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Training manual for staff who work with or  
have the ambition of working with UAC

# Working with unaccompanied children

Improving resilience and agency



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## Introduction

This manual has been developed to provide professionals, such as social workers and other care providers, with the knowledge they need to participate in a three-day training course on working with unaccompanied children.

The Training of Trainers course is interactive and builds on the participants' different levels of knowledge. Each module enables the trainer to cover relevant topics through a variety of training methods, including presentations, discussions, small group work, case studies and video material. PowerPoint slides to support the trainer's presentations are included, with presenter's notes that outline key discussion points.

The training provides knowledge and tools that will strengthen care providers' capacity to care for unaccompanied children. This course manual aims to enhance the knowledge of professionals interested in learning more about working with UAC, thus supporting their delivery of training. It was developed by IMPACT as part of its training package and aims to respond to needs while also sharing the good practices on guidance and reception of unaccompanied children identified during the project's mapping activities. The manual should contribute to an overall improvement in the quality of care provided to unaccompanied children, and also expand this provision by supporting capacity building activities for other interested professionals.

The content of this training manual is based on the book *Children on the move* (Schippers, 2021) published by the European Guardianship Network (EGN), *Working in SIL: a practical guide* (2021), published as part of the PROUD project, *Identifying minors who are victims of trafficking and exploitation in Italy* (Save the Children, 2020), and *STEP-by-STEP together – Support, Tips, Examples and Possibilities for youth work with young refugees* (Council of Europe & the European Commission, 2018). We have also added information provided to us by coaches, mentors, guardians, behavioural scientists, teachers and other professionals. Their input originates from observations, a variety of issues encountered, and – most importantly – many conversations with the children themselves. Certain phenomena are empirically supported by experiences, and therefore given as general statements. Examples of this: children are often hungry and tired after their flight, and they find it difficult to trust others.

All European countries have different working methods, so project partners provided valuable feedback and contributions to the manual. This included examples and supporting literature. Additionally, European and international policy documents and academic publications were used to support the theoretical framework.

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## Learning outcomes

By the end of the course, participants will have:

- An improved understanding of the needs of unaccompanied children (UAC)
- Better understanding of the different phases in caring for UAC and what is important during these phases
- Enhanced skills to meet the needs of the children
- The skills to recognise self-care needs with their knowledge of tools that meet these needs ('caring for the carer')



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# Module 1

## Introduction to UAC and alternative care

The children that this manual refers to have fled their country of origin and been separated from either parents or another person who has custody of them. In Europe, these children are called unaccompanied children (UAC). In this manual, we speak about alternative care arrangements. That may be family-based care, for example with foster carers, both formal and informal. It can also be semi-independent living (SIL) schemes, where children live in small group homes (a maximum of eight children living together) and are cared for by trained professionals.

This chapter is an introduction to UAC and alternative care. The first two sections provide background information on their vulnerabilities and legal position, and all the procedures they are faced with. The third section focuses on the main reasons for leaving their own country. The last two sections highlight alternative care arrangements.

### 1.1 Vulnerabilities of UAC

Unaccompanied children have special vulnerabilities and needs that are based on their triple characteristics of being a child, being a migrant, and not being accompanied by adults who know them well (their family or legal guardians). This means that they:

- Have been separated from their birth parents, families, communities, language, religion, culture and country all at once, which exacerbates their feelings of loss and isolation
- May have suffered abuse, exploitation and violence during their journey, while also being subject to physical hardship, trauma and lack of access to appropriate healthcare or education
- Might have faced or be facing discrimination, hostility and stigma during their journey and on arrival in a new country
- May experience culture shock on arrival in a new country, and be re-traumatised as they undergo the asylum/immigration, age assessment and care procedures
- Need to build the foundations of a new life in their country of arrival, as they embark on a journey towards integration while coming to terms with loss and separation and, at the same time, developing into young adults

### 1.2 Legal position of the UAC

There are various reasons why a child may be unaccompanied or get separated, including persecution of the child or their parents, international conflict and civil war, human trafficking and smuggling – perhaps being sold by their parents – accidental separation from their parents over the course of the journey, and searching for better economic opportunities.

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Regardless of their background and origin, unaccompanied children share many of the same attributes. They are alone and underage, have left their country, and are seeking protection and shelter. These children are particularly vulnerable, due to their traumatic experiences and the fact that their parents are not present. If they are recognised as refugees, they are also entitled to special protection and assistance. Their legal position (refugee/asylum seeker/migrant), and the procedures associated with it, often have an impact on living in family based care or SIL accommodation accommodation. Since these children are affected by national and international guidelines and legislation, it is important that professionals who are involved with UAC have basic knowledge of the legal framework for the child's rights and of the ways in which the asylum procedure affects the unaccompanied child.

### UN instruments

The following UN instruments highlight the rights, responsibilities and minimum standards which must be respected with regard to unaccompanied children.

#### *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989)*

The UN CRC is the most widely ratified international human rights treaty in history. As previously mentioned, UAC come to the EU for a variety of reasons. Regardless of their nationality or immigration status, they are children and should be treated first and foremost as such, according to the UN Children's Rights Committee, responsible for monitoring the implementation of the CRC. The common rights of these children to special protection and assistance laid down under UN instruments should be respected. Children who have been temporarily or permanently deprived of the family environment shall be entitled to special protection and assistance from the State. Otherwise, alternative care must be provided.<sup>1</sup>

The State is responsible for protecting refugee children. This protection exceeds mere basic provision of shelter, nutrition, and basic healthcare. They also need to protect children when they are in the process of applying for asylum.

As stated above, refugee children are first and foremost just children. They should therefore be able to receive education, undertake extracurricular activities and play freely. Furthermore, they have a right to continuity and stability.<sup>2</sup>

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has been installed to monitor compliance with the CRC. To assist States in the implementation of the Convention, the Children's Rights Committee regularly publishes a 'general comment', which serves as a further explanation of one or more articles of the CRC. The general comments provide more concrete guidelines for what is needed to achieve these children's rights more fully.

Two general comments are particularly important for the reception of UAC:

#### *-United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, general comment No.6 (2005) on the treatment of Unaccompanied and Separated children outside their country of origin*

This comment draws attention to the vulnerable situation of unaccompanied and separated children and provides guidance on the protection, care and treatment of unaccompanied children.

#### *-United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, general comment No.14 (2013) on the right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration (art. 3, section 1)*

The main objective of this general comment is to strengthen the understanding and application of the right of children that their best interests are paramount in all the measures that concern them.

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### UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2010)

Children who are temporarily or permanently deprived of their family environment, and therefore cannot grow up with their parents, are entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the state. Alternative care should then be ensured e.g. alternative family care or SIL accommodation.

These guidelines on alternative care for children again aim to improve the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This also applies to relevant provisions of other international instruments aiming at the protection and well-being of children who are without or are at risk of being without parental care. The guidelines explain how policies and practice on alternative care should develop (and have been developed) for broad-based dissemination within all sectors in the field of alternative care. Their purpose is to particularly support the efforts made to bring children up in their own families as much as possible, and to ensure that where this is not possible an appropriate and permanent solution is found. In those cases, where growing up with their own family is not possible or is not in the best interest of the child, the most appropriate forms of alternative care that promote the full and harmonious development of the child should be identified and provided. SIL is also a form of alternative care.

These conventions and guidelines apply to all children, including unaccompanied children. If resistance from authorities is experienced when setting up a SIL, the importance of the rights of the child, and the right to grow up safely, should be emphasised. According to the CRC, a UAC is also entitled to receive suitable education.

### EU law

The EU has established a Common European Asylum System (CEAS) which sets out common standards and cooperation to ensure that asylum seekers are treated equally in an open and fair system – wherever they apply. The system is governed by five legislative instruments and one agency: the Asylum Procedures Directive, the Reception Conditions Directive, the Qualification Directive, the Dublin Regulation, the EURODAC Regulation and the European Asylum Support Office. Both the recast Reception Conditions Directive (Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council, 2013/33/EU, 2013) and the recast Qualification Directive (Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council, 2011/95/EU, 2011) provide rules for accommodating unaccompanied children. The directives are both part of EU asylum legislation that has been adopted and implemented by all Member States, except for Ireland and Denmark and also former EU Member State the UK.

#### *Recast Reception Conditions Directive*

The Directive aims to provide better and more harmonised standards of living to applicants for international protection throughout the EU, irrespective of where – in which Member State – the application has been made. It replaced the Reception Conditions Directive of 2003 that laid down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers. There are new rules concerning detention and better standards for vulnerable people, including minors and unaccompanied children.

#### *Recast Qualification Directive*

The recast Qualification Directive sets out standards as to who qualifies as a beneficiary of international protection and the content of protection granted. Just like the recast Reception Conditions Directive mentioned above, it is a central legislative instrument in the establishment of a Common European Asylum System.

The preamble states that: *'The best interests of the child should be a primary consideration of Member States when implementing this Directive, in line with the 1989 United Nations Convention on the*

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*Rights of the Child. In assessing the best interests of the child, Member States should take due account of the principle of family unity, the child's well-being and social development, safety and security considerations and the views of the minor in accordance with his or her age and maturity.' (2011)*

Although the asylum procedures are enforced differently in each Member State, it is good to be aware that the same EU legislation applies in most Member States. These directives also lay down the protection of the vulnerable position of unaccompanied children.

#### *EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child*

In 2021 the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child was adopted. The strategy identifies many areas where work is needed, but there are grounds for optimism that this will make a positive contribution to the rights and situations of many children, including children in migration, throughout the Member States. It has been developed for and with children.

Children should have access to information provided in a child-friendly way, so they can clearly know what their rights are and, in this case, what the EU plans to do for them. The child-friendly versions of the strategy were co-designed by children and present the information in a digestible way for their readers. Children advised on the language, images and examples used in the leaflets. Every child in Europe and across the world should enjoy the same rights and live free from discrimination and intimidation of any kind. In the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, the Commission addresses persisting and emerging challenges and proposes concrete actions to protect, promote and fulfil children's rights in today's ever-changing world.

#### **Lack of parental authority**

Children up to the age of 18 are legally dependent on the adults that have their custody and lack legal capacity. Therefore, they cannot and should not reside in a country without an adult that supports them, and ensures their care, protection and overall well-being. Each European country has its own guardianship system for children that enter the country without their parents. There are countries where a professional guardian is appointed by law to exercise the authority temporarily, such as in the Netherlands. In other countries a private individual is appointed as a guardian, such as in Italy.

The guardian is responsible for ensuring that the care of the young person is properly exercised, and intervenes if it is insufficient. As each Member State has its own system of guardianship, there are major differences in the extent to which a guardian is directly involved with the child and gives substance to guardianship.

As a social worker, it is important to know the guardian responsible for the UAC and to involve the guardian in the guidance, working together to ensure that the child can develop their independence as well as possible.

#### **The asylum procedure**

The asylum procedure is a bureaucratic process. In most countries, especially the countries on the borders of Europe, no interpreters are available. The procedure is therefore completely inappropriate for an unaccompanied child. Many of these children grew up in countries where the governments are corrupt and unreliable, so distrust of officials is often the basic attitude. Past experience shows that, at first, unaccompanied refugee children do not see the difference between all the officials they are confronted with. They do not understand who is responsible for what and, in principle, do not trust anyone. Trust in others has often been damaged by traumatic events during war and their flight.

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The asylum procedure is seen as very important, and an unaccompanied child wants to complete it as quickly as possible. The distrust and the impatience these children have sometimes stand in the way of them being given adequate support.

For professionals working at SILs that do not only host children recognised as refugees, it is important to realise that both the asylum procedure itself and the outcome (possibility of negative decision) are stress factors. This causes insecurity and distress, and affects every aspect of the unaccompanied child's everyday life. The asylum procedure is in some countries lengthy, giving the child anxiety and uncertainty about their future. If children receive negative decisions, their integration prospects diminish, since they fear that they will be returned to their country of origin when they turn 18. Therefore, the uncertainty of their legal status acts as a demotivation factor that might create symptoms of withdrawal.

Refugees are likely to have been instructed by travel agents, fellow refugees or family, or through social media, on what to say and what not to say during the asylum application process. Unfortunately, this information is not always correct. The genuine flight narrative is therefore not always shared with others, while these events are often much more poignant and would give more depth and credibility to the asylum application. A refugee might only tell the real story after completing the asylum procedure, when they have started to trust their counsellor.

One of the most important needs of unaccompanied refugee children is to gain an understanding of the procedure. This can be done with detailed and repeated explanations in their own language. The child will then understand that procedures must be followed and cannot be influenced by putting pressure on people or bribery. The availability of interpreters and intercultural mediators, plus help from people from their own country, is vital for this.

### **Understanding bureaucratic procedures**

Unaccompanied children have travelled the world without parents, either alone or with other family members or people from their country. Along the way, they have had to make many decisions about the journey on their own: how to travel and who with, where and where not to stay, and which routes to take. In a way, they are self-reliant and independent. When they are faced with the bureaucratic registration and asylum procedures in Europe, they often lose this sense of self-reliance. They know that their future depends on the asylum procedure, but they do not understand it in all its complexity, if only because of the language and the lack of reliable people to translate for them.

This can lead to a lack of agency, feeling you are unable to influence the situation, the asylum procedure, or your future (including their family's future). It is therefore extremely important for the well-being of the unaccompanied child that they have a good understanding of the procedures, so they need people at their disposal who can translate and explain and are also reliable in this. Good examples of appropriate provision of information are short vlogs on YouTube made by former refugees in the language of the unaccompanied children. Another good example is a German child-friendly booklet for refugee children on different subjects, with quotes and advice from child refugees (Jugendliche ohne Grenzen, 2017).

An additional problem for many children is the Dublin transfer. A Dublin transfer can put a lot of stress on children. For example, they can be sent back to Italy, where reception and protection are often poorly arranged and family reunification takes a long time or cannot be achieved. What also may occur is that a Dublin transfer request is issued for a family member the child is travelling with. This can lead

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to dilemmas: does the child go with the family member who is being sent back, or will the child stay with other family members in the country where they are currently living. Although the interest of the child is important in the claim, a Dublin transfer often causes a lot of uncertainty and stress, especially because the procedure takes a long time.

### **Family reunification**

The right to family life is a human right. Nevertheless, the right to family reunification in asylum procedures in European countries varies. Member States fear the 'attraction effect', therefore in many countries the family reunification procedure has been made very unattractive. The procedure takes a long time, and several official documents must be provided to support the request. This can be difficult, especially if other family members have already fled the country of origin. So for children travelling alone, the family reunification procedure is often a source of stress. Long and complicated procedures, the necessary documents that are difficult to obtain, the journey that needs to be funded, and the uncertainty that comes with it, place a heavy burden on these children. The family abroad often do not understand that their child is not able to accelerate or advance the procedure. And if the application ultimately fails, or the family decides not to come because other opportunities have arisen, or not every family member is allowed to come, this is a big disappointment for these children. But even if family reunification is granted, this can be difficult for a young person. Sometimes they have been separated from their family for years, and are now used to taking care of themselves. It can be challenging to be part of their family of origin again and to abide by their rules.

