themselves, and from parents’ associations (Eltern-Vereine). Just approach one of the staff, even if you don’t speak German well. Ask the questions you have, even if you feel uncertain for cultural or religious reasons.

What do I have to do so that my child can attend child care?

Children from 1 year of age have a **legal entitlement to a childcare place**. This is stated in Book VIII of the Social Code. You can find it at Section 24. It also applies to refugee children, at the latest from the time they move out of the reception centre.

Obtaining a place is a prerequisite for attending childcare. You must apply for a place for your child. How this is done varies greatly, depending on where you live.

You can obtain information:

- From your municipal administration at the town hall
- At the Office for Youth Affairs (Jugend-Amt)
- Directly at the childcare facility.

Foundation stage programmes often cost money. If you don’t have enough money, the fees may be waived. For this, you must lodge an application at the local Office for Youth Affairs (Jugend-Amt).

Often, not enough places are available for all children. However, you have a right to a childcare place.

Which education pathway suits my child?

The grammar school pathway offers the greatest range of career opportunities. But the general certificate of secondary education and the intermediate certificate of secondary education also offer good opportunities for vocational training or further education. Many employers appreciate practical skills very much. Apprentices and trainees have good chances of advancing their careers.

You can obtain free information and counselling from the Federal Employment Agency (Bundesagentur für Arbeit) at



www.arbeitsagentur.de/bildung

A good education for your child starts at the childcare facility.

Your child should feel comfortable at the school.

Your child should be able to follow the lessons well.

Your child should be able to achieve good grades in their education certificate.

This is why you should make the decision about the education pathway or the secondary school together with your child!

Support your child. But don't put your child under too much pressure to perform. Too much pressure can cause stress. And stress can make children sick.

Who decides on a child's education pathway?

During the last year of primary school, teachers write a **primary school recommendation (Grund-Schul-Empfehlung)** for every child. This recommendation states which education pathway is most suitable for the child. The recommendation is based on the child's grades and learning style. Teachers discuss their recommendation with the parents or legal guardians.

The teachers' recommendation is not binding in all federal states. You can also select a more academic education pathway for your child. A test, an individual consultation, or trial lessons may then be required. This varies from one federal state (Bundesland) to another.

You can obtain information about this directly from the secondary school.

What can I do if my child is having problems at school?

My child has trouble learning

If learning is a problem, the **teacher** for the subject concerned is the most important contact person. If several subjects are affected, contact the class teacher. Teachers are generally happy to advise you. They will give you tips: this is how you can support your child. So don't be shy. Talk to the teacher, even if you don't speak German well yourself.



My child is not comfortable in class or at the school

Most schools have a **school social work** programme. Professional social workers work there. These professionals support children and young people with personal problems. You or your child can make an appointment for a consultation with a professional social worker. School social work services can also help if there are problems with teachers, or with other students.

Many schools also have teachers as school counsellors. They can help with general problems, for example when choosing an education pathway or occupation.

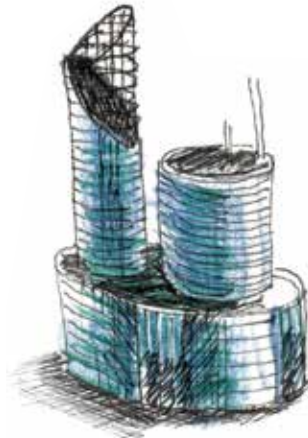
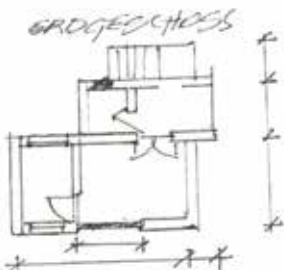
These conversations are confidential. This means: what is discussed is not passed on to other people.

You can usually get the telephone number or email address of contact persons via the school's website or at the school administration office.

My child lacks concentration, or is sad or withdrawn. My child is irritable and aggressive.

In this case, psychological stress or a mental illness may be present. If so, your child may not be able to fully control the behaviour.

To confirm a mental illness, a medical examination is required. Make an appointment with the **paediatrician** or the **general practitioner**. You will also get information about possible treatment methods there.



4. We are new to Germany

Which year level, which school is right for my child?

Newly arrived children and young people are generally placed in the year level that corresponds to their age.

The time a child has already spent at school in the country of origin is taken into account when an education pathway and type of school are selected. Sometimes, children and young people have not been able to attend school for longer periods because of their journey as refugees or the situation in their country of origin. This is also taken into account. If so, they may be enrolled in a lower year level.

The exact procedure varies by federal state (Bundesland). Before admission, consultations with the parents take place at the school or the authorities.

Children and young people often have to learn the **German language** first. Only then can they participate in the lessons.

Different models are used for this in each federal state and at individual schools:

- Sometimes, children get additional language support lessons in their normal year level.
- Sometimes, there are separate preparatory courses. Newly arrived children and young people attend them for part or all of their school time at first. It is about allowing them to learn the German language as quickly as possible.

How can I support my child with starting school?

As parents or legal guardians, you are the most important people in your child's life. This is especially true for children who had to leave their country and familiar surroundings.

