

Diverse film culture from the very beginning – Feature films for children aged 6–8

Research results and recommendations
of the working group “Feature films 6–8”
in the Förderverein Deutscher Kinderfilm e. V.,
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Part I | Initial situation: Do we need “feature films 6–8”?

01 | Introduction

This paper focuses on a small but important segment of children’s film: live-action feature films (as opposed to animation) for the youngest schoolchildren (i.e. around 6–8-year-olds) with original stories that are anchored in the reality of children’s lives and tell stories that are appropriate for the target group. Currently, these films – referred to below as “feature films 6–8” – are practically not produced in German-speaking countries. This gap has prompted the Förderverein Deutscher Kinderfilm e. V. to set up the “Feature films 6–8” working group.

We wanted to know: Are these films even wanted (Part I)? Why are they not being made (Part II)? And what measures that are as directly effective as possible could promote their creation (Part III)?

In order to analyse the situation and develop ideas for suitable measures, we spoke to stakeholders from various areas of the industry: broadcaster representatives, cinema managers, programme designers, producers, media educators, authors and, last but not least, the target group itself. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all the interviewees who have supported this paper with their experience, expertise, and ideas.

The situation of German children’s films

The production of children’s films in Germany is closely linked to their exploitation in cinemas. In this respect, it is entirely justified to examine the offering from the cinema side.

Children of primary school age are among the most active cinema users. This is confirmed by a study presented by the FFA in Leipzig in September 2023 for the period July 2022 to July 2023, which records cinema use from the age of 0.¹ At 79%, 10–14-year-olds are the group with the most cinema visits, followed by 6–9-year-olds. 68% of them have visited the cinema – an average of 3.1 times. The attendance rate among 10–14-year-olds was as high

¹ FFA (Filmförderungsanstalt / German Federal Film Board):
[Facts and figures on the cinema market, FFA 09/2023 \(www.ffa.de/marktdaten.html#studien\)](https://www.ffa.de/marktdaten.html#studien)

as 4.3 times. (By comparison, only 60% of 14–19-year-olds and 44% of 20–29-year-olds visited the cinema during the survey period. The proportion of cinema-goers in the total population was 34% with an average of 3.9 visits).

What film experiences does the cinema offer them? A look at the FFA’s monthly hit lists for the period mentioned above (07/22–07/23) shows that animation films and adaptations of well-known brands dominated. According to the FFA study cited, the most successful film was THE SUPER MARIO BROS. FILM (USA 2023). German (co-)productions released in July 2022, the first month of the study, included BIBI UND TINA – EINFACH ANDERS, ALFONS ZITTERBACKE – ENDLICH KLASSENFAHRT (both for an older children’s audience) and KARLCHEN – DAS GROSSE GEBURTSTAGSABENTEUER (animation film).

This finding is not new. Compared to the situation ten years ago, however, there has been some improvement. This is because the funding initiative “*Der besondere Kinderfilm*” (BKF, “Outstanding Films for Children”). At that time, this innovative alliance of public television, the film industry, federal and regional funding and politics began its work. It has set itself the goal of strengthening the diversity of films on offer for young audiences and promotes films that would not be made on the market alone: original ideas and stories that are closely linked to the reality of children’s lives.

Since then, ten feature films have been made for young audiences. However, none of them are aimed at the younger audience of 6–8-year-olds. WINNETOUS SOHN, ENTE GUT, AUF AUGENHÖHE and UNHEIMLICH PERFEKTE FREUNDE, the “younger” of the productions, only have an educational age recommendation from the age of 8.

However, the result of the initiative proves that the industry can achieve a great deal with the necessary determination and a concerted approach. This gives cause for optimism when it comes to creating original feature films for 6–8-year-olds. Because, to anticipate one result of the study: Almost everyone has identified a need for “feature films 6–8” – in fact, a great need.

02 | Media consumption of the target group

The working group surveyed 66 children aged 5–10 on their media behaviour using a questionnaire.² The analysis shows a wide range of preferences and habits in the area of media consumption in this age group.

Most children prefer to watch TV at home, followed by going to the cinema. Tablets and smartphones are gaining in importance. The majority of children watch **television** daily or almost daily. A significant proportion watch less television and some children do not watch television at all. Going to the **cinema** is an occasional activity for most children, with “once or more times a year” being the most common answer. However, some children visit the cinema regularly while others have never been to the cinema.

² Non-representative survey in the period Dec. 2023 / Jan. 2024.

Watching films is predominantly a **social event** for children. The majority of children surveyed stated that they watch films with their parents, followed by siblings. The presence of parents in the cinema can be perceived as disturbing by their children. They then emphasise the importance of films made especially for children. Some children also watch films alone. Occasionally, friends are mentioned as accompanying persons.