In short: family reunification is often a source of stress and uncertainty for unaccompanied children – for several reasons. Each child will react to this stress differently, but in working with UAC it is good to be aware of that. All legal aspects of the asylum procedure, such as obtaining a permit, or a Dublin request for family reunification, put a lot of stress on children. During the period that social workers are involved in guiding an unaccompanied child or young person, there are several ways in which they can be supportive.

### **1.3 Why do children and young people flee their country of origin?**

People generally flee war, persecution, poverty and hopelessness. From 2014 to 2021, many people fled the war in and around Syria. Most refugees initially stay in refugee camps in their own region. Only a small number try to come to Europe because of the hopeless situation they are in.

During that time, parents of unaccompanied children from Syria said they sent their children to Western Europe for fear of rape, abduction or recruitment by Islamic State (IS). Many Syrian children also come to Europe hoping that their family will be able to join them later, through family reunification procedures. Many Afghan children say that the family's decision to let them flee is a response to Taliban recruitment activities in their immediate area. Among these unaccompanied children are also victims of sexual slavery and child prostitution, often through the practice of keeping 'dancing boys' (bacha bazi) in Afghanistan.

Many of the Eritrean unaccompanied children say they have fled the threat of lifelong conscription in their home country, and what they see as no real prospects for a better future. This was not always the family's choice, as the children say they kept their families out of their decision. They made the decision to leave together with others. For decades, children have also been fleeing Iraq. In recent years, mainly because of the fight against IS, but also to get away from conscription, female genital mutilation, or honour-related violence.

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There are other forms of persecution which make children want to escape. For example, being at risk in their own country because of (alleged or actual) homosexuality. Homosexual acts and relationships are punishable in many countries. In some countries, punishment could mean the death penalty, such as in Uganda and parts of Nigeria and Sudan (De Vries, 2014). People who belong to a minority group – religious or otherwise – such as the Yazidis in Syria, are sometimes forced to flee to escape persecution or extermination. The Yazidi children who arrive in Europe were severely traumatised by the 2014 genocide committed by IS in north-east Iraq. There are also children who escaped from an army or rebel militia in which they were forced to, for example, perform acts of war, and who received help so they could flee to Europe. Other children flee because of family-related or culture-related problems. There may be a threat of honour killing because their own or another family's honour has been violated. Or a child may want to avoid being subjected to female genital mutilation or a forced marriage.

People have been migrating for centuries in search of better opportunities. Today, accounts of poverty and hopelessness, such as in Pakistan or parts of Africa, are given as reasons to flee or migrate. Albania, for instance, is a country with a high number of trafficking victims (for the drugs trade, prostitution, pornography and forced marriage). Many young people from these areas try to reach Europe in search of opportunities. For example, from 2017 to 2019 the number of children from North Africa increased significantly in Greece, Spain, France, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. Many of them grew up in severe poverty in their country of origin. They had to fend for themselves from a very young age and had been homeless for years. For many, this started at the age of 10 or 11, but some children even said they had been homeless from the age of 5 or 6. These children are often addicted to drugs, have had little or no education, and have survived through petty crime and sexual exploitation. They have almost no chance of being granted a residence permit but do still hope for a better future. Other children from these countries fled to Europe when they were a bit older. Their parents often encouraged them to do so, because they did not see any prospects for the child in their country of origin.

Unaccompanied children arriving in Europe from Vietnam have also been the focus of some attention. For years, there have been concerns that these young people are victims of human trafficking. Generally, it is understood that they go to the UK on the assumption that they will find work there, but labour brokers are often indeed traffickers, and many children end up being exploited. At cannabis farms or nail bars, or for prostitution, for example<sup>3</sup>. It is difficult to build a lasting relationship with them, and as soon as they get the opportunity, the children go somewhere else. The tragedy with the refrigerated truck container at the end of 2019 in Essex (the UK), in which 39 Vietnamese people died from suffocation, included children who were registered as unaccompanied children. This shows once again how much risk people are prepared to take.

Family reunification is often seen as a way to escape from war and other dangers. In a situation like this, a child is sent first to pave the way for reunification with parents, brothers and sisters. Financial resources are usually insufficient for the whole family to leave at the same time. The journey is also so dangerous, and therefore the chance of survival so slight, that they try to spread the risk by sending just one family member. European countries have been changing their family reunification policies in recent years in response to this. In effect, that means that some children do not go to European countries where family members are already living, because their choice of country is chiefly motivated by the prospect of successful family reunification. Distressing situations have been seen in the Netherlands that illustrate this. For example, a child lives alone in the Netherlands, rather than with their adult sister in another European country, because family reunification for parents, brothers and sisters in the Netherlands is possible, although it takes many years to achieve due to long and difficult procedures. Another example is of families who are scattered across the world because the situation

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in their country of origin forced them to leave for different destinations at different times. They then try to reunite in Europe because they believe there will be better opportunities for them there.

Once they arrive at the borders of Europe, most refugees – including children – want to travel on to the wealthier north-west European countries. They have heard of more opportunities there for asylum, family reunification, work and accommodation. And that there is better protection, care and education for children. Children often prefer to continue travelling with adults they arrived in Europe with, if they are travelling to northern Europe. In addition, precarious and poor reception conditions in countries of first arrival (Greece, Italy, etc.) can be a contributing push factor for them to continue travelling. But often the main reason is that they already have family in a particular country. However, travelling within the EU may pose a problem.

The Dublin III Regulation identifies which country is responsible for processing the application for international protection of an asylum seeker. As a rule, this is the first country (EU Member State) where the asylum seeker is registered. Many asylum seekers are therefore confronted with a ‘Dublin’ transfer if they have already been registered in another country upon entering Europe. That country is responsible for the asylum application, so the asylum seeker will be transferred there for examination of the application.

A distinction has been made between two types of groups. One group consists of unaccompanied children who are present in the EU without any family members or relatives in other European Member States. These children may not be transferred to the Member State where they first entered the EU and/or made an application for international protection. This separate approach has applied to unaccompanied children since an EU Court of Justice decision in 2013 (judgment of 6 June 2013, EU:C:2013:367). That decision was based on the best interests of the child always being considered, and unaccompanied children were identified as a particularly vulnerable group. In contrast to adults, this implies that children may not, as a rule, be transferred to another Member State unless it would be in their best interest. The second group consists of unaccompanied children who do have family members or relatives legally present in another European Member State, and for whom reunification with relatives would be in their best interest. Reunification on this basis is not always successful.

In most cases, it is the family who make the decision to send a child without their parents. They decide who is physically and mentally strong enough to complete the journey. That is often the eldest son. In the eyes of the family, their child is independent and resilient enough for this. So, the child generally leaves their family feeling that they are an adult. They believe they are capable of coping with the flight, regardless of their age. This is often preceded by a long period of preparation: the family must raise the money and find a ‘travel company’ or ‘travel agent’.

Evidently, this does not apply to all children who flee. Many flee suddenly without being well prepared, if the situation has become too dangerous for them to stay. Eritrean children often say that they left impulsively, with others who were leaving at that time. Their family does not always agree with the flight. There are also children who are still so young and vulnerable that the decision to hand the child over to a travel agent is more a sign of despair than a measured decision. In a 2016 news broadcast, Syrian parents in a refugee camp near the Turkish border said: “We are going to die here anyway; my child may drown at sea, but there is also a chance that he will make it.”

In addition to all these reasons for fleeing, there may well be another motivation – the hope that the child will make money and a career in Europe that will ultimately benefit the entire family. People in

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the wealthy West often find it hard to understand a parent's decision to let their child go, and that can lead to a judgemental attitude towards the parents and a protective attitude towards the child. This is usually not in line with the experience of the refugee child, who is proud of completing the journey and wants to help their family.

Cultural differences between the West and the refugees' countries of origin play a noticeable role here. Unaccompanied children generally come from a so-called collectivist or 'we' culture, also referred to as an extended family culture. European culture is much more individualistic or 'I'-oriented. There is a big difference between this and a collectivist culture, particularly in north-west Europe. Understanding cultural differences helps create an understanding of the intrinsic motivation and behaviour of refugee children.

#### 1.4 Family based care

There are several kinds of reception in families that might be suitable for an unaccompanied child, i.e. reception in the social network of the child themselves (which may or may not be their own family), and reception within a family they do not yet know.

##### Growing up within their own social network

Apart from the advantages of living in a familiar culture, growing up within their own social network, or even with members of their own family, has the added advantages of a shared family and migration history plus existing, often affective, relationships. The smells, the food, the dialect spoken – recognisable stress buffers that often overlap more here than in families with other ethnic backgrounds. Some unaccompanied children might have relatives in the destination country who they can live with. Others may be accompanied by people who are not relatives but might also be suitable as carers. In these cases, professionals need to evaluate the relationship between the child and the relative or accompanying person, as well as that person's ability to take care of the child's needs.

##### Growing up in a reception family

If unaccompanied children do not have their own network of family members or other responsible companions who they can live with, reception in a family they do not know may also provide a safe place.

Some unaccompanied children do not agree to being placed in a family. This could be because they are already used to living an independent life and looking after themselves. Depending on their age, and their actual ability to look after themselves semi-independently, and after talking to the child in detail about the reasons and the options, the conclusion could be that reception in a family is not the best option. These children may benefit more from reception in small-scale reception facilities, or from living on their own, instead of reception within a family.

#### 1.5 Semi-Independent Living schemes (SIL)

SIL is a type of small-scale reception for children aged 15-18. Ideally, younger children who are not yet sufficiently independent are placed in family care. The SIL accommodation is usually a standard family home or apartment that will house between three and six children. The small size of the group creates a calm environment for the children, which allows them to live together in harmony. To provide adequate guidance it is also better to limit the group size. The children are guided by a team of professionals.

At SIL in the Netherlands, a coach, host/hostess, caretaker and cultural mediator work together to care for the children. The coach is responsible for daily guidance and provides psychosocial support. A coach

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will be present at a SIL location at certain times every day, especially when the youngsters are also at home. The host or hostess is an untrained pedagogical assistant who makes contact with the young people in a more natural way, supporting the youngster with their chores and offering the warmth and comfort a parent would give. The caretaker carries out minor repairs and technical maintenance at the home. The intercultural mediator is supportive in solving 'misunderstandings' between youngsters, or 'misconceptions' between a youngster and a professional, by explaining to both parties what the other person means. This mediator also has an important role in providing the youngsters with information about life in the region where they are now, education, healthcare and integration in general.

### **Working at SIL in Greece**

**Caregivers** work at SIL apartments, combining the role of host/caretaker as described in the Dutch system, usually covering night shifts, ensuring that the children are safe. They offer practical support, helping the youngsters with their daily needs, accompanying them to health services when necessary, and intervening on practical issues that may arise.

**Social workers**, based in METAdrasi's office, visit the SIL apartments too, in order to speak to the children and follow up on their cases. They are responsible for keeping each child's files up to date (including medical reports and an updated individualised case plan, in cooperation with the guardian, etc.), and for accompanying the children to services and providing referrals when needed.

A **psychologist** and a **lawyer** are also part of the SIL team, in order to provide the children with psychological support or legal advice. Each child can book a one hour appointment per week with the psychologist or the lawyer. In emergencies, this frequency can be increased.

**Guardians/Authorised Representatives** of unaccompanied children are not included in the SIL programme, as they are responsible for the child's legal procedures, but they do work closely with the SIL team. They are appointed by the Public Prosecutor. Guardians visit the children frequently. How often depends on the level of vulnerability of each child and their current needs. Guardians are also responsible for supervising school attendance and general progress in the child's life.

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# Module 2

## Settling in

### 2.1 Insecurity and the need to feel safe

At the start, in phase one, the emphasis will be on making contact and getting to know the child and the family (including the family in the country of origin) and, if necessary, taking care of health issues. It is important for the child to be able to feel safe.

### 2.2 Introducing Amir

Amir is a 16.5-year-old boy from an African conflict country. He is the eldest son of a family of five children. It is a loving family. He has an elder sister, two younger brothers and a baby sister. His mother suffers from a chronic illness. The family comes from a rural town. Amir went to school until he was 11, and after that he helped his father with work on their land. The internal conflict, poverty and fear for the future were the reasons why Amir fled the country.

### 2.3 Feeling safe: the child's needs

#### Child factors in general

Factors concerning the child that should be considered are cognitive development, coping behaviour, psychological and emotional development, social development, physical development, health, (age-appropriate) self-dependency, behaviour, motivation, prior experiences with placements, the child's expectations, and special needs.

Regarding age appropriateness, it is good to realise that the ages of unaccompanied children are not always correct. They sometimes simply do not know their own age, or are told by flight 'guides' or traffickers that giving another age – either younger or older – will be to their advantage.

Situational factors are the possibility of obtaining a residence permit, the relationship with the candidate reception family, long-term prospects of placement (regarding family reunification), former placements, the role of the absent parents or family, siblings to be placed in family care, and inappropriate sexual behaviour displayed by the child.

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### Important issues in the first phase of the reception of unaccompanied children:

The initial phase of reception focuses on offering rest and safety

The basic needs of the child are provided: shelter, sufficient food, physical safety and being in touch with family

The contact with the child is based on showing interest and being reliable

The child's distrust, secrets and unwillingness to talk about things are respected

The child's level of independence is respected

Aiming for continuity in mentors/guardians and at the reception facility

Suitable and preferably useful daily activities are available

There is positive support for the child's experience and expression of religion

In short: feeling safe and welcome, and having sufficient and appropriate food, certainty about your place of residence, human contact based on interest and support, frequent contact with family, and understanding of the procedures you are dealing with are all factors that contribute to a basic sense of security. Feeling secure helps unaccompanied children to unwind and recover from the stress and traumatic events, and they are then able to explore the opportunities in the society they now find themselves in. A society in which they are confronted with a completely different culture that may sometimes seem inconceivable to them, as well as complicated bureaucracy, and new risks and temptations. The right support and appropriate provision of information can be of great help to them and reduce the risks.

#### Food

The importance of eating, and having access to sufficient and familiar food, is often underestimated. Most unaccompanied children were hungry during the journey. And many had also experienced hunger caused by war and poverty in the period prior to the flight. Once the children are in Europe, they expect to find a rich, safe country where there is enough food. Eating is a primary need, necessary for survival. Someone living in poverty or war, or someone who is fleeing, has no certainty that there will be food to eat. Unaccompanied children are therefore initially focused on food.

Foster parents also recognise the stress caused by food. Unaccompanied children hoard in the beginning, hiding food under their bed or in a cupboard in their room. These foster families have discovered that if sufficient food is always available, and hoarding is allowed, the child's fixation on food will automatically decrease. Over time, certainty about the availability of food is internalised and no longer a source of stress, particularly in residential groups that let go of rules about food and ensure that there is enough food that children can always access. The fixation on food generally passes or decreases after a few months.

In many cultures, eating together is a time to share emotions. When there is something to celebrate, a marriage or birth, or if there is sadness or grief, the emotions that go with that are shared during a meal. Eating together, experiencing the smells and flavours together, is associated with sharing emo-

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tions and being with people you love. Food is also the way to share, to be hospitable. Food is always available, guests are offered food, and everyone is always welcome. Eating is therefore also the basis of togetherness and a sense of community.

