

#WueHearYou

Family-friendly Leadership

The podcast by the Office of the University Women's Representative

Episode 5: Prof. Dr. Carina Lüke

Welcome to **Family-Friendly Leadership**, our WÜKit podcast, which is all about balancing family and career at JMU. In this episode, we are joined by Prof. Dr. Carina Lüke, who currently holds the Chair of Education and Intervention in Speech and Communication Disorders. In 2022, she was elected as the faculty's women's representative for human sciences. Since November 2025, she has also served as Vice-Representative for Gender Equality at the Faculty of Human Sciences. We look forward to her exciting insights and hope you enjoy listening!



Natalie Nikolaus (Office of the University Women's Representative): We are pleased to welcome to our UFB podcast from WÜKit Family-friendly Leadership, Professor Dr. Carina Lüke, Chair of Special Education and Therapy in Language and Communication Disorders and also Women's Representative for the Faculty of Human Sciences. (01:00)

Prof. Dr. Carina Lüke: Thank you very much for the warm welcome. I'm delighted to be here.

NN: You were recommended to our office as a family-friendly manager and were highly praised. Therefore, we are delighted that you are available for a short interview in which you can tell us a bit about your management style. Could you give us some insight into how you make it easier for your employees to balance their academic work and family life? (01:26)

CL: Well I think I try to look at it on a day-to-day basis, to keep everything as flexible as possible, like flexible working hours and flexible work locations. I think what has been common practice in academia for a long time now, in terms of working from home and so on, is of course relatively standard or even relatively common when the current needs of the team members are such that they simply need to work from home a lot – which may not be a permanent situation, but their current life circumstances require it. So I think that is perhaps the most important thing for me, to ensure that every person in the team can do the work they want to do, which best matches their interests and resources, but also within the framework of what we actually do.

NN: In your opinion, what is the most important thing in a manager's attitude so that they can lead in a family-friendly way? (02:30)

CL: So, I actually believe, even though it may sound silly and there may be relatively little that can be done about it at first, that the attitude is perhaps the most important thing. I think this always becomes very clear when you look at negative examples. When I spoke to a colleague who told me – not here, but another colleague, that when a female colleague left a very male-dominated department, someone in the group said: ‘Great, now we can finally schedule our faculty council meeting, department meeting, whatever, back to the regular time, I don't know, Wednesday, 4 to 6 p.m. or something like that.’ And my colleague was so shocked because he is also an active parent. And I think it's very important for me to separate care work from women. So that's really something that, yes, significantly more women, even in academia, still do the care work in a private context. But this direct link and the idea of ‘we're adapting to women here’ is, for me, a negative example of how committees and university structures as a whole are not in fact family-friendly. It's not about accommodating the women here, but rather about making active parenting possible and ensuring this job is compatible with the responsibilities they have to fulfil in their private lives. And I think there's this mindset that this is somehow intentional and perceived as being better for society and for us as an institution. I think that's the bottom line. ‘I get the feeling that I'm doing something to make one person here happy, otherwise they'll complain again.’ That's not a family-friendly approach, and I actually think that's the most important thing, because it comes up again and again in comments like that.

NN: Yes, it is very important to include all genders, because it is not just about women. Then I would like to follow up directly with the question of whether you can identify or have been able to identify gender-specific, different needs among your employees regarding work-life balance. (04:46)

CL: Yes, well, I think one thing is my team is very female. I think there are 17 or 18 of us in total at the department, and only two of them are men. But somehow, on a higher level, also as the Women's Representative, or with this topic, which I've been dealing with for a long time – when I look at our institute or something like that as a whole, it's more like this accumulation, that women simply take advantage of it more often or communicate back to me more often: 'Oh yes, it's great that this exists here or elsewhere' so that it's more of an issue, that this necessity to make the system family-friendly is also being addressed, so to speak. Yes, that's the case for lots of people, isn't it? In my context, I also end up speaking with a lot of men or academic staff about this, I think, because they know that I'm perhaps interested in the topic or that I'm generally open-minded about it, I'm not sure. But specifically, it's those with active caregiving responsibilities—so, to put it this way, no one comes to me who isn't an actively involved parent. Which is completely fine, of course. If I'm in a relationship and one person is primarily responsible for the care tasks – there's no judgment here, that's wonderful. But the person who's in the background, so to speak, the one who mainly does that work, they aren't the ones I have contact with. Instead, it's the people who themselves say, 'Well, I'm taking parental leave now,' or 'I'm not available for committee work at this time.' Among those who are actively involved in parenting I would say the needs are actually very similar regardless of their gender. It's just that I tend to notice this more often in women. But it's more the frequency. In terms of the actual content, the needs are the same. 'We need a daycare spot; if we organize conference in institute or similar events, do we have facilities where children can be changed, where I can occasionally bring a child to a seminar; do we have any materials, a nursing corner?' Or also with students, when they come for consultation hours – we simply have everything here, which is also very close to my research, since I also conduct research with babies here. So then I say: 'Well, let's naturally schedule the consultation hours in our research rooms, because we are simply equipped to be child-