A similar situation is reflected in the **selection of films**: Parents play a decisive role here. In addition, personal recommendations from school and social circles are an important source for the age group surveyed. However, suggestions from streaming platforms also influence their decision-making. YouTube is also used as a source of information, preferably for animal documentaries and child-friendly content.

When it comes to preferences between **series and feature-length films**, these vary, with series tending to be favoured. However, some also prefer longer films, while others are flexible and are guided by their current interests.

The survey shows that children of primary school age have a variety of interests and preferences for very different types of films, including, as expected, animated/ cartoon films, comedies, and Disney films. In addition to the desire for “magic and sorcery”, the main themes chosen are emotional relationships (“friendship”, “family”, “animals”), which can be related to the **everyday reality of children’s lives**. Occasionally, exaggerated actions and depictions that are perceived as unrealistic are criticised.

Overall, the survey emphasises that the demand for these diverse perspectives should be matched by a more diversified supply.

03 | The perspective of cinema managers

For the cinema managers interviewed, the children’s audience is definitely economically relevant. This is because the lower admission prices can be offset by the consumption in the cinema and the accompanying adults. In addition, the bond with cinema and film begins at the age of four. By offering a wide range of films (genres, repertoire, etc.), a **regular audience** can be built up over the years. This means that parents, as important gatekeepers, are more likely to take their children to unfamiliar films that they would otherwise not choose out of concern that their children would be exposed to them.

Moderators as reference persons, short film programmes, **special activities and educational film offers** have proven their worth in terms of an overall and communal experience. It has been shown that older siblings (7/8) enjoy going to the cinema with younger ones (5/6). When children watch a **variety** of children’s films, they become more open and can differentiate better. Others who miss out on the children’s programme already choose adult films at the age of seven.

The cinema managers criticise the lack of live-action films for 6–8-year-olds with life issues and topics that play a role for children in their everyday lives (e.g. family, friendship, school). Adults should be able to watch the films along. The films should have **more confidence** in

the ability children and appeal to them emotionally with a gentle tone and a common thread.

Films from Germany are considered important and are favoured by cinema managers if the quality is right. Successful **marketing** by the distributors is the be-all and end-all.

“Good live-action films, that’s almost like an educational mission. (...) We have to get children into the cinema now! They are the ones who will go to the cinema later. They are our future.” – Ulrike Spann (Hackesche Höfe Cinemas, Berlin)

04 | The perspective of film education

The work of the “Bundesverband Jugend und Film”³ with its own film library and the nationwide project “SchulKinoWochen” (School Cinema Weeks) of “Vision Kino”⁴ are exemplary for the perspective of cultural and school film education. The selection criteria for the films used here are based solely on **aesthetic and content-related standards**. One crucial point: the films must take children seriously. The BJF and Vision Kino programmes for 6–8-year-olds are in particularly high demand.

“It is very important for us to get young children excited about cinema and film, but to do this we need a greater variety of great films for this age group.” – Michael Jahn (Vision Kino, SchulKinoWochen)

The **diversity** of our society should also be adequately represented. However, far too few of these films are made for the target group and most of them come from other European countries. Both institutions also demand significantly more diversity from German children’s films in terms of cinematic forms, narrative styles, and themes.

There is no question that children of this age want to see feature films that reflect **the reality of their lives**. The BJF recognises this in the particularly high demand for such titles. At the School Cinema Weeks, they meet with an extremely positive response from the children, such as GESCHICHTEN VOM FRANZ or the films of the RICO-UND-OSKAR series. Difficult topics also have their place here.

“It is crucial to challenge children emotionally, but not to overburden them. Finding the right balance here is one of the criteria of the fine art of making films for young children.” – Reinhold Schöffel (Managing Director BJF)

05 | The perspective of media education

For children, feature films are a mirror of their own world. They provide nutrients for **personal growth** and orientation in social structures. Live-action films represent a more realistic narrative form than animation films. However, media educators are also aware that only a few live-action films are available for children aged 6–8 years. This target group is

³ The „Federal Association of Youth and Film” (BJF) supports its members in matters relating to non-commercial film work for children and young people.

⁴ Vision Kino is a German non-profit organisation for the promotion of film and media skills for children and young people.

therefore missing out on an essential part of film art that appears important for the development of personality and **media skills**.

Children are in an intensive process of social learning, in which films that take them into their real-life situation can be a direct testing ground for behavioural patterns and character models. An important aspect of this is training the ability to take the point of view of others and categorise their actions. From a media education perspective, it stands to reason that children can develop these social skills earlier and more intensively if they are encouraged to do so through films. Live-action films in particular strengthen the sense of reality and broaden horizons by other means.

The competence of the target group is too often underestimated in films that are addicted to harmony. More live-action films could systematically broaden the **film culture base** for younger audiences and thus indirectly contribute to strengthening their interest in unconventional film forms later on.