The traditional culture in north-west Europe is very different. Meals are eaten at set times, and the food is put away the rest of the time. Guests are invited to people's homes and extra food is prepared for them. Having unexpected guests at the table is not the norm. When there is something to celebrate there is a festive meal with lots of delicious food, but eating together is not traditionally a time to mourn together or share sorrow.

### **Family**

Contact with their family is extremely important for almost all unaccompanied children. These children come from an extended family culture, as was described earlier. So even though their family is geographically far away, for most of them the family is still very much a part of their life. The child has come to Europe to help their family, to contribute to their well-being. They often feel responsible for the family and therefore want to succeed in the asylum procedure and family reunification or want to earn money to send home. This changes over time, of course, when the reality turns out to be different, as do family expectations and hopes.

There are now many inexpensive ways to have contact with family, using a mobile phone or the internet for example. Unaccompanied children may use social media a lot to keep in touch with their family, with those who were left behind, but also with family members who they lost on the way, or who fled at a different time and followed a different route. These family members may be in bad shape or in dire circumstances. "And," as a former refugee said, "once you've fled, the only place you can meet your family is in the online world."

Unaccompanied children think about their family a lot, especially in the initial phase. This is noticeable from their continual use of the internet or their phone. Foster parents and professional care providers do not always understand this, and it can lead to arguments. For example, two brothers were told that they were being disrespectful, because they were on the phone to their father in Israel who called them during dinner. They had to ask their father to call them later. The boys felt very misunderstood in this situation. They were very concerned about their father; they did not know exactly what was going on, but they did know he was in trouble and needed money.

Sometimes the child's parents are in such a difficult situation that they cannot be contacted. Or parents may be missing. This is unfortunate and very stressful for the children.

### **Contact**

Unaccompanied children are usually unfamiliar with the concept of a professional who provides care and support. They are used to being helped by their family or the community, assistance given by people they already know. In general, unaccompanied children like to feel that the contact they have with, for example, staff at the reception centre, a mentor or a guardian, is because the person is interested in them, and concerned about them, and that they are not only doing this as part of their job. The children say that it is important that a guardian or mentor is there "when they really need them," like during an appointment with the immigration services or a lawyer, an appointment related to health problems, or a telephone call with their family. Mentors or guardians sometimes have to get used to this. They have mainly learned to respond at moments that are difficult or problematic, not during good times too.

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### **Behaviour seen from an intercultural and trauma-informed perspective**

Hyperarousal occurs in many unaccompanied children, especially during their early days in Europe. It manifests itself in agitated behaviour, caused by chronic stress and triggered trauma. This behaviour can also lead to aggression, because in a state of hyperarousal someone responds to danger – or perceived danger – by fighting, fleeing or actively freezing. The fight response can lead to risky and unsafe situations and to escalations, because of the reactions that it evokes in others.

Cultural differences play an important role in the perception and recognition of aggression. Hofstede et al. (2016) discussed the dimensions of masculinity and femininity regarding the extent to which traditionally masculine and feminine traits are valued in a society. Traditionally, valued masculine traits include assertiveness, ambition and competitiveness. Valued feminine traits involve modesty, supportiveness and solidarity. Being tough, fighting and aggression are considered to be masculine values. Unaccompanied children generally come from masculine societies. They have learned that fighting and aggression in boys and men is valued, or at least accepted, while in many Western societies this is rejected, and feminine traits are valued. Hofstede et al. (2016) labelled these European societies as highly feminine, with Sweden first on the list. Different standards may apply within certain social contexts, such as groups of football supporters who value fighting, aggressive behaviour and being tough, but this type of behaviour is generally rejected in many Western societies.

Unaccompanied children experienced a lot of violence and insecurity during the flight, and often prior to it. This also plays a role in their behaviour. Being able to fight well and be aggressive can serve a purpose, in helping you to survive and protect female family members. So it could be very useful and appropriate behaviour in threatening situations.

During transit, or their early days in reception, unaccompanied children often experience a lot of insecurity. Although many countries try to minimise the number of times children are moved between centres, these transfers do still frequently occur. Due to this, many children's lives lack stability in the first period after their arrival and during the rest of their stay. In many cases, they are still 'on the run', in 'flight mode'. They just want to continue travelling and do not yet have confidence in their mentors. The future is also still full of uncertainty – will the transit work out well for them, or the asylum procedure and family reunification? Young people can show aggression towards other refugees and their mentors due to the stress and trauma. This is particularly the case in a reception environment where problems with control can predominate, and where there is little room for human contact and sincere interest, such as in large-scale reception. Aggression is therefore seen less in small-scale reception and families. In Denmark, training reception staff in low arousal methods has proved useful for avoiding conflicts.

Understandably, aggressive behaviour and escalations of violence in reception lead to attempts to control the situations. The usual approach is to take corrective measures. These are punishments such as the withdrawal of privileges and sometimes a timeout or temporary transfer. This approach, correcting undesirable behaviour (and rewarding desirable behaviour) is a method that is widely used today in Western youth care and parenting programmes. Examples are, on the one hand, reward systems with stickers and, on the other, places for timeouts and cooling down from anger, or consistently ignoring undesirable behaviour. The strategy is based on the principles of operant conditioning, part of a learning theory based on behaviourism. The starting point is that all behaviour is learned (conditioned) in interaction with the environment.

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Unaccompanied children often do not understand the kind of punishments given in Western society, such as privileges being revoked, a timeout or having to apologise, so this should also be considered. Different principles of parenting and influencing behaviour apply in the cultures that most unaccompanied children come from. In those societies, undesirable behaviour is punished, and the more the behaviour affects family honour, the more severe the punishment. Behaviour that does not affect family honour can also go unpunished. Desired behaviour is ignored because that is what is expected. So a young person knows that they are behaving well if they are not punished. This is different from what is customary in Western upbringing, where desired behaviour is stimulated according to the principles of operant conditioning.

Past experience shows that recognising the cause of the 'inappropriate' behaviour of an unaccompanied child can be helpful. Does it concern behaviour that arises from trauma triggers and/or a high stress level, perhaps hyperarousal, or is it mainly learned survival behaviour due to insecurity or to get something done? In other words, where is the behaviour coming from?

If the inappropriate behaviour arises from hyperarousal or trauma triggers, there is little point in imposing a punishment. The behaviour stems from a reflex, after all. Understanding and acknowledging the intensity of the emotions provides a good opportunity for connecting with the child. From there, the child can look for ways to see these kinds of violent outbursts coming, for example by recognising rising tension and triggers. The child can then learn in a cognitive way to anticipate the escalation by getting out of the situation in time. Relaxation exercises can also reduce the increasing tension. It can be helpful to find out together with the child what used to help them relax, or what their family did when stressed. In this way the child gets a grip on their situation, a feeling of control. Treatment for the trauma symptoms is also important, of course, if they do not decrease or even get worse over time.

Survival behaviour has usually been learned, to achieve something. Working together with the child and, if possible, their family, you can look for corrective measures that are clear to the child and will help to change the undesirable behaviour.

Reflecting on the 'wrong' behaviour to teach someone to behave differently is also common practice in Western culture. A young person needs to understand why the behaviour is wrong and to apologise. This is an interesting and often underestimated difference between a 'guilt' culture and a 'shame' culture.

Finally, professionals should take the time to get to know the child, to invest in the relationship. Knowledge about the effect of trauma and culture is relevant, but as is always the case, the right response to problematic behaviour is dependent on the individual child and their needs.

## 2.4 Human trafficking

In most European countries, asylum seekers are not permitted to work. Children have even less rights or opportunities to work. This, in combination with the lack of parental supervision, makes unaccompanied children particularly vulnerable to human trafficking. The need to send money to their family, pay off a human smuggler, pay for the family's travel for family reunification, or to survive homelessness, makes them easy victims for exploitation.

### Trafficking and exploitation

Trafficking in human beings is a crime that comprises three elements: acts, means and purpose. The acts – what is done – are recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people. The

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means – how it is done – are: threat or use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability, or giving payments or benefits to a person in control of the victim to achieve consent. The purpose – why it is done – is exploitation, which includes exploiting the prostitution of others, sexual exploitation, forced labour, slavery or similar practices, and the removal of organs.

Anyone under the age of 18 who is recruited, transported, transferred or harboured for exploitation purposes, in or out of the young person's home country, even without being coerced, cheated or abused, can be described as a child who is a victim of trafficking.

International legislation describes the worst forms of child labour as:

- 1 All forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom, and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict.
- 2 The use, procurement or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography, or for pornographic performances.
- 3 The use, procurement or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs.
- 4 Work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of the children.

No matter how they have entered the country of destination, victims are always forced to be dependent and are exploited using physical and psychological violence. For this reason, the victim is in many cases subject to forced labour, whose definition can be found in the ILO Convention n. 29 (c. 29) of 1930.

Trafficking in migrant minors occurs when illegal entry to a country is given to someone who is not a citizen or resident of that country, to gain material or economic benefits.

The European Commission defines the term exploitation as an umbrella term that includes the exploitation of human beings, through forced prostitution, or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or the provision of services, slavery and similar practices, as well as the removal and sale of someone's organs. Human trafficking and human smuggling are often seen as interchangeable terms. However, these crimes are very distinct in terms of victimisation and assistance that would be required.

Human smuggling can be defined as the illegal entry of a person into a country, whereby the person has knowingly and willingly decided to embark upon the journey of which the costs and risks are typically known to the person. The smuggler is the person illegally transporting them with their informed consent.

Human trafficking can be defined as "The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or reception of persons, including the exchange or transfer of control over those persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation." Exploitation shall include, as a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others, or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, including begging, slavery or practices like slavery, servitude or the exploitation of criminal activities, or the removal of organs (Rijken et al., 2020).

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A child that is a victim of human trafficking is considered to be any person below the age of 18 who is recruited, transferred, forcibly moved or provided accommodation for the purpose of exploitation, even if there is no evidence of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, deception, fraud, or any other form of abuse.

A common misunderstanding is that human trafficking is exclusively a cross-border crime. Therefore, many professionals tend to overlook the fact that trafficking can also take place within the borders of a country. Any action that is carried out with the purpose of exploitation of another person, by means of deception, coercion or threat, can be considered trafficking.

Since there is such a wide variety of means of coercion, types of exploitation and victim backgrounds, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Some victims have been lured to Europe with a promise of prospects for them there. Upon arrival, they find out that the actual plan was exploitation, such as prostitution or forced labour. This group often have less difficulty self-identifying as a victim, and generally find it easier to accept help, although this is highly dependent on the (perceived) influence of the trafficker over them (such as threatening the family in the country of origin or using traditional spiritual methods to exert control over the victim). Other victims might have some kind of personal connection to the trafficker. Throughout the process, these traffickers invest in creating a dependent relationship with the victim, which hampers self-identification as a victim. This is often seen in sexual and criminal exploitation. For the victims, it becomes difficult to distinguish between 'being forced' and 'helping out a friend' and 'being loyal'. Unaccompanied children are vulnerable to recruitment for the purpose of exploitation, such as selling or moving drugs within the host country, as they feel very lonely and isolated and some "older community members" groom them by making them feel that they belong, are understood and are cared for.

An example: Nazir is a 15-year-old Afghan boy who suffers from severe PTSD and is struggling to maintain a stable home environment due to "challenging behaviours". He has moved from placement to placement several times, and is struggling at school. He meets some older Afghan boys in his neighbourhood. They spend time with him, offer him food, drinks and cannabis, and make him feel like he belongs again. They start asking him favours – to keep a backpack for them at his home, to travel to another city to take something there for them, etc. Social workers notice the presence of these older boys when they visit, and share their concerns in their notes, but take no further action. Nazir continues to engage in these activities and ends up in jail. Nazir does not perceive this as exploitation until much later on, when is 24 years old and fighting his deportation order, and a case worker looks through his file. After having many conversations with him about the situation in the past and now, the case worker refers him to the trafficking referral mechanism, which recognise Nazir as a victim of trafficking.

It would help the child a lot if professionals in their environment could identify the signs of human trafficking and/or smuggling, and would therefore be able to initiate the conversation about it and, possibly, trigger an intervention. Unfortunately, the signs are very diverse, and may overlap with signs of other refugee-related problems. Nevertheless, there are instruments available that list the alarming signs that victims can manifest. Lists like these can be useful, but may not include all possible signs. The signs usually listed are: being away from home a lot, answering the phone in haste (and then often leaving immediately), coming home late and often looking wretched, having relatively more new and expensive things than you would expect, being irritable and displaying sudden changes in behaviour.

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A person working with UAC (e.g. a caregiver, social worker, etc.) may notice:

- Changes inside the home (new furniture, a new TV set, an expensive sound system, phone or laptop, etc.)
- Changes in a child or young person's appearance (expensive jewellery or clothes, new tattoos, bruises, or any other sign of physical abuse)
- Low school performance (a noticeable drop in their grades) and/or poor attendance (even though the child gets up early and leaves the home)
- Reluctance to engage with the programme (for example avoidance of attending any extra-curricular activity, offered either by the programme or others, usually by making excuses about limited free time, heavy school workload, etc.)
- Sudden changes in personal hygiene (multiple and long showers, or neglecting personal care)
- Behavioural changes (becoming disobedient regarding the rules of the home or the programme in general, sudden and intense mood swings, signs of depression, nightmares, or highly sexualised behaviour)

Some of these signs could be linked to PTSD or another mental health condition, but also to the use of addictive substances, such as drugs. However, all the above scenarios may be dangerous for a child. These changes in a child's behaviour can constitute signs of exploitation. The child could have been forced into labour or prostitution. Sometimes, the child finds themselves in an inescapable situation, obliged to work in inhumane and precarious conditions for long hours, to pay a "debt" that the family or the child themselves has "created" by migrating.

At first glance, someone could ignore the importance of signs like these, 'normalising' the situation, thinking that they are signs of adolescence (disobedience, sexualisation, spending many hours outside the home, changes in hygiene routines) BUT "Better a false alarm than no alarm!" So if you are not sure about reporting something you have observed in a child's behaviour, IT IS BETTER TO REPORT IT!