Support your child as best you can

Little rituals can help. These are regular activities you agree to do together. For example: having tea every day. Or praying together. Or a song. Depending on how old your child is.

Encourage your child to talk about experiences and worries. Listen patiently. Even if your child tells the same story over again.

Just as important for the development of children and young people is getting to know their new environment. To make sure they settle in well: in the neighbourhood, in their class group, in the playground.

The most important prerequisite for this: being able to speak German. And to get to know everyday life in Germany. Both can happen most easily when children spend time with others who have already been in Germany for longer. Or who were born here.

Use the programmes offered by schools and childcare facilities

Go to the parents' evening (Elternabend) or parents' open day, and use the counselling services offered by schools and kindergartens. Even if you speak no or little German. These services are very important for the relationships between teachers, parents, and children.



Many schools offer **after-school supervision** options in the afternoons. Here, students can do their homework and play together.

Schools also offer **extra-curricular activities (Arbeits-Gemeinschaften)**. They are also called AGs. They are often offered weekly as joint activities. For example: singing in a choir, acting in a play, playing sports. Or painting and crafts. These activities are voluntary, and take place outside of classroom lessons. Allow your child to take part in these activities.

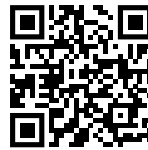
How to deal with difficulties in the family

Every family sometimes has problems. This happens especially in difficult situations. For example:

- When someone is unemployed
- When there is not enough money
- When there are problems in the marriage.

When this happens, ask for help. Accept the help. There is no reason to be ashamed.

Some services in your language can be found on the internet at



<https://mimi-gegen-gewalt.info-data.info/>



Your living situation may also be difficult. Living in a shared accommodation facility or the refugee reception centre is often stressful. Families spend a lot of time together in a small space. This can cause stress between partners and in the family.

How can I avoid stress

- Make a daily schedule with fixed times for learning, play, eating, and sleeping.
- Make a plan for the week.
- Hang the plan where everyone can see it.
- Make sure that your children access age-appropriate content on television, the internet, and social media.

Offer your child an outlook

An outlook means something to look forward to. For example:

- What does my child expect for the future?
- What are my child's needs and desires?

Talk about these questions regularly in your family. Take your child seriously. Also talk with your child about their career aspirations early on. If children have a goal, they can learn more easily and successfully.

Pay attention to what your child is doing well. Give them praise.

And always remember: children love to learn. Children love succeeding at something. Children want to make their parents happy and proud!



5. Selected counselling services

On the topic of: school and vocational training

Migrant Organisations' Federal Parents' Network for Education and Participation (Bundeselternnetzwerk der Migrantenorganisationen für Bildung und Teilhabe, bbt)

The bbt offers parents multilingual information about childcare, school, and education. Multilingual online advice is also available. www.kebik.de

Career counselling service of the Federal Employment Agency (Agentur für Arbeit)

The career counsellors at the Federal Agency for Employment know the education system in their respective federal state. They can advise on how to obtain a further educational qualification. They can also advise on the options for dual-mode or school-based vocational training. You can make an appointment for a personal consultation in your area by calling the telephone number 0800 4 555500 (free of charge)

Online information portal for career planning and career choices of the Federal Employment Agency (Bundesagentur für Arbeit)

On this page you will find clear information about the occupations that exist. You can also look up which occupation may suit you or your child.

For young people:
<https://planet-beruf.de/schuelerinnen>

For parents and legal guardians:
<https://planet-beruf.de/eltern-und-erziehungsberechtigte>

On the topic of: financial assistance

Education and participation package (Bildungs- und Teilhabepaket)

Families with little money can apply for financial assistance through the government's education and participation package (Bildungs- und Teilhabepaket).

Money can be applied for, among other things:

- School trips
- School supplies
- Travel costs
- Lunches.

The family portal of the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend) provides information about the available benefits and local contact persons at <https://familienportal.de/familienportal/familienleistungen/bildung-und-teilhabe>

You can also find contact persons at the municipal administration office (Stadt-Verwaltung) or district authority (Landrats-Amt) of your place of residence.

On the topic of: psychological counselling

School-psychological counselling centres

If there are problems at school, you can also seek help from counselling centres for educational

psychology (schul-psychologische Beratungsstellen).

These centres help with:

- Learning difficulties or difficulties concentrating
- Fear of examinations
- Problems with teachers
- Problems in the class group.

They provide counselling to students, but also to parents and legal guardians.

Counselling is free of charge and subject to professional confidentiality. This means: counsellors are not allowed to talk with other people about what came up in counselling.

Counselling centres can be contacted directly. The school does not have to be told about it.

You can find an overview of school-psychological counselling centres in Germany at www.schulpsychologie.de

You can also find an option for counselling by email there.

Schools and Education in Germany

This guide contains information on the topic of school and education in Germany. It is intended to provide information to migrants, refugees, and newly immigrated caregivers.

Brochures can be ordered, and online versions for smartphones and computer are available from our websites at www.bildung-und-schule.info and www.mimi-gegen-gewalt.de.

This guide was developed as part of the “MiMi Violence Prevention with Migrants’ project” and is available in several languages.

Das Kooperationsnetzwerk:

Ethno-Medizinisches Zentrum e.V.



LANDKREIS



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