friendly there.’ And that, I believe, is actually very comparable across genders. The issues are the same.

NN: And if employees approach you, do you have any tips for them on how to address the issue of work-life balance with their manager? (07:39)

CL: So, first of all, I would consider communicating openly, addressing issues and needs whenever possible. If I'm in front of someone, a manager, who I've already noticed is a bit reluctant or not really supportive of family-friendly policies or balancing care responsibilities and work, then I think I'd try to prepare myself well and think things through. For example, by participating in these committees or saying that these times are not possible for me, or that our regular team meeting, which may take place at a time when I don't have external childcare, is something I definitely need to think about. What can I do? What can I do as an employee to still fulfil my duties? Certain deadlines. That's something that should come from the institution, where you can say, ‘Okay, I'd love to get involved in the committee here and there. I can also imagine taking on the position, but I can't make it at those times. Are there any other options? Then I would also like to get involved.’ And vice versa, for many things, I believe that in academia we are not bound by time. Yes, there are tasks to be done – be it exams, theses, research proposals, writing publications – and saying, ‘Yes, then and then I would prefer to work from home or I won't be available at those times because I have to take on this care giving duty, but I can promise that the paper will be written within that time frame.’ I believe flexibility is what I try to consider or enable in my team. I also think, on a broader level, that is the positive aspect, if you will, of the scientific system – that we can work at many different times. Of course, this also carries the risk of significant exploitation. Obviously, if I have expectations that everyone will work through the weekend and at night, that's not feasible. However, if I decide as a young scientist that I want to pursue this path, and I want to stick with it, and it's a good fit for me, then I can make that decision. Yes, I have the option of reserving Saturdays for myself as a working day, for example. That's not something employers should decide, but I can perhaps decide and say: ‘Okay, I always have childcare on Saturdays and that's important to me, I want that, so I'll sit down and write my paper and it makes me happy and I can sort of continue my career that way. But that means I'm actually not available during regular office hours, as stated in my

employment contract– maybe Friday or Thursday or something like that– I'm basically not reachable. And I think that's something that should come from the person themselves. Supervisors shouldn't dictate something like that and say: 'Well, then you'll just have to work on Saturdays.' But I think you can shape and use this a little bit on your own initiative, find your niche and then say – 'Okay, I can't do this and that, but I will fulfil my tasks in this and that time frame' and specifically propose how you imagine it. I think that's how I would recommend approaching a strategic conversation with someone who might be sceptical about it.

NN: So, in other words, employees should make suggestions and then hope that their managers will be understanding. (10:55)

CL: I think that, in the end, what matters to managers is that certain things get done and that you are successful, and if you can present that in a convincing way with good arguments – 'Yes, of course I can fulfil my duties. I have to organise exams or grade tests or write an essay or something like that, and I can do that then and then. I just need this freedom to decide where and when. I think that's something managers will appreciate, that in the end, the product may count much more than other aspects.

NN: So that means that if the manager can also address this and get involved, I would say that this is very relieving for the employees. And also a family-friendly management style becomes more visible so. What benefits does this leadership style have for the managers themselves? (11:49)

CL: I believe that the employees are simply more satisfied and happier overall. I wouldn't want anyone on my team to get sick. Above all, I wouldn't want a highly qualified person to leave the company and quit their job and, in principle, leave the scientific system because it's not compatible. I actually believe that we cannot allow ourselves to do that, and that in the end, we want to be successful as a team, whatever that means, however that success is operationalised. It doesn't have to be in terms of the amount of third-party funding, and perhaps not in terms of any metrics like impact factors of publications, but however the team defines what a shared success would be. I think you can achieve that better when the team members are doing well. And that goes far beyond this term, this aspect of family friendliness, of course. Yes, I believe that these qualities, such as

flexibility, but also being available and approachable, and taking a genuine interest in team members. 'What is currently happening with you? Where is the pressure?' I believe it makes a significant difference that people in the team work for the team, work together, that there is a sense of community and, let's say, something that goes beyond the actual work itself. So I think that's what makes the job enjoyable and what can somehow make a team successful. That's why I think there are only advantages to trying to structure things that way.