**For more information about human trafficking and child exploitation:**

*London Safeguarding Trafficked Children Toolkit*, London safeguarding children board, London 2011, [http://www.harrowlscb.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/london\\_safeguarding\\_trafficked\\_children\\_toolkit\\_feb\\_2011.pdf](http://www.harrowlscb.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/london_safeguarding_trafficked_children_toolkit_feb_2011.pdf)

*Toolkit to combat trafficking in persons. Global Programme against Trafficking in Human Beings*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2008 <https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/HT-toolkit-en.pdf>

*Development of a child-rights methodology to identify and support child victims of traffic*, Italy, Bulgaria, Germany, Romania, AGIS Programme 2005-2007 [https://childhub.org/sites/default/files/library/attachments/468\\_505\\_en\\_original.pdf](https://childhub.org/sites/default/files/library/attachments/468_505_en_original.pdf)

*Protocol for Identification and Assistance to Trafficked Persons and Training Kit*, Anti-Slavery International 2005, <https://documentation.lastradainternational.org/lisidocs/16%20Protocol%20for%20Identification%20and%20Training%20Kit.pdf>

*Guidelines for the identification of victims of trafficking in human beings, Especially for Consular Services and Border Guards*, European Commission DG Home Affairs Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union 2013 [https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/guidelines\\_on\\_identification\\_of\\_victims\\_1.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/guidelines_on_identification_of_victims_1.pdf)

*Combating the trafficking in children for sexual purposes, Questions and Answers*, ECPAT 2006 [https://documentation.lastradainternational.org/lisidocs/191%20FAQ%20Child%20Trafficking%20\(ECPAT,%202006\).pdf](https://documentation.lastradainternational.org/lisidocs/191%20FAQ%20Child%20Trafficking%20(ECPAT,%202006).pdf)

*The identification of victims of human trafficking in transit and destination countries in Europe, A practical guideline for frontline workers*, Danish Red Cross [https://www.trafficking-response.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-identification-of-victims-of-human-trafficking-in-transit-and-destination-countries-in-Europe\\_English.pdf](https://www.trafficking-response.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-identification-of-victims-of-human-trafficking-in-transit-and-destination-countries-in-Europe_English.pdf)

*Uniform Guidelines for the Identification and Referral of Victims of Human Trafficking within the Migrant and Refugee Reception Framework in the OSCE Region*, OSCE Office of the Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings <https://www.osce.org/cthb/413123>

## 2.5 Feeling safe: tasks for the professional

### Building trust

The rollercoaster of events, and the emotions they trigger, can make the start of the guidance difficult in the initial phase. Refugee children must first find out that the professional is reliable and supportive, stands by them completely and does not have a double agenda. This takes time. Respect, openness and interest are crucial when building a relationship of trust. As a social worker working with UAC, you must be able to give the young person what they are asking of you at that moment. You must have an eye for both the child's strengths and vulnerabilities, and tailor the support accordingly. At the beginning of their stay at the reception facility, in SIL accommodation or with a family, it is often difficult for refugee children to understand that their social worker is there to support and guide them. They

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have to deal with many different people with different jobs. And they usually do not know what an aid worker does. In the countries where UAC come from, help is usually arranged within the family or community, not by the government or by professionals.

*An unaccompanied child might say to an aid worker: 'You are paid to help me, so I cannot trust you. You're doing it for the money and not for me.'*

Over time, the distrust fades away as the children experience the involvement of, for example, their mentors. They realise that the support offered comes from this sense of involvement, and they often start to call the adults caring for them their sister, brother, father or mother. This is a sign of trust and confidence. On the other hand, a social worker who wants to make too many decisions for a child will soon find them resisting that. Unaccompanied children have become accustomed to fending for themselves during the flight to Europe, and they feel mature and self-reliant to some extent. Respecting their independence and letting them exercise agency in their own situation will strengthen their resilience.

An unaccompanied child needs time and positive experiences to see that a professional guiding them can offer engagement and support, even though they are paid for it. Be trustworthy in what you say and do. Show that you trust the child yourself. A reliable counselling relationship should be the goal.

As a social worker, understanding unaccompanied children and their need for guidance is helpful in being able to guide them well from the start, thereby promoting their development towards recovery and independence. You need a culturally sensitive attitude to make contact with the refugee child and their family, and to be able to respond to needs and motivations. This is also essential for promoting development, eliminating any developmental threats, and finding appropriate solutions where necessary.

### **Resilience, agency and autonomy**

Resilience can be dependent on several factors. Agency and autonomy are relevant factors that enable refugee children to enhance their resilience. Being able to act autonomously can give children a sense of confidence and pride in their own abilities.

### **Agency as part of resilience**

Agency refers to a person's ability and strength to act in a changing situation and to maximise opportunities in that environment (Carlson et al., 2012, in Van Reisen et al., 2018). The Van Reisen research group refers to Carlson et al. in its research on trust among unaccompanied children from Eritrea. According to Van Reisen, the unaccompanied child's capacity for agency includes the ability to build their trust in others, including their guardian, mentor, peers and professionals.

### **Agency in unaccompanied children includes the ability to:**

- Act in a changing or unfamiliar context, for example knowing how to respond during an interview at the immigration office
- Manage situations, for example an unaccompanied child's response to their guardian and to different social norms or rules, values, etc.
- Use inherited resources, such as how children draw resources from their family and kinship
- Experience a sense of well-being, acceptance and recognition, for example by making their voice heard and expressing their needs
- Rely on others, for example peers, their guardian, mentor, professionals (Van Reisen et al., 2018)

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Fleeing is an example of agency. It is an opportunity to exercise agency and to influence, for example, a situation of oppression and exploitation (Hajdukowski-Ahmed in Lanslots, 2012). Selectively providing information about yourself can also be seen as an expression of agency, a way to deal with difficulties, to look ahead and not back, and to maintain a certain degree of control when an unaccompanied child has to find their way in the asylum, care and education system, say Vervliet and Derluyn in Trajectories of unaccompanied minors (2013).

Expectations associated with flight and migration play an important role in the resilience of refugees. These expectations are often related to the motive for the flight, such as finding safety, but may also change during the migration. The study by Vervliet and Derluyn (2013) into expectations, agency and psychosocial well-being among unaccompanied children supports the idea that family members generally play a fairly important role in the decision-making process regarding the migration, and in the expectations that unaccompanied children develop. But it appears that young people have their own expectations too, separate from the family, which the researchers consider to be a sign of agency.

Agency also comprises the capacity to understand society, says Arendt (in Van Reisen, 2018). In the early days, unaccompanied children are often confused about the society they are now living in, which makes them feel powerless and insecure. The bureaucracy, the different roles of the different services such as the immigration office, guardian, mentor, what can and cannot be influenced – all of it is new and incomprehensible for many children.

It is therefore important to give them as much clarity as possible, to provide a sense of agency. That enables the child to get to grips with the bureaucratic processes, and to understand who they can turn to for what, and what can and cannot be changed. It also seems to create a sense of agency if they can have some influence on their living conditions at the asylum centre. Young people generally like being able to participate in decisions on, for example, agreements about what time the kitchen can be used, or what they will be eating.

### **Consultation and commitment of absent parents or family**

The extent to which biological parents, or family members who are important to the child, agree with the placement in SIL accommodation or family based care influences the stability and sustainability of the placement. Their disagreement will most likely provoke a loyalty conflict. And even the slightest negative tone in communication between biological parents or family and the reception family may cause instability.

If possible, communication between the guardian/social worker and the biological parents or family should take place with the help of an interpreter. It can also be helpful to ask a 'key figure' to support the communication and talk to the biological family. This 'key figure' must be a member of a cultural or ethnic group that is well integrated in the new society. He or she can help with analysing the problems regarding cultural differences, and can mediate or give advice if there are conflicting issues. This person can also operate as a cultural mediator in finding the most important person in the family who can give permission, or from whom commitment should be gained. This could be the father, mother or – more likely – grandfather or grandmother, or even a headman of the tribe or a priest.

If the parents can be contacted, then the professionals working with the child can give them, with the help of a translator, a realistic picture of the child's situation and the opportunities they have. Making clear to the family that their expectations were unrealistic can reduce or remove the pressure on the child. A 16-year-old boy from Syria said how relieved he was when his guardian explained to his father

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that it was not the boy's fault that the asylum procedure and family reunification was taking so long, but that the rules had been changed and everyone now had to wait a long time. Before that, his father had kept telling the boy that he should try harder or complain to make things go faster. The father thought that his son had done something wrong, especially because his nephew had succeeded in bringing his family over a long time ago, but now he understood. The boy has been more relaxed since then and is now showing an interest in school and his new environment for the first time. He has clearly passed the initial phase now and feels he can trust his social worker.

## 2.6 Settling in - Skills & Tools

### Talking to unaccompanied children<sup>4</sup>

- Explain the obvious. Something that seems obvious to you is not necessarily so for the child you are guiding. If it is, the youngster will tell you. But if it was not, you are teaching them something in a sensitive way. For some young people it could be embarrassing if they had to ask what you meant.
- Be interested in other cultures. As a social worker guiding UAC, you are not expected to know everything about the cultures of all youngsters. By having a curious, open attitude and asking questions about how things used to work at home, or "what would your family say about this?," you show you value their experience and you value differences, and this enables dialogue. It might also help you to better understand certain behaviours.
- Avoid labelling behaviour desirable and undesirable with the argument "This is how we do it here, in ... (country)". It could put them on the defensive and give the wrong message that there is only one way of doing something, which delegitimises young people who act differently.
- When suggesting activities, try to consider cultural aspects: proposing an afternoon at the swimming pool during Ramadan will exclude certain young people from participating. Ask the youngsters for their input and involve them in planning activities.
- Avoid explaining everything through culture: violence is not cultural. First and foremost, the youngster is an individual and should be treated as such, rather than viewing him or her as a cultural representative. Although certain habits can be culturally explained, avoid falling into the trap of confusing negative behaviours with cultural aspects.
- Treat each young person as an individual, independently of where they come from. Young people are sensitive to inequality and unequal treatment. It is not easy to provide a balance between recognising individuals' needs and providing equality.
- Sometimes just listening to their stories, without feeling the need to do something or intervene, is enough.
- Create an atmosphere in which the values of respect, openness and mutual learning are the standard.
- Finally, when working with unaccompanied children, provide learning opportunities by asking questions and discussing certain stereotypes. Only then can things like this be considered and deconstructed.



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### Checklist 'Child-friendly information'<sup>5</sup>

'Child-friendly information' means information that is adapted to the child's age, maturity, language, gender and culture.<sup>6</sup>

Age, maturity, language skills, gender and culture perspective must be considered cumulatively by respecting some golden rules:

- Adapt information to the child's situation
- Provide information directly to the child, as much as possible, in their first language (mother tongue)
- Use an interpreter (as soon as necessary) after verifying the interpreter is understandable to the child and can understand the child
- Keep in mind that the environment in which information is provided affects the extent to which it is child-friendly
- Empower the child by providing information that gives them strength and opportunities to develop coping strategies
- Ensure the child understands what information is confidential and what you are obliged to disclose
- Use non-judgemental vocabulary
- Use open and non-intrusive questions
- Give the child all necessary information, even if it might only be useful at a later stage<sup>7</sup>

To avoid misunderstandings or a lack of understanding:

- Do not ask the child if they understood your explanations<sup>8</sup>
- Do ask the child to explain what he or she has understood

Child-friendly information is also, and maybe above all, information provided to help the child with their questions and worries, so not only for the professional's purposes. This means looking at things from the child's perspective to make a list of the questions he or she might have. This could include:

- > Where am I? For how long? Will I be transferred? If so, when? To where?
- > What are the roles and duties of the professionals I will be in contact with?
- > Who will take care of the procedures for making my stay official? When will I get an answer? Who will give me an answer? What will happen if I am not allowed to stay?
- > Will I have a medical check-up?
- > When and where will I go to school or college?
- > How can I keep my belongings safe?
- > How can I keep in touch with my loved ones?
- > Who can I turn to if there is something I need (clothes, toiletries, transport tickets, food, etc.)?
- > Will I be allowed to do sports, art or leisure activities? If so, when and under what conditions?
- > Can I go out by myself? Do I need to ask permission? Who should I ask?
- > How can I practise my religion?
- > Who do I turn to if I have a problem, if I am in danger, if I am a victim of violence or exploitation, etc.?
- > Who can I turn to if I want to make a complaint?

To provide verbal information:

- Speak slowly and articulate well
  - Try to build short sentences without multiple components
  - Use easy/simple vocabulary avoiding technical or professional terms (jargon)
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- Prioritise sentences that are as close as possible to spoken language<sup>9</sup>
- Avoid pronouns, as repeating names is clearer<sup>10</sup>
- Avoid subject-verb inversions and passive forms
- Do not use contracted forms and use standard forms of grammar<sup>11</sup>
- Avoid using any words that have multiple meanings, like 'get' in English<sup>12</sup>
- Try to use the vocabulary that children use among themselves<sup>13</sup>
- If you know them, introduce words from the child's first languages<sup>14</sup>
- Use rephrasing to explain complex information: "when I say...it means<sup>15</sup>"
- Do not underestimate the role of gestures to reinforce understanding

To provide written information (in addition to the guidelines given above for verbal information):

- Minimise the length of the text
- Remember that the translation of a text is not always sufficient to guarantee understanding<sup>16</sup>

To reinforce written information with illustrations:

- Keep in mind that illustrations (drawings, diagrams, pictograms, etc.) do not automatically guarantee better understanding of written information
- Avoid iconic, symbolic and metaphorical illustrations
- Do use figurative and realistic illustrations
- Do not use illustrations referring to cultural background or customs that are alien to the child

### Standard operating procedures for identifying young victims of trafficking and exploitation in Italy<sup>17</sup>

The following good practice offers standard operating procedures to identify children and young people who are victims of trafficking and exploitation. This document was produced on the basis of the situation in Italy, within the framework of the EU Pathways project. That project aims to build the capacity of social workers and child protection professionals to support children and young people who are potential victims of trafficking. It comprises partners from European NGOs, including the British Red Cross, the Italian Red Cross, Save the Children Italy, and ECPAT UK.

#### ACTION 1: EVALUATION AND SATISFACTION OF PRIMARY NEEDS

- **WHAT** An immediate evaluation to satisfy urgent primary needs, such as food, water, hygiene, clean clothes, rest, urgent medical treatments.
- **WHEN** The evaluation and satisfaction of primary needs must be conducted as soon as a minor in need is detected.
- **HOW** Before starting any procedure, it is important to assess the physical and mental health of the minor, using interviews and observation with the support of cultural mediators, and medical and/or psychological assistance if necessary.
- **WHERE** The evaluation and satisfaction of primary needs must be conducted during disembark operations and identification procedures, either in communities, refugee camps or transit camps, day or low-threshold centres, or Public Security Forces offices.
- **WHO** The evaluation and satisfaction of primary needs must be conducted by social service workers, legal consultants, road policing units, refugee centre workers, Public Security Forces, or judicial authorities able to detect a minor in need.

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## ACTION 2: EVALUATION OF PROFILES AND INDICATORS OF TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION<sup>18</sup>

- **WHAT** An evaluation of the minor's characteristics, history, actions, and behaviour in relation to potential indicators and profiles of trafficking and severe exploitation.<sup>19</sup>
- **WHEN** The evaluation of profiles and indicators of trafficking and exploitation must be conducted as soon as a minor who is an actual or potential victim of trafficking and/or severe exploitation during a working activity is detected by road policing unit operators or by the Public Security Forces.
- **HOW** The evaluation of profiles and indicators of trafficking and exploitation must be conducted through formal and informal talks with the minor, in the presence of a cultural mediator, as well as a detailed observation of the minor's behaviour; through the application of the principle of benefit of **the doubt**<sup>20</sup> in relation to the victim's characteristics, age, safety and privacy, as well as their cooperation with the authorities.
- **WHERE** The evaluation of profiles and indicators of trafficking and exploitation must be conducted in a place where the minor is safe and protected.
- **WHO** The evaluation of profiles and indicators of trafficking and exploitation must be conducted by immigration workers, local and other public authorities, international organisations, health workers, Public Security Forces or Juvenile Justice authorities.