“Above all, we need more courage and creativity. We all need to rethink and trust children more. No other target group can be surprised and genuinely inspired so easily in the cinema.” – Thomas Hartmann / Christian Exner (Deutsches Kinder- und Jugendfilmzentrum (KJF))⁵

06 | The broadcasters’ perspective (1)

Editors from six public broadcasters were surveyed. Most of those surveyed believe that their channels are well positioned in terms of their target group due to the diversity of their programmes. For the 6–8 target group in particular, the focus is on series and animation. At the same time, respondents were generally open to devoting more attention to live-action for younger audiences in different formats.

Films are regarded as high-quality programmes and can be used over the long term. For broadcasters, “co-viewing” and “**family affinity**” are important aspects of feature films. This stands in the way of too narrow a target group. The surveyed editors are particularly self-critical of the tight financial framework, which severely limits the possibilities for children’s programmes.

Domestic productions enjoy a high level of acceptance among the target group. Films for 6–8-year-olds are still very often purchased from other European countries. Most, but not all, of those surveyed believe that this well reflects the reality of children’s lives in Germany. In addition, there are too few convincing offerings in this direction from German-speaking countries – including as part of the initiative “Outstanding Films for Children”.

⁵ The German Children’s and Youth Film Centre (KJF) provides media education qualifications for professionals in youth, educational and cultural work, advises institutions and organisations and recommends films on platforms such as “kinderfilmwelt.de”.

Anke Lindemann (public broadcaster *Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk*, MDR) in particular considers the situation to be unsatisfactory at the levels of script development, production, and distribution. She would like to see a **stronger lobby** for this target group:

“Overall, the children’s film sector is not loud enough. There is a lack of strong, forward-thinking voices and positions. They are not always sympathetic, but they are necessary to make a cause heard.” – Anke Lindemann (MDR, Head of the editorial team “Children & Family”)

07 | Interim assessment

In general, the interviewees stated that the situation of German children’s films has improved since the initiative “Outstanding Films for Children” was launched. However, the discussions conducted by the working group also made it clear that there is a gap in the offerings for the 6–8 age group. This should not be underestimated, especially with regard to children’s film education and media skills.

But why are too few of these films being made in Germany? We address this question in the second part of our analysis.

Part II | Why are there no “feature films 6–8“?

08 | The authors’ perspective

We interviewed 14 children’s film authors. None of them have been able to realise original stories for 6–8-year-olds, while four projects are currently in development. Some report that it is difficult to accommodate these stories, as the prevailing assumption in the industry is that they **cannot be realised**. Often cited reasons: A film without an established brand would not reach parents, or young children as protagonists would not be able to carry a story. During the script development, there were content-related conflicts with decision-makers due to differing pedagogical views or because there were different ideas about what the young audience could handle as a challenging story. In the case of stories for older children, there were sometimes suggestions to reduce the tension and adapt the humour so that younger children could “watch along”. Almost all interviewees said that they would very much like to write a “feature film 6–8” if there was a chance of realisation. Some would like more support through appropriate **training programmes** or educational advice with regard to the needs of the target group.

09 | The producer’s perspective

From the point of view of the producers interviewed, the problem lies primarily in **financing**. Youth protection regulations and the even more time-consuming filming with younger children make productions more expensive anyway. Outside of the initiative “*Der besondere Kinderfilm*” (Outstanding Films for Children), financing can hardly be closed because the

broadcasters have too few funds to participate at all or with a relevant share. The funding institutions often have reservations about the films because there is no established market for original stories, they are not seen as promising at the box office and/or the target group is considered too small. A lack of **appreciation** as well as a lack of **expertise** with regard to cinematic storytelling for younger audiences in some decision-making bodies make things even more difficult. Overall, this also makes it difficult to find a distributor.

10 | The perspective of the distributors

Cinemas are certainly looking for content for the target group because there are too few films on the market for them. This is reported by Alexandre Dupont-Geisselmann from Farbfilm Verleih, which specialises in the release of live-action children’s films, among other things. He emphasises that good films can also work in the cinema. The prerequisite is appropriate **marketing**, which in the case of the younger target group must primarily be directed at parents. The market is therefore there, but children currently only have a limited perspective:

“Younger children often no longer see live-action films as an offer for them because they have only been socialised with animation. We have to enable diversity and also provide access to live-action film for the younger target group.”
– Alexandre Dupont-Geisselmann (Farbfilm Distribution)

11 | The broadcasters’ perspective (2)

Some conversations gave the impression that this was the first time that the lack of live-action films for the 6–8 age group had been explicitly addressed. The broadcasters’ perspective on possible changes is determined by three partly contradictory poles, which reveal some of the reasons for the difficulties in realising these films.