NN: Many are aware that a family-friendly management style is actually very beneficial for all sides. Do you perhaps have any tips for people who aren't yet acting in a family-friendly way, or who may be new to leadership, on how to adopt this family-friendly leadership style? (13:41)

CL: So I think that for many people, it's certainly not a case of malice or anything like that, of actively wanting to prevent something. But perhaps also because their own biographical experiences mean that they themselves are not actively parenting. Either they had someone who supported them, or perhaps they simply don't have children, perhaps even consciously decided not to. I know that this is also an issue for many people. In the past, many women had to decide whether to take on the challenge of an academic career, which is challenging enough in itself, regardless of all the other responsibilities, or perhaps made a conscious decision. I believe many are simply shaped by their own background, just as I am shaped by my background, which is why I do certain things the way I do, and I think taking a step back like that, I wouldn't accuse anyone of being unwilling. It's more that ,I have no idea how that could work. I have no idea how we should fulfil our tasks if the people aren't always there.' Perhaps now, with Corona, there are more concrete ideas about how it could work, but some things still won't work. So, of course, it's different. We're also a very present team, and the people who are simply in the office a lot have a faster and more brief exchange. There's no question about that, because things happen quickly between doors, you're much closer to what's going on, and I think that's why it's worth considering this idea and perhaps trying it out with committed employees. There are committed people who can do this remotely and who can contribute. 'We have an idea of how you can get involved, even if you're not here every day, but we might have days when we actually see each other at

least once or twice a week and so that we don't lose that connection with each other. So I'd like to encourage everyone, if perhaps they don't believe that this can work, to reflect together on how it can work and then do something that you can stick to, try it out. Yes, really try it out. Give people the freedom. I can only recommend it.

NN: Are there any points that we, the various university contact points, such as our office or also the human Resources and Family Service, how can we support or assist with? What can we do? (16:08)

CL: Yes, I think that's also really important, because of course, apart from things like certificates and family-friendly universities, I think what really matters most is what you experience in your day-to-day life and where you can turn to for help. I think that contact points like the office of the university women's representative are actually brilliant, because they always offer the chance to turn to someone who is willing to listen. And even if they are not the right people to deal with that matter, they will always look into how to proceed. Where can you refer the matter? What would be the next step? I think it's really helpful to have people you can always turn to and who won't look at you strangely, so to speak. I think that's the most important thing that these specific institutions can do. Almost even more important for this sense of security is really to create structures that are simply no longer up to debate, such as specific committee meeting times. That's always a point of discussion, of course. Even then, it will not always be possible to please everyone. But I believe that a great deal has already been done in this regard. But also, as you say, for example in administration, when it comes to human resources, the HR department or something like that, also in terms of willingness to provide information. I don't know, let's say, I've had my second child. How does that affect my employment terms at the university now? What about the Academic-Fixed-Term Contract Act? How long can I continue to work here before I need a permanent position, for example? I think something like this is quite important – being able to get quick and accurate information. Reliability and a willingness to provide information – which for me is shaped by actually having had experiences with rather poor information. For example, simply knowing that staff did not get answers to questions like how long they are still allowed to be employed at a university taking into account parental leave, or whether they had ever worked as academic staff before, and so on. It's not exactly

trivial, and it's not that they didn't receive any information, but rather that only their superior received this information. So, I think that's simply not good. Of course, it is up to me, the superior, to decide whether and when employment contracts might be finalised. But the legal requirements: 'What rights do I have?' Even professors discuss this repeatedly: 'if I am a civil servant, do I have the right to reduce my working hours if I want to do care-work?' Of course, there is no job description for a professorship, but it is simply the law in Germany, and that's what I would expect from such an institution; that they provide clear information about such opportunities rather than thinking: 'Oh no, then we'll have the problem again that someone is working part-time and this professorship will have to be filled by someone else. Instead, they think: 'Yes, that's a possibility, it's great when you're here, then maybe we'll have someone representing us part-time for a year, and it's great that we were able to recruit you.' So, I think that's something that can really shape an institution or be influential for employees in terms of truly achieving work-life balance.