If nothing emerges during the activities mentioned above, and if the person who talks to the minor first does not have the opportunity or the adequate expertise to complete an initial assessment of possible trafficking indicators and profiles, that same person needs to call the relevant authorities on the **Anti-Trafficking Green Phone Number 800 290 290**.

## ACTION 3: ASSESSMENT OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

- **WHAT** The assessment of family relationships is to establish whether there is a family relationship between the minor and the adults accompanying them.
- **WHEN** An immediate check of the presence of a trusted adult for the minor and the nature of their relationship needs to be done. The check must be executed to provide a quick assessment of the minor's risks and safety.
- **HOW** The assessment of possible family relationships starts with an inspection of the available identity documents. The minor and the adults accompanying<sup>21</sup> him or her will also be interviewed separately with the support of a cultural mediator, and the information provided in all the interviews will be compared and examined. Being present during the first telephone calls with the minor's family in the country of origin will be necessary too – for a complete assessment of risks and safety.
- **WHERE** The assessment of family relationships must be conducted in a place where the minor is safe and protected.
- **WHO** The assessment of family relationships involves various actors (Public Security Forces, NGOs, other international organisations, and embassy or consulate workers). To find out the possibilities for starting the procedure, you will need to get in touch with social services and the Juvenile Justice authorities.

## ACTION 4: AGE ASSESSMENT

- **WHAT:** Age assessment involves all the procedures and methods to assess the age of a minor.
- **WHEN** The age assessment is conducted only in cases of well-founded doubts<sup>22</sup>.
- **HOW** The assessment is first executed using registry office paperwork, with the cooperation of the consular authorities<sup>23</sup>. If the paperwork is not available, or not easy to find, and the age of the child is not clear, a social and health assessment may be required to determine the minor's age<sup>24</sup>

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- **WHO** In cases of doubt about the age of the child, the age assessment is conducted by the Public Prosecutor's office in the Juvenile Court. In cooperation with the guardian, and if there are specific reasons, the Public Prosecutor's office at the Juvenile Court may, on the advice of the Public Security Forces or immigration centre staff, request an assessment using a social and health check<sup>25</sup>.

The social and health check must be executed by a multidisciplinary staff member in a suitable environment, in the presence of a cultural mediator, and by adopting non-aggressive methods suitable to the person and their alleged age.

#### **ACTION 5: CONTACT AND REFERRAL BY THE MINOR'S GUARDIAN**

- **WHAT**
  - ✓ If you are not the guardian, but you are acquainted with the minor, you need to promptly warn the guardian about any doubts you have as to whether the minor may or may not be a victim of trafficking.
  - ✓ If you are the guardian, and the minor confides in you about being a victim of trafficking, or you perceive that yourself, you should promptly inform the social services or the Juvenile Court. If the danger is imminent, refer to the Public Security Forces. For further instructions and information, call the **Anti-Trafficking Green Phone Number 800 290 290**.
  - ✓ If you are the coordinator of the community where the minor is based, promptly inform the guardian about your doubts, and determine a plan of action together.
  - ✓ If you are the coordinator of the community where the minor is based, or an agent of the Public Security Forces dealing with a minor without any form of protection, inform the relevant authorities of the presence of the minor and apply to the relevant Juvenile Court for protection for the minor.
- **WHEN** The application for protection must be completed as soon as possible when dealing with a minor without guardianship<sup>26</sup>.
- **HOW** The application for protection must be submitted by sending the request to the local Juvenile Court.
- **WHO** The application for protection must be submitted by the legal worker at the centre where the minor is based, or it can be requested by the public security authority dealing with a minor.

#### **ACTION 6: INFORMATION<sup>27</sup>**

- **WHAT** The minor must be informed about the risks of exploitation, their situation as a victim, and how they can be protected and removed from exploitation<sup>28</sup>.
- **WHEN** During the disembark and identification procedures, or when the minor is transferred to a centre or identified in a transit camp, there is a possibility to make an initial report on the risks of trafficking and exploitation, which can be expanded on with more details after the completion of a preliminary identification of the victim. Each case is different. The right time for the story of the victim's history of trafficking and severe exploitation to emerge must be selected cautiously, and after a thorough evaluation of the risks, as well as careful consideration of the minor's safety and their best interests.
- **HOW** The information should be given to the minor in a formal interview and/or structured activity in a quiet place and in the presence of a cultural mediator. The information provided must be reliable, coherent and clear; it must not raise any false expectations and/or confuse and scare the minor.
- **WHERE** Making a report of trafficking-related risks, as well as any exploitation that has taken place, must be done in a safe and protected place for the minor<sup>29</sup>.

- **WHO** The information will be given to the minor by mediators working in an immigration centre, legal consultants, guardians, road policing unit workers, the Public Security Forces, judicial authorities, or cultural mediators.

#### **ACTION 7: RISK ASSESSMENT<sup>30</sup>**

- **WHAT** The risk assessment includes all the activities necessary to evaluate:
  - ✓ The minor's perceptions in relation to their own safety or the safety of their family.
  - ✓ Potential immediate or future risks to the minor's safety.
  - ✓ Useful information the minor may already possess to take informed decisions on their future.
  - ✓ The minor's awareness of their future.
- **WHEN** A prompt risk assessment must be conducted as soon as the victim emerges.
- **HOW** Based on the assessment of their risks, needs and best interests, a plan for the individual safety of the minor will be developed after completion of their identification as a victim of trafficking.
- **WHO** The risk assessment plan will be developed and coordinated by several actors: Public Security Forces, judicial authorities, local and other public authorities, immigration services, mediators, NGOs and other international organisations, and health workers. If the danger is imminent, an immediate assessment must be requested from the Public Security Forces.  
NB The essential prerequisites for an effective risk assessment:
  - Safe place
  - Right time
  - Adequately prepared professionals

#### **ACTION 8: FORMAL IDENTIFICATION<sup>31</sup>**

- **WHAT** A formal identification is a procedure to establish if a minor may or may not be a victim of trafficking and exploitation.
- **WHEN** The formal identification must be conducted after a preliminary identification of the minor as actual or potential victim of exploitation, and after a period of recovery and consideration.
- **HOW** The formal identification must be conducted through a detailed formal interview and after preliminary identification; it is also useful to continue collecting indicators to verify the information provided to the alleged victim of trafficking.
- **WHERE** Interviews must be conducted using a non-judgemental approach in a child-friendly place, making the minor feel comfortable in an environment which is calm and suited to their needs as much as possible. The interview for identification must not be held in the place where the minor is being exploited.
- **WHO** The formal interview must be conducted by professionals working in human trafficking assistance offices<sup>22</sup><sup>32</sup> (public and private social authorities specialised in the realisation of programmes for emergence, assistance and social integration, ex Article 8, Legislative Decree 286/98 in Italian legislation), in cooperation with other professionals involved.

#### **ACTION 9: TRANSFER TO A SPECIALISED REFUGEE CENTRE**

- **WHAT** The aim is to transfer the child or young person to a refugee centre specialised in dealing with minors who are victims of trafficking<sup>33</sup>.
- **WHEN** The transfer to a specialised refugee centre, subject to the guardian's authorisation, must take place after the identification of the minor as a victim of trafficking.
- **HOW** The transfer to a specialised refugee centre following the guardian's authorisation, must take place after a formal identification and risk assessment, and after informing the minor and listening to their own opinions, and only if the transfer represents the minor's best interests.
- **WHO** The transfer to a specialised refugee centre must be conducted by the guardian in cooperation with the social services and anti-trafficking unit workers.

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# Module 3

## Development and integration

### Developing a sense of belonging and prospects for the future

In phase two, the emphasis is on encouraging healthy personal development. In addition to providing safety and protection, strengthening resilience and empowerment are important in this phase.

#### 3.1 Step into their shoes

##### More on Amir

“I thought it would be good here, you know, but it isn't. They don't understand us here. We all have these arguments because they force us to do things we don't want to do and, in the meantime, they don't arrange family reunification for us, and we don't have money or work. I thought it would be better in Europe, but it's not. And now I don't know what to do. How can I ever get used to this, and get rid of that anger, and how I can help my mother...?”

Amir has been quick to learn the language of the host country. He has a lot of friends, mostly other young refugees. He wants to earn money to send home, but is frustrated at how hard it is to find a job at his age. His family is putting pressure on him to send money home and to apply for family reunification. This causes stress and Amir has concentration problems, also finding it hard to sleep at night. On top of this, he does not feel at home at school, so is skipping classes more and more. As Amir is a proud and self-reliant boy, he does not want any psychological help. He is putting pressure on the social worker to find him a job at a barber's shop (he wants to become a barber) and to arrange family reunification.

##### Mara

Mara (12) is living with her aunt and cousin in a small village. She wants to go out and stay overnight with her friends, but her aunt refuses, saying she is responsible for Mara and her honour, so Mara has to stay home, to “prevent problems”. Mara has a lot of contact on social media with boys. One of them is putting pressure on her to upload intimate pictures. Mara's aunt notices that the girl is withdrawn and does not want to talk to her anymore. At the same time, the school wants to talk to Mara's aunt about giving Mara more space. Mara has regular contact with her mother. She calls Mara every week, wanting her to do well at school and become a nurse or a doctor. Mara feels lonely.

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## 3.2 Development: the child's needs

### Sense of belonging

Feeling connected and having a sense of belonging are important issues for UAC. The youngsters that participated in IMPACT workshops in Italy, France, Serbia and the Netherlands came up with the following guidelines on how social workers can support them with this:

- Discuss with the youngster what they need to feel connected
- Make 'real' contact. Young people find that contact with professionals can feel quite distant. As one of the youngsters described it: *My guardian is committed to guiding me, I know that. I just don't feel the connection. He acts as if he's my lawyer and what I need most is a hug and somebody asking me: "How are you doing?"*
- Continuity in the people guiding the UAC
- Being able to stay connected to their own culture, but to start integrating in the host country as well
- Having a safe place of their own
- Being able to participate in society: going to school, making friends, sporting activities, etc.

### Identity

Developing their identity is an important task for adolescents. For UAC it is good to keep in mind that:

- It is really a personal journey
- They need role models from their own culture as well as from the host country's culture
- The youngsters must be able to maintain contact with their families, whether this family live in their country of origin or in another EU Member State
- You should provide the opportunity for a young person to join mixed peer groups, with both UAC and youngsters from the host country

### Prospects for the future

Sometimes it can be challenging for youngsters to feel there are prospects for their future. The stress caused by applying for a residence permit, or the long wait for family reunification, can make the youngsters feel that there is no future for them here. Yet those future prospects are essential and a vital resource for resilience. Especially when their future is uncertain or perhaps not in the host country, it is important to offer the young person support. That is not an easy task. Stay connected and try to develop different scenarios, if you foresee the outcome of an asylum procedure or of family reunification not being what the youngster had hoped for. Pay attention to the little things that are going well, things that are feasible.

### Connecting past and future

There are several ways a social worker can support UAC in connecting past and future:

- Ask the youngsters about their dreams and desires when they were living in their home country
- What were their talents?
- Where did they come from?
- What is important for them to keep and to strengthen?

Make sure there is no difference between who the youngster was back home and who they are now.

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### Dealing with traumas

We know that mental health is often a taboo subject, and that perception of the connection between health problems and their causes can differ greatly between cultures. The consequences of traumatic events often overwhelm unaccompanied children. They may not be familiar with mental health problems like these, so may not recognise or understand the symptoms themselves, especially without any parental guidance. This makes them feel very insecure. They may interpret their symptoms as depersonalisation, witchcraft or a loss of inner strength. Stress is something that unaccompanied children are familiar with, and most of them know the concept as they often experience severe stress.

The American Psychological Association defines trauma as “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer-term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea”. It can also be defined as a high level of stress that temporarily prevents a person from coping. However, 75 per cent of all human beings manage to self-integrate and overcome traumatic events within two months. So young refugees should not be considered victims or “people who are ill,” but rather as survivors with infinite resources.

### Challenges in relation to trauma in unaccompanied children<sup>34</sup>

There are many reasons for young refugees to be traumatised. This includes:

- Loss of family, friends, home
- War and effects of war
- Exile, violence, rape, dramatic experiences on their journey to Europe
- Disorientation, loss of comfort zone (language, customs, religion, rules, etc.)

Unfortunately, traumatic experiences do not necessarily stop when young refugees reach a European country. On top of experiencing exclusion, racism, poverty and marginalisation, young refugees often face institutional violence. Besides this, the wait for having their stay made official (status regularisation) is a long one. Many young people, and specifically unaccompanied children seeking asylum, wait for long periods (up to two years) to get a first positive or negative response to their request to remain in the country. This creates high levels of stress, anxiety and fears for the future. Being moved from one shelter to another stops young people from fully settling, investing in sustainable relationships, and developing a feeling of safety. Family reunification is often made difficult or impossible. Many young people arrived in Europe with the aim or hope of having their remaining family members join them. When this hope fades away for one reason or another, young people suffer from loneliness and feelings of guilt, and are no longer motivated to continue with their process of integration in Europe. Some even express the wish to go back to their home country, despite the war.

The age of an unaccompanied child is sometimes assessed in dubious and traumatising ways. Furthermore, depending on the host country’s policy, not all refugees have access to school and education. And young refugees often fear dying in a country far from home, without any of their family members knowing about it and without the possibility of their bodies being sent back home. Leaving no trace behind can create a lot of anxiety and fear. All these aspects contribute to re-traumatisation in the host country and prevent young refugees from settling and integrating.