On the one hand, the expectations placed on these films are a particular challenge, so probably in terms of **quality** (“convincing”), **tonality** (“humorous”) and the **content** (“original”). It is obvious that these characteristics – also due to the different interests of those involved – are likely to be defined differently by each and every one of them.

Secondly, there is a fundamental openness to taking a closer look at the task of “feature films 6–8“. The initiative “Outstanding Films for Children” plays a central role here. However, a quota is more or less clearly rejected. Instead, the interviewees are essentially in favour of calling more strongly for such stories to be submitted. Anke Lindemann (MDR) is specifically in favour of initiatives in the area of script development (workshops).

Thirdly, however, this openness is curbed above all by the lack of money. In the long term, it can be argued under the heading of “**intergenerational justice**” that the percentage of children in society must be reflected in the presence and financial resources of children’s programmes in the public media.

12 | Experiences of the initiative “Outstanding Films for Children”

The initiative “Outstanding Films for Children” is generally open to children’s films from the age of six. So far, however, there have only been a few and mostly **unconvincing submissions**, meaning that no project has been selected so far. The reasons are seen on different levels: The writing for younger children is said to be more demanding, the production of the films more difficult and the target group too pointed for exploitation in the cinema – or even on television. However, project manager Margret Albers sees the decisive argument for the creation of these films in the **need**: “If such a need is formulated, then the industry will react.” Children can only formulate it themselves to a limited extent. They are still developing their tastes and may not know any “Outstanding Films for Children”. In Albers’ opinion, this is where adults are called upon to formulate needs in the interests of children and to fight for diversity in film offerings.

13 | Conclusion

The different perspectives bring to light complex and sometimes contradictory reasons why “feature films 6–8” are not made or are so difficult to make. On the one hand, the lack of good project proposals is lamented; on the other hand, authors experience that they are unable to accommodate projects for the target group and understandably do not develop new ideas.

There seems to be **too little exchange** about what characterises good stories for the target group. Parents need to be considered as co-viewers and gatekeepers. A need is definitely seen on the market, but the awareness that “feature films 6–8” represent a necessary segment in the children’s film offer does not (yet) seem to be pronounced in the industry.

Funding is a major problem. The **position of public film funding organisations** should be analysed in a next step. Broadcasters remain the decisive player, without which financing in this segment does not currently appear possible.

The **commitment of the entire industry** is needed for these films to be made. The awareness that feature films based on original stories with relevant content and artistic quality are also important for 6 - 8-year-olds – and to which they are entitled – must lead to joint initiatives for development, financing, production, and exploitation. In order to create this awareness and also more expertise in the various areas of the industry, more attention, lobbying, and communication is needed.

Part III | Proposals for initial measures

In the discussions, a large number of desirable measures were named in order to promote the situation for “feature films 6–8” and for children’s films in general. Selecting some of these ideas the working group “Feature films 6–8” proposes a combination of events and other measures coordinated in terms of time and content on. They should focus on the topic “feature films 6–8” in the period 2024/25. The aim is to create broad awareness in the industry (and beyond) and to encourage and support first concrete projects.

Series of events

- Forum / round table for exchange between broadcasters/streamers, producers, and authors with the involvement of media educators, BJF, VISION KINO
- Specialist events, each with a different focus, are organised as part of the festivals and specialist forums:
 - Goldener Spatz, Schlingel, FilmStoffEntwicklung, Nordic Film Days
 - Presentation of best practice examples from other European countries – children’s film festivals like *Schlingel* (Chemnitz) and *Nordische Filmtage* (Nordic Film Days, Lübeck)
 - Exchange with distribution companies and cinemas: *Filmkunstmesse* (Arthouse Film Fair, Leipzig)

Further training

- Workshop and/or industry event as part of the script development programme “*Akademie für Kindermedien*” (AKM, Academy for Children’s Media)
- Independent training programme as part of “AKM+”
- Mentoring by educational experts and children during the writing process

Public film funding

- Focus on the target group of 6–8-year-olds as part of the initiative “Outstanding Films for Children”, e.g. by specifically inviting them to submit such projects in the coming year.

Within the “Förderverein Deutscher Kinderfilm”

- Formation of an **initiative group “Feature films 6–8”**, which will continue to lobby regularly for the target group, work out priorities and propose measures. – This new group could possibly also be opened up to non-members.
- Formation of a **working group on “Financing children’s films”** to investigate whether and, if so, how children’s films are systematically disadvantaged by funding structures and regulations, and to develop a concept for lobbying on “finance”. This can be linked to the awarding of a research contract, e.g.:
 - Share of children’s films in the German film market
 - The economic power of children’s films
 - Share of public funds (funding and broadcasting contributions) for children’s film/ children’s programme

Interviewees

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Cinema managers

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