NN: How do you view the academic system in Bavaria, Germany? How does that influence your management style in terms of family friendliness? Does the system enable a lot, or does it tend to restrict things? Perhaps you could give some specific examples of one or the other. (20:02)

CL: So I would say that, overall, our scientific system is not particularly people-friendly. There is also a big debate at our university about abuse of power, about the fact that we have a mechanism, as in many other systems, where people could be exploited because there are many hierarchical dependencies, and that naturally has a direct impact. If I now have the aspiration to combine or reconcile my care work and my job, then I am somehow dependent again on the needs of my superior, so to speak. That's how it is in many other places. So I don't think I need to go into great detail about how doctoral students can potentially be mistreated and exploited in terms of their life and working time. It's all part of the same thing. In other words, it's something systemic that needs to be addressed, that needs to be questioned again and again, that needs to be looked at, that needs structures to be created through various contact points, such as the office of the university's women's representative, but also the women's representatives in the faculties, who, I would like to point out at this point, are not only responsible for women.

Structures, but also cooperation. I believe that having a good atmosphere, whether it's colleagues for doctoral students or postdoctoral researchers, where they also have another platform for exchange independent of their chair team or organisational unit, I think that also helps. So, having contact points and other connections where you can exchange ideas. I think that's an important point in order to make it work as well as possible. The high pressure is simply difficult. We have certain issues, such as employment periods and the high pressure on mid-level academic staff to accept fixed-term contracts. Compared to other countries, we simply have far, far fewer permanent staff in mid-level positions. Yes, overall, this puts enormous pressure on the system, which is rather negative. I think what's positive, if you can actually make it work, is really this flexibility. I now have two children and I'm in charge of this chair, overseeing two degree programmes. And I don't think that would be possible if I didn't have the freedom to come and go at certain times. I'm a night owl and I can simply sit down in peace at night and write my paper or my third-party funding application. This job allows me to do that. If I had to be somewhere in person, in some other field of work, then for certain tasks I simply wouldn't be able to go or I'd had to be there in person. Of course, I don't neglect my teaching duties, or only in very exceptional circumstances. But apart from teaching, everything else like oral exams or something like that, can be adjusted a bit. And I think you can really use this flexibility to make it at least manageable. I'm absolutely convinced of that.

NN: I think flexibility is a key factor that can make a lot of things possible. You have already mentioned other countries or perhaps other universities. You have also been to other higher education institutions and universities. Do you perhaps have a best practice example in mind, as to how can this be made? (23:19)

CL: On a small scale, within teams, it's simply a matter of acknowledging that this is an issue that affects everyone in some way. I've also been fortunate in my own academic career to have worked alongside many women who were also active as parents and responsible for their own children. This is also the case for me, together with my husband. I think that's really important, because it makes things easier somehow, because it's so natural. And that can happen within an organisation, but I think it tends to thrive more at a smaller scale, through the people you are in direct contact with. At a

higher level, such as university management or faculties or something like that, it is important to make it clear that committee meetings should only take place at certain times. In other words, to establish clear guidelines so that there is no need for discussion. I think that's the most important point. Otherwise, I believe that what such an institution can do, and what we can perhaps expand here in Bavaria, is of course the issue of childcare. This is a major issue everywhere. It is incredibly difficult. There is also a shortage of skilled staff, which causes widespread problems. Hardly anyone who is responsible for their children has a problem if they have reliable and good childcare. The problem is rather that childcare is cancelled because caregivers are sick, because there is a shortage and you then have to find a replacement at short notice. Of course, sometimes your own children are ill, and then obviously you want to look after them yourself. But the biggest problem is actually that nurseries have limited opening hours, they close unexpectedly, and then you have to be flexible in order to look after your children. Otherwise, everything else can be planned. And I think that's something that an institution could do even better. But I know how difficult that is. So, basically, my expectation, my hope, would be that every research assistant has a place in the institution's daycare centre for their child. That would make a lot of things much easier.