As far as youth workers are concerned, the following challenges have been identified:

- Youth workers are not trained in trauma and mental health issues, and often feel overwhelmed by such situations, without knowing the first actions or steps to take to stabilise the person and how to contact the relevant resources.
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- The high level of emotional stress youth workers must face, and the complexity of the task of assisting unaccompanied children with specific needs, can lead to exhaustion and even burn-out.
  - The role of youth workers could/should be to help young refugees connect with their resources, recognise them, transform them, and feel more confident to use them in their new societies.
  - The youth worker's role is not to focus on the trauma, but rather on the strong resilience of young refugees.
  - These young people are often very tired of having to repeatedly tell their story – and its traumatic aspects – to various institutions and officials. Youth workers should therefore avoid looking for the traumatic stories, but rather focus on everything else that makes the individual the young person they are. As Steve de Shazer, the co-creator of solution-focused therapy, used to say, "If you're fascinated by details, read thrillers." He also said, "Problem talk creates problems; solution talk creates solutions"
  - This does not mean that youth workers should ignore trauma. Traumatized young people often show symptoms of sudden fear and flashbacks, sudden anger, difficulties in concentrating, lack of trust and difficulties in investing in new relationships. In these cases, youth workers should, of course, be able to refer young refugees to professionals who can address the trauma.
  - Youth workers are not psychologists or therapists, and should therefore avoid adopting this role. Firstly, to ensure that any counselling received is professional and appropriate, and secondly to protect themselves from vicarious trauma by hearing terrible stories. If, for some reason, youth workers are confronted with the exile and trauma stories of young refugees, it is important that they are provided with a framework for debriefing with colleagues or other specialists.
  - Youth work can, in fact, be a space for creating a new comfort zone, enabling young people to work on trust, 'normality' and opportunities to be young, engaged and busy with topics that concern youth. Young people need to feel that nothing is expected from them, that they do not need to perform or tell their story, but in this 'safe place' they can develop trust and confidence with other young people and youth workers.
  - Youth work can be a place where traumatized young refugees can understand that their reactions are "normal reactions in an abnormal situation." It can be worthwhile explaining what trauma is, namely that it is a natural physiological reaction to danger, that it is useful for human beings to have this reaction, and that there are ways to then go back to calming the body and continuing with a normal life.
  - Youth work can be a place to break taboos and discuss painful or embarrassing topics, such as religious beliefs and practices, death and rituals around death, fears and desires. This can help young refugees to express themselves about difficult topics and to share their ideas with young people from the host country about similarities and differences.
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Working with unaccompanied children is about helping young people to find out what they like, what they are good at, and what their strengths are. It is about acknowledging and recognising young refugees' resilience. This can be achieved by the following methods:

- Focusing on past successes. Young refugees had a life before becoming refugees, so ask them what they liked, what they used to do, what they were good at. You can also ask them how they managed to get through everything they went through. This question puts the focus on abilities and underlines the efforts made.
- Treating each young refugee as an individual: they are not all the same. They do not function in the same way just because they come from the same region or because they are refugees. They do not aspire to the same goals. They do not like the same things. They do not carry the same trauma. Give every young refugee the opportunity to be themselves. There is no universal approach for everyone.
- Working with unaccompanied children requires some cultural awareness and the ability to respect cultural beliefs and customs; this is also necessary in relation to general health and mental health issues. In some countries, witchcraft is a part of cultural practices, and some young refugees will share their stories about spirits, ghosts or witchcraft. Even if you as a youth worker do not believe in it, it is important to respect the cultural reality of the young person rather than trying to convince them it is mental illness, calling it trauma, or using other diagnostic terms.
- Social workers can provide a space for peer-to-peer learning by bringing together young refugees and other young locals.
- Do not be afraid of emotions and for allowing space for them. It is OK for a young person to feel sadness, anger and fear. Let them know that they can express these emotions freely, and that you are ready to listen if they so wish.
- Death is an important topic for young refugees. Many of them strongly fear the loss of a family member back home, or their own death in a foreign country far from home. It can be useful to address the topic of death, the different ways cultures deal with it, and the practices and beliefs around it.
- Identify local specialists/networks who could provide support if needed. You do not have to act as a therapist yourself.

### Stress

Unaccompanied children have to deal with the stress of the asylum procedure, uncertainty about their prospects, being uprooted from their country of origin, missing their family and concerns about their family's well-being. Many of them were traumatised before and during the trip. As a result, a lot of unaccompanied children suffer from health problems caused by trauma and chronic stress.

Stress is the emotional and physical response to potentially dangerous or adverse situations. A certain amount of stress is needed to function properly and to estimate whether a situation is potentially unsafe. However, when a person is exposed to a lot of stress for an extended period, the stress system can become so over-stimulated that making a proper estimation of what is and what is not dangerous becomes impossible. Someone with an overstressed system often no longer has a good sense of danger or of unsafe situations.

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There can also be a constant sense of danger, causing the person to be in a permanent state of hyperarousal. All the time, the person is hyper-alert, vigilant and agitated and can easily go into fight or flight mode. This coincides with a reduced ability to concentrate and a poorly functioning memory (Struik, 2010). Unaccompanied children might suffer from a hypersensitive stress system, a small window of tolerance, and many triggers. As a result, they quickly go into a state of hyperarousal or hypo-arousal, or the period lasts for a long time (see box). The behaviour that goes with this therefore stems from an instinctual reaction to the experience of actual or perceived danger. To the environment it seems as if the child is becoming aggressive “out of nowhere, for no apparent reason”.

Mental health problems related to chronic stress and trauma can have a great effect on how children function. Their cognitive capacity may decrease due to these problems and the intensity of the emotions complicates adequate emotion regulation. Children can become overwhelmed by emotions and thoughts and relive their experiences to a point where their capacity to remember and store events decreases (Struik, 2010). This explains why unaccompanied children find it hard to motivate themselves to go to school, especially in the early days.

### **Stress system**

The human stress system is controlled from the primal brain that drives the immediate response: the response to perceived threats. Neurotransmitters such as adrenaline and noradrenaline are released, which increases the heart rate and muscle tension. This is a hyperarousal state of the body aimed at averting immediate danger. A second system, the HPA axis, provides ‘fuel’ to ‘sustain’ this hyperarousal reaction in the longer term by producing the hormone cortisol (Stöfösel & Mooren, 2010; Struik, 2010). The zone of stress that can be tolerated is also called the ‘window of tolerance’ (Ogden & Minton, 2000). When the stress remains in this zone, a child (or adult) can experience the emotions, body sensations and thoughts associated with a stressful experience without having to activate the defence system and process the experience effectively. This also applies to traumatic experiences.

When the level of stress is no longer tolerable, and the stress system perceives too much danger, the defence system is activated. To avert the danger, the body can put itself in a state of heightened arousal (hyperarousal). In this state, there is an immediate reaction to the imminent danger. The heart rate and muscle tension increase, the child is vigilant and alert, the senses become hypersensitive. Everything is focused on the impending danger. The hormones dopamine and norepinephrine are released. It is a state in which active defence against danger is used, such as fight, flight or active freeze. If active defence is an obstacle to survival and the danger cannot be averted, the stress system switches to passive defence. The body prepares for very serious injury, some sort of shock, and conserves as much energy as possible. The body enters a state of reduced arousal (hypo-arousal). The brain temporarily loses the ability to estimate danger, and the ability to think and solve problems is turned off. A state of hypo-arousal is accompanied by, among other things, a slow heartbeat and shallow slow breathing, reduced blood flow and a low temperature. A stream of opiates is released, soothing the pain and creating a kind of calmness. Passive survival responses include submission or freeze (paralysis).

Dissociation can occur in both states of arousal (Ogden & Minton, 2000; Struik, 2010).

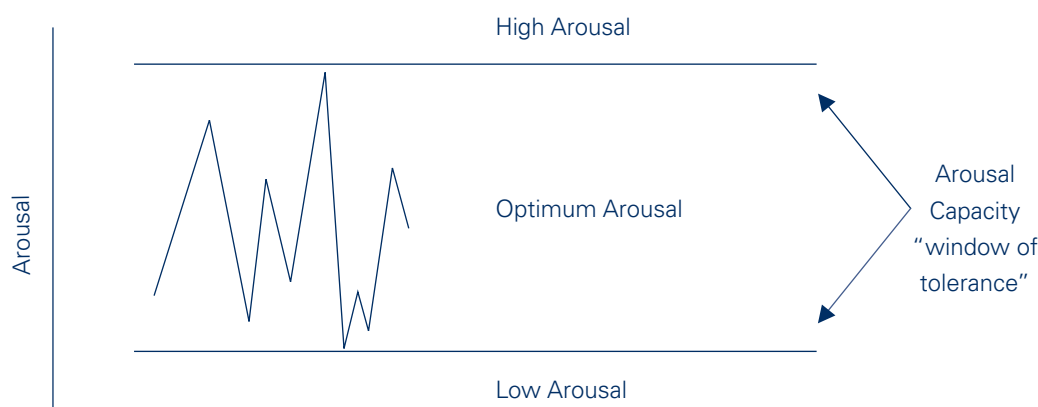


Figure 1- The Window of Tolerance (Ogden & Minton, 2000)

The literal meaning of trauma is wound. A wound needs to heal, and that may take some time. Most people can deal adequately with the consequences of shocking events, but some do develop serious problems. The event does not determine the symptoms experienced. These are partly the result of, for example, previous traumatic experiences, how resilient someone is, the social support they are given and genetic predisposition. Van IJzendoorn, Professor Emeritus of family pedagogy at Leiden University, concludes in his book about childrearing across borders (2008) that differential susceptibility predicts that some children are more susceptible to environmental influences than others, in a positive or negative sense. Various studies conducted by his research group showed that genes related to the dopamine system in particular make children receptive to their environment. Certain combinations of these genes can prevent some children from developing a post-traumatic stress disorder after abuse or neglect, or externalising and outward-focused behavioural problems.

We speak of post-traumatic mental health problems if recovery takes too long. The most common are intrusive re-experiencing, avoidance and increased irritability. Re-experiences can be defined as highly uncontrollable and recurring memories in which elements of the trauma are felt, smelled, seen and heard again. The autonomic nervous system is often activated too. This is what makes the re-experiences so overwhelming and 'real', although the traumatic event took place in the past, in another place, and the actual present is usually safe. Re-experiences continue to make the traumatised person extremely anxious because they are very realistic and usually lack a sense of time and context (Jongedijk, 2014). They can also be triggered. One detail of the negative memory can activate the entire network of memories but also expand the negative network of memories (Struik, 2010). This may lead to a worsening of the post-traumatic symptoms.

A natural response to fear is avoidance. The traumatised person avoids what they fear. A key component of post-traumatic mental health problems is the fear of recalling traumatic events (Jongedijk, 2014). One of the ways that this manifests itself in unaccompanied children is that they avoid answering well-meant questions that professionals ask out of curiosity. But avoidance can also be a part of not wanting or daring to go to bed, for fear of being overwhelmed in their sleep by intrusive dreams of re-experiences or nightmares. So sleeping problems due to nightmares, or a fear of them, are very common among unaccompanied children.

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Avoidance behaviour can also be the result of shame or guilt. This is often seen in unaccompanied children who had traumatic experiences as victims or witnesses of sexual violence. Many of these boys and girls do not talk to the professionals who are working with them about their experiences, because they are perceived to be shameful. Nor do they talk about it among themselves, even if other children have similar experiences. The risk of losing their honour is also part of this. If their partner, family or community discover that the boy or girl was raped, there is a risk of rejection. Hyperarousal can lead to increased tension, which can manifest itself in several ways. The child could be hypervigilant, anxious or easily agitated, and have difficulty concentrating or sleeping problems. These symptoms can easily lead to sudden outbursts of irritability, anger and aggression, seemingly without cause. This is often seen in unaccompanied children, especially during the early stages after arrival, a stressful time for them.

Another response to psychotrauma is dissociation. When dissociation occurs, the muscles weaken, the person is less approachable, and a change of consciousness might occur as well (Jongedijk, 2014). Dissociative symptoms are part of the traumatic stress response and vary in severity and duration. Dissociative phenomena occur with any trauma. This mainly concerns amnesia (loss of memory) and a slight degree of depersonalisation. The person feels blocked in the present because feelings of the past overwhelm him or her too much (Stöfösel & Mooren, 2010). Dissociation can occur during a traumatic event, but also during a re-experience (Struik, 2010). A type of self-dissociation is self-harm. Damage to the skin can ease both physical and emotional tension. In this way, fears and repetitive negative thoughts might become less or disappear completely (Jongedijk, 2014).

Most people recover from a shocking event on their own. Several studies show that only 10 per cent of adults who have experienced life-threatening situations go on to develop disorders such as depression, anxiety disorders, addiction or a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and need professional help.

### **Other mental health problems**

There is a considerable overlap between problems related to post-traumatic stress and depression. So these mental health disorders are often seen together. In refugees, this manifests itself in lethargy, lack of energy, and negative or even suicidal thoughts and actions. If refugees become suicidal, it is frequently related to having no prospects – perhaps because their asylum application has been rejected.

Sometimes, refugees resort to substance abuse: alcohol, soft drugs or other medication. This can help them to avoid traumatic memories or feelings of shame, and to reduce increased irritability, if only for a while. But they obviously run the risk of addiction.

Loss of something or someone, and the mourning that goes with it, is what everyone must face at some point. All over the world, mourning is accompanied by rituals, so-called rites of passage. Rituals are mainly characterised by the support they give to individuals and the community as they go through major changes in life. People can feel disrupted for a long time if rituals or ceremonies are not performed, or not done in the right way.

Most refugees are faced with a great deal of loss. They have lost loved ones, possessions and status, as well as symbolic acts that were familiar to them and a context in which to practise rituals together. Processing loss can be more difficult if there is a lack of meaningful cultural, religious, social or specific group context (Smid, 2020). It can leave people depressed, angry and anxious, which can increase aggressive feelings and behaviour.

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Those who grieve may experience feelings of gloominess, psychological absence, intrusive thoughts, feelings of guilt, doubts as to whether they can take control of their life, and even hallucinations, states Dutch psychologist Van Hest in an article about mourning among refugees (2012). He adds that, during treatment, ceremonies can be useful for processing grief.

### 3.3 Development: Tasks for the professional

#### Focus on resilience and agency

Resilience is the ability to deal with or recover from a major effort or trauma. It includes having a healthy mental state and normal development in a context that could imply the opposite.

Sources of resilience are:

- social support environment, connecting with family
- various acculturation strategies
- education
- religion
- avoidance
- hope

Guidance given to unaccompanied children aims to increase resilience by minimising risk factors and reinforcing protective factors.

Agency is a person's ability and strength to act in a changing situation and to maximise opportunities. More information on agency can be found in 4.2.

#### Focus on empowerment

Build on the strengths of the unaccompanied child. Find out what they desire and take them seriously. Focus on what is going well (even the simplest things). What is going better than other things? What is successful? With any answers you get, focus more on these aspects (e.g. what do you think is great about school?). Getting young refugees to talk about what works well will reinforce positive networks in their brain and enables them to develop a more positive self-image. And you have no need to worry: other professionals will focus on the problems.

### 3.4 Integration: the child's needs

#### Education and finding a job

To make a successful start in the new country, it is important for the young person to work on their future. School and work are the most important tools for this. Most third-country nationals, both parents and children, find education of great importance. Education is seen to provide a better future. In these cases, the main drive for good, continuous schooling is already present. Going to school and showing commitment becomes more difficult when education is not a priority for the youngster. This is not usually caused by the child's unwillingness. Often there are underlying factors involved: things related to the flight, the asylum procedure and being away from their family. A child may also be unfamiliar with learning structures and the associated expectations.

In the first phase, school should preferably be started very gradually: with an introduction to the methods used, a settling-in period and accessible educational components. The school does not expect much from the youngster at first. This changes during the development phase, and the young person

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will then have to deal with regular timetables, homework, and the usual assessments of behaviour and daily class attendance. Although this structured way of enrolling UAC in the school system is preferred, it is not the case in every EU Member State. In Greece, places in preparatory classes are not always available. From that moment on, it will become clear to what extent the child is ready for this daily activity cognitively, as well as emotionally and practically. Most unaccompanied children are not used to going to school all day anymore. Some of them were on their way to Europe for a long time and did not have any kind of daily routine along the way. Some come from a culture where life is not lived by the clock. Symptoms of stress, anxiety and trauma often also continue to be distractors and have a great effect on the child's daily functioning. It is often a reason why a youngster sleeps poorly, which makes it difficult to get up in the morning and concentrate at school.

Most refugees know what a teacher's role is from experience in their home country. As a result, their contact with teachers is often straightforward and less subject to the trust problem they may have in contact with other professionals. Children do not regard the teacher as part of the "corrupt, political system" that they have a bad experience with and feel dependent on. The frequent contact that refugee children have with their teachers mostly results in a positive and affective relationship. Many of them confide in their teachers and discuss a lot of things with them. Teachers are therefore an important source of information and are part of the young person's formal network.

At this stage, the young person is expected to have a day and night rhythm that is appropriate for going to school. Youngsters should be able to wake up themselves and get ready for school in time. They must learn how to structure their day, as part of their development towards adulthood. If a child is not capable of doing so, the coach should speak to them to see how they can support them. After the settling-in period ends, the young person will probably be eager to find a side job, if this is permitted by the country's legislation. Sometimes, the child's main motivation is that it will help them to support their family in their country of origin.

### **Building a network**

There are several ways that the young person's social environment can give them support. This is reflected in their family's involvement in guiding them as they expand their supportive network in the country where they are now living.

It is vital for children to be able to have contact with their family, if they choose to. Some children fled from their families and do not want any contact. As a coach, you partly take on the role of the biological parents. Parents and other close relatives do have an influence on the young person. So even though the family is not physically present in the child's daily life, it is important to involve them. A coach can do this by asking the youngster how the family would feel about a particular issue. This is known as imaginary involvement. (Schippers et al., 2019).

*Imaginary involvement of the family:*

*"If we could talk to your grandfather now, what would he advise you?"*

*"How would this be solved in your home country?"*

*"What would be the next step, according to your mother?"*

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Sometimes, the solutions offered by children and their families can work much better than solutions suggested by professionals. Family also have an important role if the asylum application fails and the child must return to their country of origin. The child's family can often think of the best thing to do if that happens. If the asylum procedure has resulted in a permit, and a family reunification procedure is initiated, cooperation with the young person's family members is, of course, very important. Refugee children and their parents often have an unrealistic picture of the sometimes slow and bureaucratic asylum procedure and family reunification. This may lead to the family regretting their decision to send the child away and be separated from them for a long time. Parents may then say something to the young person that make things more difficult. For example, asking the child to return, telling them war is getting closer, or informing them that money is running out.

All this can put pressure on the child, making them feel unsafe and insecure, and the coach should be aware of that. What do you notice in the youngster's behaviour after they have had contact with their parents? What does the child say about the pressure put on them by their family, or the expectations the family are burdening the child with?

In addition to maintaining contact with the child's biological family, building a supportive network is an activity that needs to be addressed at this stage. Supported by their guardian or social worker, a youngster's aim is to expand their network. Try to get a good picture of the young person's social contacts, and spend time getting acquainted with important people in the child's life. Look for buddies or volunteers who can support the child after they turn 18. Because as soon as they reach that age, they no longer have their current professional network. Volunteers and other informal contacts can take over this role to a degree, and help the child to transition to adult life.

The child will make friends through school or in their neighbourhood, and this will also expand their network. Show an interest in their friends and try to get acquainted. Encourage the youngsters to invite friends and acquaintances to come and meet their coach. This will help you get to know them. Investing time in having good contact with people in the child's network can be of use to you if the young person needs extra support.

### **Integration and inclusion**

Unaccompanied children with a residence permit focus on integration. So working on a child's integration during their guidance should be started as soon as possible.

But it is not always easy for a newcomer to establish and maintain social contact with people, particularly children of their age who were born and brought up in the host country. School is normally an important place for meeting people, but during their early days in the country, unaccompanied children generally go to special schools that focus on learning the new language. Since local children do not attend these schools, this is not conducive to learning the language, nor to their integration.

In addition to places of education, work and social activities provide good opportunities for social connection. But in the beginning that requires not only the necessary funds, but also social adjustment. Participating – and conforming to the yet unknown informal rules of, for example, a company or a football club – calls for some adjustment and guidance. Otherwise, it quickly leads to disappointment because it “just isn't working out”.

One mentor talked about taking some children to a football club and introducing them there. The boys were made welcome, but it was not a success. Although they played football a lot, and really wanted

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to join a club, the boys had never played in a team on a field with a referee. They played in a very different way and did not understand all the rules. That made them feel very insecure. They also did not know how to behave socially, in the changing room or in the shower. So they did not go anymore.

There are some good examples of their social environment (for example neighbours) involving unaccompanied children in neighbourhood activities, such as barbecues, drinking coffee together, sports activities, doing odd jobs. The children really appreciate that. And in some countries there are buddy projects which enable young refugees to engage with local families and/or peers.

Experience shows that children with a residence permit, despite the initial relief that they have succeeded, also have to deal with grief and loss. After many hardships and traumatic experiences, the flight has suddenly come to an end. Sometimes this leads to major psychological problems, and the young person experiences a void. After all, it was never really their choice to live in this new country. Their flight was mainly because they wanted to get away from an unsafe situation, aiming at survival but not yet at a future. Building a life in a new foreign country can be very complicated, alienating and lonely, especially if this has to be done without family. If a family reunification application has been rejected, or the family decides not to come or does not have the means – financial or otherwise – to do so.

Like other migrants, refugees have to adapt to their new environment. When people are confronted with a different culture for a long time, they do adapt. The way they view the world is changing, and some norms and values are also changing. In a study by Sleijpen (2017), the acculturation strategies of young refugees are mentioned as one of the sources of resilience. These strategies involve connecting with your own cultural background, as well as adapting to a new lifestyle. The young refugees felt that adapting to the new culture without forgetting their own culture was the most desirable.

Why this is important is illustrated by the following example from Austria, where a former unaccompanied child from Afghanistan had gone to visit his family in Iran. He was then 19 years old, and since the age of 15 had been in Austria where he now had a residence permit. In Iran, after the initial joy of the reunion after so many years, his family felt ashamed because of the boy's westernised behaviour. Because of this, they did not take him to gatherings or parties. So he had to stay at home nearly all the time. Out of boredom, he took a taxi to explore the centre of Teheran. As he got out of the taxi, he gave the taxi driver a tip, as is customary in Vienna. The driver was very confused because there is no tradition of tipping in Iran, especially when the person giving the tip is a young Afghan Hazara boy.

### *Integration*

According to Berry, Professor Emeritus from the Department of Psychology at Queen's University in Kingston, Canada, and an expert in the field of acculturation psychology (1990), this strategy – integration – is generally seen as the most promising acculturation strategy for the social well-being of a migrant. Berry distinguishes different migration strategies for adapting to a different culture: integration, assimilation, segregation and marginalisation. In this context, integration means adapting to the new environment, the dominant culture, while retaining your own culture. Assimilation entails adaptation to a dominant culture, without preserving their own culture. In segregation and marginalisation there is no adaptation to the dominant culture.

In today's world, integration is mainly understood as the newcomer adapting, without this being combined with preservation of their own culture. For example, there are mandatory integration pro-

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grammes for newcomers in which they must learn the new language and know about the most important norms and values. In several European countries there is even some hostility towards the newcomer, the foreigner. An offer of segregation rather than integration. The emphasis in Europe is thus shifting more and more towards assimilation, adaptation to the dominant culture. Preservation of your own culture is not labelled as positive, and segregation and marginalisation are increasingly seen. The newcomers are not included in society and mainly live in their own communities. On the other hand, there is a social trend in the Western world towards the inclusion of newcomers.

### **Inclusion**

Inclusion can be described as a society that includes newcomers and accepts their differences, which will also change because of interaction. If there is social inclusion, it is not so much the newcomer who is acting, who 'must' integrate, but the society, that is including newcomers and making it possible for newcomers to participate.

Inclusion is now a widely used concept for enabling the mentally and physically disabled to participate in society. Including them in society creates interaction that is of added value for both parties. Inclusive education is education in which children with disabilities are in class together with children without disabilities. The interaction between the children is enriching for all. Children with disabilities benefit from this environment in a cognitive and social sense, and children without disabilities learn values such as respect, tolerance, empathy and responsibility. They also become familiar with the principle that no one is excluded. UNICEF states that inclusive systems value the unique contributions students of all backgrounds bring to the classroom and allow diverse groups to grow side by side, to the benefit of all (UNICEF, n.d.).

A society that includes newcomers offers a great chance of positive integration. A good example of this is where young people with residence permits are given the opportunity to live in a housing complex together with students or young adults. Another is large companies making jobs available for young refugees. These young people do not yet speak the language well enough to be employed according to normal procedures, but they are given a chance. Many sports clubs are also open to newcomers. All this may require the necessary guidance if it is to be successful, as already mentioned, but these are positive initiatives in societies aimed at the inclusion of newcomers. Despite such positive developments for people with permits, there are also many unaccompanied children who do not receive a permit and come under pressure to return to their country of origin.

### **Leisure time**

In this phase, the young person will learn about the kind of activities they can do in their spare time. Often this differs from their country of origin. For many young people, being able to express their religion is very important. Religion gives an unaccompanied child meaning, comfort and a sense of control in their new living conditions (Ní Raghallaigh, 2011). It is therefore an important coping mechanism that helps young refugees to stay strong. Religion gives them support in dealing with traumatic events. Especially for Eritrean children, religion is very important, as it provides guidance and comfort and is a way to regulate their emotions (Schippers, 2017). Many young people are active in a religious group at a church or mosque during their spare time. This gives them a lot of information about society and the community and that is often of great value. Talk to them about their religion. Try not to steer towards what is 'true' or 'not true' or force on them the mainstream cultural standards of the country they are living in. Try to find out what youngsters know without judging them. By having an open conversation, you learn what is going on in a youngster's mind and show respect for their religious beliefs. On the other hand, you can pick up signs of a young person being exposed to extreme ideas that may be risky.

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### **LGBTQI+ children**

LGBTQI+ means Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex, with the + symbolising other marginalised sexual/romantic orientations (or the lack of them) or other gender identities.

LGBTQI+ asylum seekers and refugees are a particularly vulnerable group. They are confronted with both homophobia and transphobia in communities from their home countries, and with racism in a lot of LGBTQI+ spaces. These difficulties are compounded for young people living in shelters or in SIL accommodation, as they are required to share their living spaces with other young people who they might not feel safe with. This is even more difficult if the apartments are in smaller cities or towns where there are no meeting places for LGBTQI+ people.

These are considerations to keep in mind if a young person decides to come out to you. They will probably have had bad experiences of homophobia and/or transphobia, and may be wary of being open about it, especially since being LGBTQI+ is usually even more heavily stigmatised in their home countries than in Europe.

### **Status regularisation - essential for the child**

The asylum procedure is a bureaucratic process. In most countries, especially the countries on the borders of Europe, no interpreters are available. The procedure is therefore completely inappropriate for an unaccompanied child. Many of these children grew up in countries where the governments are corrupt and unreliable, so distrust of officials is often the basic attitude. Past experience shows that, at first, unaccompanied refugee children do not see the difference between all the officials they are confronted with. They do not understand who is responsible for what and, in principle, do not trust anyone. Trust in others has often been damaged by traumatic events during war and their flight. The asylum procedure is seen as very important and an unaccompanied child wants to complete it as quickly as possible. The distrust and impatience these children have sometimes stand in the way of them being given adequate support.

For professionals that do not only host children recognised as refugees, it is important to realise that both the asylum procedure itself and the outcomes (possibility of negative decision) are stress factors. This causes insecurity and distress and affects every aspect of the unaccompanied child's everyday life. The asylum procedure is in some countries lengthy, giving the child anxiety and uncertainty about their future. If children receive negative decisions, their integration prospects diminish, since they fear that they will be returned to their country of origin when they turn 18. Therefore, the uncertainty of their legal status acts as a demotivation factor that might create symptoms of withdrawal. Waiting for a decision for a very long time might make the child feel like their life is in limbo – they are unable to move on and make plans, and sometimes this might push them into disengaging further from support services and into exploitative/at-risk situations (travelling further within Europe, absconding).

Refugees are likely to have been instructed by travel agents, fellow refugees or family, or through social media, on what to say and what not to say during the asylum application process. Unfortunately, this information is not always correct. The genuine flight narrative is therefore not always shared with others, while these events are often much more poignant and would give more depth and credibility to the asylum application. A refugee might only tell the real story after completing the asylum procedure, when they have started to trust their counsellor.

One of the most important needs of unaccompanied refugee children is to gain an understanding of the asylum procedure. This can be done with detailed and repeated explanations in their own lan-

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guage. The child will then understand that procedures must be followed and cannot be influenced by putting pressure on people or bribery. The availability of interpreters and intercultural mediators, plus help from people from their own country, is vital for this (ensuring that the information they are given is child-specific as otherwise it might create other issues).

An additional problem for many children is the Dublin transfer. A Dublin transfer can put a lot of stress on children. For example, they can be sent back to Italy, where reception and protection are often poorly arranged, and family reunification takes a long time or cannot be achieved. What also may occur is that a Dublin transfer request is issued for a family member the child is travelling with. This can lead to dilemmas: does the child go with the family member who is being sent back, or will the child stay with other family members in the country where they are currently living. Although the interest of the child is important in the claim, a Dublin transfer often causes a lot of uncertainty and stress, especially because the procedure takes a long time.

While social workers in most countries are not trained to provide legal advice, considering the importance of regularising status for these children, as mentioned above, it is essential for the social worker to remain involved in these matters, and for them to ensure that the child receives appropriate legal advice. If there are concerns regarding the legal advice that a child is receiving, the social worker, working together with the guardian, should consider referring them to other organisations, such as NGOs specialising in asylum-seeking children, for further support and advocacy with regard to their immigration. In addition, the social worker might be able to provide helpful evidence for the child's immigration application and should always ask themselves if there is some support that they can provide, for example attending important events with the child such as court hearings, sharing reports that highlight the child's needs and vulnerabilities, or preparing a letter of support to ask for the immigration procedure to be sped up, as it is affecting the child's mental health, their ability to engage with their support network and to focus on school, etc.

### 3.5 Integration: tasks for the professional

#### **Practical guidance on school and work**

- *Developing a healthy day and night rhythm:* you can support youngsters in doing this. Ask them about their daily routine. Explore the strengths and possible obstacles. Find resources that can help the young person go to bed and get up on time and discuss them with the child.
- *School:* although the young person themselves are responsible for going to school, it is important to maintain contact with the school. Talk to the child's legal guardian about that as this is their responsibility. But social workers who see how a child functions in everyday life often have contact with the school too, and conduct progress meetings. This is particularly important if a child has problems at school.
- *Searching for work:* explore the child's wishes. If they want to look for a job, what type of work would the child like to do? Search together for side job opportunities that are offered in the area. Look for online videos so that the young person can see what the work entails. Explain what work is all about. Is what the child wants practically feasible? Talk to them about that. Does the child have the ability and skills to do this type of work? If not, how would they be able to achieve that? Can they combine work with school? Help the youngster formulate achievable goals for this. You can then create a CV and application letter together, and practise a job interview with a role-playing game or by looking at an instructional video. Find out whether there are any local initiatives for helping young people or young refugees to get jobs. Sometimes other organisations have already built up a lot of expertise in this area. Finally, young people often find work through other people, so asking around in their network may be worthwhile.