NN: That's definitely very important for us too. We try to ensure that childcare works well. Are there any other requests you might have for the university management or politicians? If you could make any wishes, what would they be? (25:44)

CL: I think that, as far as university management is concerned, the points we have just listed. Politically, of course, it goes in the same direction when it comes to childcare and the fact that this should be a given. But then I think it's more of a bigger social issue. There are things that can be changed through politics, for example. When I think about it, in Scandinavian countries it's a bit frowned upon, let's say, if fathers don't take parental leave as well. And that's a change in society. I would say that's not the case here. Unlike a few years ago, far more fathers are taking parental leave. However, the statistics clearly show repeatedly that, very often, in these heterosexual relationships, that mother and father take the parental leave at the same time. In my friends' families, who tend to have same-sex parents, I often see that things are distributed a little more creatively, which I find very interesting. Parental leave tends to be distributed differently. And I think that

perhaps this expectation is not so prevalent. We still have these high expectations in society. In this case, the mother is somehow responsible. It's quite clear that she somehow takes care of things. And everything the fathers do is then great and on top. Or, oh, how wonderful that you're doing that. There aren't such expectations with same-sex partnerships. That's quite exciting. But how do you do it? Suddenly, it's open how things are organised. And I think that's a longer-term process. How do you do that? An open attitude. You have to care, and you also want to care. Hopefully, that will change somehow. And yes, that's what I would like to see, but I don't think it can be achieved overnight. But I know it's the little things. Time and again, when I'm at conferences or with colleagues, even in the past. I know, when I had my second child, I think it was when I had my second child. Or after the first, I don't know exactly. After my first child, I went back to work straight after maternity leave and met a colleague in the faculty. And then he said, 'Oh, I heard you had a baby. Yes, us too. Second or third child or something. My wife, of course, is at home for now.' And I'm standing there. My child is, I don't know, three, four months old. And I'm just there part-time. And we've divided it equally, so that I think, oh yes, great. Obviously, there's so much going on inside you. That's what a mother does, of course. And it's always something that resonates. My husband has had the same experience, of course, only the other way around. Well, why aren't you coming to the conference? Your wife can look after the child, can't she? So these are the kinds of issues that always come up. Or, of course, the assumptions made about men or fathers. They can't look after the child properly. Yes, so if you were walking around with a baby back then, where is the mother? Obviously, this child needs its mother. And I think that's something that needs to be changed. And I don't think that can be done without political action or measures. But I think something like flexible use of parental leave, perhaps rather than a reward for taking parental leave at the same time, people should be able to divide these months flexibly and so on. Various political measures that can help both parents to become actively involved, may help to slowly change this situation. But yes, I think role models, people who are involved in active parenting and are part of the system, are also helpful and they keep asking, why is it natural for the mother to stay at home? When are you taking your parental leave? Well, that's natural, of course, you don't make yourself very popular, but with a little wink you hold up a mirror to these people again. At least I can't let myself do that.

NN: That's very, very good, because that's the only way change can happen. Yes, that's, I would say, a great wish, a wonderful wish, and I believe we can all contribute to it, as you already mentioned, so that perhaps something moves in that direction. (29:40)

CL: We will see

NN: Are there any other points you would like to make? (29:47)

CL: No, I think I've already expressed my greatest wish. For me, it's really the separation of care work from gender. I think that's what I would wish for. On the one hand, so that fathers are simply better recognised in the system and don't feel more foolish than women when they say they would like to fight for this to be taken into account for them too. And vice versa, I think there's also a bit of this scientific career requirement for women, which women see regardless of whether they have children or not. I think the one should simply be separated from the other in the first place. We should be family-friendly. This applies to all people who are parents and can get involved in this. And I also have some colleagues who say, 'Man, I would rather have spent much more time looking after my children back then, but I missed the opportunity.' And I think that is not a good reflection on us as a society. And at the same time, not putting so much pressure on women, oh, hm, maybe you'll end up having children, maybe you won't. So first of all, it's about pursuing career development and academic career goals, and there are also people in the system who don't have children, for whatever reason. They shouldn't have to fill in all the gaps, or have expectations placed on them. Well, I don't think that should be the case. We have children, we have people with care responsibilities in the team. Which means that others have to be available from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. That shouldn't be the case either. Even there, there are needs and resources and personal circumstances that should be taken into account. So I really believe that I would try to make sure that people are doing well. And that's really just one aspect among many of creating a friendly, supportive working environment.

NN: That's a wonderful final word. Once again, thank you very much for your time. And yes, as I said, thank you very much for sharing your leadership style, the opportunities that exist, and also suggestions that we and others can benefit from. (31:40)

CL: You're very welcome

*That was our informative conversation with **Prof. Dr. Lüke** about the need for flexibility at work and the separation of care work from gender. For more information on the topic of reconciling family and career, take a look at the WüKit website or contact us at: unifrauenbeauftragte@uni-wuerzburg.de. Be sure to visit the website of the university's women's representative and take advantage of the offers. Interested in a specific topic? Or do you have an opinion on the podcast topics? Just send us a message! Many thanks to all our listeners for tuning in – see you next time!*

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