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### Practical guidance on leisure time

- *Joining clubs and associations:* let the child become a member of a sports club, music club or other leisure association if possible. Explain the obligations when you are a member, such as participating in training courses and paying dues. The child is expected to learn how to participate in activities as training sessions or rehearsals. Tip: find out whether there are funds available for membership fees or materials. If they do not have to pay for the membership themselves, it will lower the threshold for participating.
- *Local initiatives:* are there any activities for refugees in the area which the child can take part in? There might be easily accessible local sport, cultural or music events which a child can participate in at a reduced rate. Link up with organisations like these and discuss what you can do for each other. It works best when one employee is appointed as the main contact for an organisation so that there is a permanent point of contact. That is the way to create a sustainable collaboration. For many youngsters it is a big step, joining a club or organisation with no or few migrants and trying to feel at home there. Local initiatives aimed at migrants offer accessible leisure activities, so that a young person can get used to taking part in group activities.
- *Discussing religion:* it can be helpful to use an intercultural mediator when discussing religion with an unaccompanied child and engaging in a conversation about it. An intercultural mediator can explain and indicate cultural differences. As the mutual trust between you and the young person grows, you can also talk to them about your own ideas and opinions. Often you can have good discussions with young people on philosophical topics.

### Practical guidelines to keep in mind if a young person comes out to you

First and foremost, do not share this information with anyone, whether it is other staff members or residents, except if the young person asks you to. You can ask them if they have told anyone else in the team, but do not put pressure on them to do so.

- Do not ask for personal details or ask any inappropriate questions about the child's past relationships. In cases of young transgender people, do not ask if they want to have any gender-affirming surgery or transition medically.
- Do not question the truth of what the child is telling you, or tell them it is just a phase and it might pass. The child would not confide in you if they were not sure about how they feel.
- If the young person is interested, look for local LGBTQI+ organisations, especially ones that focus on youth and/or migrants. The young person can get in touch with them and meet people who share similar experiences.
- Discuss with the young person how they feel about their housemates, and whether they have been teased or bullied or there have been any negative comments about their (supposed) sexual orientation or gender identity. If that is the case, and without revealing any personal information the young person has told you, discuss it with the rest of the team. How should you handle the situation? Can the person doing the bullying be placed elsewhere? If there is no bullying, but the child does not feel happy where they are living, can they be moved somewhere else? Perhaps to where there is another LGBTQI+ resident?
- This information could be highly relevant to their asylum claim, so if the child has not yet obtained a residence permit, it might be worth asking them whether they have spoken about it to their lawyer. Tell them why it may be in their best interest to do so (while reassuring them that you would not share this information without the child's agreement).

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### Practical guidance in building a network

- *Involving family in the guidance:* maintaining contact with family in the country of origin will reinforce the guidance you can offer. Therefore, it is wise to give youngsters the chance to contact parents and other family members in their country of origin if they have no means to do so themselves. Parents have an influence on the young person, and it is good to understand this and to be able to use it when necessary. Sometimes the family will be able to speak English. If not, making use of an interpreter is wise, instead of letting the youngster translate what is said.
- *Family in the country of residence:* often a child has family members such as uncles, aunts, brothers or sisters who are already living in the country of residence. Discuss with the youngsters which known relatives could be contacted on their behalf. Explain to them that these people can offer support. It is important not to force a youngster to agree to this, and respect their wishes if they do not want you to contact the family.
- *Supportive informal network after the age of 18:* it is important to invest in a supportive informal network. Actively look for initiatives and opportunities. For example, matching a child up with a host family and/or a language buddy.

### Other important issues

- *Plan of action:* in this phase, the plan of action is introduced. Although a plan of action is an important tool, as it allows you to work with the young person in a targeted way and monitor progress, it is often designed mainly for professionals that guide the children. For youngsters, this plan is often less important, and that also applies to UAC, maybe even more so. A young person does not like to fill in endless sheets of paper. Find a way to make working with an action plan attractive and appealing to the child. Do not be too elaborate, without compromising completeness.
- *Dealing with money:* if they live in SIL accommodation, young people are responsible for their own expenses. The weekly budget they receive for buying groceries is often supplemented at this stage by money earned from work. Despite this, some youngsters do not seem to be able to deal with money. They ask for an advance on their budget. Sometimes food disappears, taken perhaps by their housemates. Coaches have an important role in supporting the young person with proper budgeting, and can help them learn how to deal with money. It is good to be inquisitive in situations like this. What might be the reasons why children cannot manage their money? Is it a lack of skills or is it something else? Sometimes a lot of pressure is put on the child by their family to support them. There have also been situations in the Netherlands where it appeared that a family member in the country of origin was being held hostage by human traffickers, and the family had to pay a ransom within a certain period of time. If this did not happen, the hostage would be killed.

## 3.6 Professional well-being

The support given to a social worker is of great importance. This supervision enables them to reflect on their own actions, reactions and feelings. It also helps them to recognise the pitfalls and to learn how to deal with them. The support can be given by a supervisor.

For social workers, it is important that they take good care of themselves while they are caring for others, to prevent symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout. Compassion fatigue is the exhaustion a social worker feels from bearing witness to the suffering of those they are caring for. It is a cumulative process that can also result in burnout over time. It can be described as a “*combination of physical, emotional and spiritual depletion associated with caring for patients in significant emotional pain and physical distress*” (Figley, 1995; Anewalt, 2009). The COVID pandemic has shown how important it is to be aware of and recognise the personal and professional signs that might indicate compassion fatigue:

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## Personal

Physical: rapid pulse/breathing, headaches, impaired immune system, fatigue, aches Emotional: feelings of powerlessness, numbness, anxiety, guilt, fear, anger, depletion, hypersensitivity, sadness, helplessness Behavioural: irritability, changes in sleep patterns and appetite, becoming isolated from friends and family, impatience, nightmares, hypervigilance, moody, easily startled, frightened

## Professional

Performance: decrease in quality/quantity of work, low motivation, task avoidance or overactivity, working too hard, setting perfectionist standards, difficulty focusing, forgetfulness Morale: decrease in confidence, decrease in interest, negative attitude, apathy, dissatisfaction, demoralisation, feeling undervalued and unappreciated, disconnected, reduced compassion Relational: detached/withdrawn from co-workers, poor communication, conflict, impatience, intolerance of others, sense of being the “only one who can do the job” Behavioural: missing appointments, avoiding telephone calls, not responding to messages, overworked, exhaustion, acting irresponsibly, poor follow-through

One protective factor in preventing compassion fatigue is peer support. Peer support given by your colleagues has other benefits as well:

- To improve the quality of work
- To share experiences and learn from each other
- To enhance equality in work
- To prevent burnout
- To stay inspired and motivated

## Supervision

Another form of peer support is participating in supervision sessions: one-on-one sessions between the professional and his/her supervisor. It reinforces the depth and quality of practice. Supervision is not just expert advice. The supervisor stands by the practitioners and helps them think the cases through. The role of the supervisor is to help the supervisee become aware, and clarify their strengths and existing ways of coping, and then help them build upon these strengths. When identifying the supervisee's skills, strengths and resources, the supervisor takes on the role of a curious inquirer.

Some functions of supervision

- The improvement of professional skills and the use of methodology of work
- Reflection through feedback on content and process of work
- Improves moral and job satisfaction
- Enhances the planning and utilisation of personal and professional resources
- Helps the professional/social worker to understand the client better, while becoming more aware of their own reactions and responses to the client

### 3.7 Development and integration - Skills & Tools

#### Self-reliance skills for UAC

Self reliance skills UAC	Examples of skills
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- looking after your own health sensibly</li> <li>- seeking medical assistance in time</li> <li>- dealing with chronic stress or post-traumatic symptoms</li> </ul>
Personal care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- taking care of personal hygiene and clothing</li> </ul>
Home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- keeping your home neat en clean</li> <li>- preparing healthy meals</li> </ul>
Income and expenses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- handling finances properly, budgeting carefully</li> </ul>
Social life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- building a social network</li> <li>- making friends, having intimate relationships</li> <li>- participating in a social environment</li> </ul>
Being an asylum seeker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- creating realistic future prospects</li> <li>- coping with family expectations,contact with family who were left behind</li> <li>- finding your feet in a strange, sometimes hostile environment</li> <li>- bridging the culture gap</li> </ul>
Being an asylum seeker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- creating realistic future prospects</li> <li>- coping with family expectations</li> <li>- contact with family who were left behind</li> <li>- finding your feet in a strange, sometimes hostile environment</li> <li>- bridging the culture gap</li> </ul>
School / Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- mastering the language of the host country</li> <li>- finding and retaining education/work</li> <li>- working on realistic career prospects in Europe, the country of origin or elsewhere</li> <li>- looking for appropriate leisure activities</li> </ul>
Organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- following the asylum procedure</li> <li>- making use of and interacting with organisations and support services</li> </ul>
Travelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- using basic infrastructure and transport options</li> </ul>

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## Handout 'Social workers and trauma'

### 1 Challenges in relation to trauma and young refugees – the perspective and role of the social worker and/or mentor

- Reasons for being traumatised:
  - **loss** of family, friends, home
  - **war** and effects of war
  - **exile**, violence, rape, dramatic experiences on their way to Europe
  - disorientation, loss of comfort zone (language, customs, religion, rules, etc.)
- In the European host country they face exclusion, racism, poverty, marginalisation and **institutional violence**.
- **I very long wait** for status regularisation creates high levels of stress, anxiety and fears for the future.
- **Often being moved from one shelter to another** keeps young people from fully settling, investing in sustainable relationships and developing a feeling of safety.
- When **hope of family reunification** fades away, for various reasons, young people suffer from loneliness, guilty feelings and demotivation. (The **age** of young refugees is sometimes assessed in dubious and traumatising ways.
- Young refugees often **fear dying in a country far from home**, without any of their family members knowing about it, and without the possibility of their bodies being sent back home. Leaving no trace behind can create a lot of anxiety and fear.

### 2 What can a social worker/mentor do?

- Help young refugees **connect with their resources**, to recognise them, transform them and feel more confident about using them in their new societies.
- Do not **focus** on the trauma, but on the resilience of young refugees.
- **Focus on everything that makes them the person they are**. Solution-focused attitude: "problem talk creates problems; solution talk creates solutions".
- Do **not ignore trauma**. Watch out for symptoms of sudden fear and flashbacks, sudden anger, concentration problems, lack of trust, and difficulties in investing in new relationships. Refer to professionals who can address the trauma. Be alert if there are any symptoms of trauma – not to focus on traumatic experiences, but to check on the symptoms. Ask about how the youngster is sleeping. How is their concentration at school? What happens (tiredness, thoughts)? Explore the symptoms without going into them too much.

You do not need to avoid every sensitive issue to prevent re-traumatisation. Tell the youngster that you have experience with a lot of refugees who have had to deal with traumatic experiences on their way to Europe. And that they are always welcome to talk about things if they want to – you will listen. Have a listening attitude without asking too much. Be encouraging and supportive, and let them tell their story. Just listen and explain to the youngster that it is up to them to decide what they want to share with you, and you will not ask them lots of questions. That gives them a feeling of control and safety.
- **Explain what trauma is**. As psychoeducation: it may be worthwhile to tell the young person more about what trauma is, how this natural physiological reaction to danger is useful for human beings, and that there are ways to calm your body and continue with your life. It is very important to teach young refugees to understand their own reactions. As "normal reactions in an abnormal situation". Start with general information: we know that many young refugees have had difficult experiences. These experiences can cause them a lot of stress and fear. That is a very normal reaction. Explain the window of tolerance using a metaphor (like a football you want to keep under water but sometimes

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it just pops up). A normal reaction to fear is avoidance. Or getting very angry without really understanding why. Or being constantly alert, even at night when you are asleep.

- Just as with traditional physiological first aid, it is essential to know the basic actions needed to calm down an overactive person. To deal with trauma and acute stress, and also to calm yourself down in highly stressful situations. The traffic light metaphor can be helpful: together with the youngster, identify the triggers and their first symptoms of extreme stress. The light goes from green to orange, heading for red. Let them think about what helps to calm them down at that moment: taking a walk, listening to music, etc. And remind them of that calming action when those moments occur. Parallel to this, social workers should know how to calm themselves down.
- To build resilience, focus on spaces of trust, 'normality' and opportunities to just be young, engaged and active with things that concern young people. Young people need to feel that nothing in particular is expected of them, that they do not need to perform or tell their story, but in a 'safe place' they can build their confidence and learn to trust other young people and social workers.
- Always be open and curious: might there be a good reason for the youngster's behaviour? What helps you to understand their behaviour and needs? Be careful not to treat behaviour as a problem, and be creative in helping the youngster to understand what they want and what works for them in dealing with stress, loss, fear and needs in their daily life.

### 3 Ideas for youth work and daily practice

Help young people to find out what they like, what they are good at, and what their strengths are. It is about acknowledging and recognising young refugees' resilience. This can be achieved by the following methods.






- **Focus on past successes.** Young refugees had a life before becoming refugees, so ask them what they liked, what they used to do, what they were good at. You can also ask them how they managed to get through everything they went through.
- **Focus on what is going well** (even the simplest things). What is going better than other things? What has been successful? With any answer you get on these topics, focus more on those aspects (e.g. what is great about being at school?). Making young refugees speak about what works well reinforces positive networks in the brain and enables the young person to develop a more positive self-image.
- **Treat** each young refugee as an individual: they are not all the same. There is no universal approach for everyone.
- Develop cultural awareness and the ability to respect cultural beliefs and customs; also necessary in relation to general health and mental health issues. In some countries, witchcraft is part of cultural practices, and some young refugees will share their stories about spirits, ghosts or witchcraft.
- **Do not be afraid of emotions** and for allowing space for them. It is OK for a young person to feel sadness, anger and fear. Let them know that they can express these emotions freely, and that you are ready to listen if they so wish.
- Death is an important topic for young refugees. Many of them strongly fear the loss of a family member back home, or their own death in a foreign country far from home. **It can be useful to address the topic of death**, the different ways cultures deal with it, and the practices and beliefs around it.
- **Identify local specialists/networks** who could provide support if needed. You do not have to act as a therapist yourself.
- In order to tackle the trauma and mental health of young refugees, it can be useful to **identify specific situations** you have faced in your practice, and to explore different ways of tackling them.

Is there anything you recognise and do you have a case example or a good practice to share with others?

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## Handout 'Plan of action used in the Netherlands'

Name	
Age	
Start date SIL	
Coach	
Guardian	
Date	

<b>Living situation</b>	
How do you find living at SIL on a scale from 0 to 10 or the smiley scale? <sup>35</sup>	
<p style="text-align: center;">0                      3                      5                      8                      10</p> <p style="text-align: center;">      </p>	
What would be needed for you to score one point more?	
What would be different?	
We agree that:	

<b>Team of coaches</b>	
How do you like the coaching team (and your coach) on a scale from 0 to 10 or the smiley scale?	
<p style="text-align: center;">0                      3                      5                      8                      10</p> <p style="text-align: center;">      </p>	
What would be needed for you to score one point more?	
What would be different?	
We agree that:	

<sup>1</sup> The smiley scale works well for younger children, but can seem somewhat childish for the children over 16.

<b>Feeling safe</b>	
How do you find living at SIL on a scale from 0 to 10 or the smiley scale?	
<p style="text-align: center;">0                      3                      5                      8                      10</p> <p style="text-align: center;">      </p>	
What would be needed for you to score one point more?	
What would be different?	
We agree that:	

<b>Language</b>	
How do you like the coaching team (and your coach) on a scale from 0 to 10 or the smiley scale?	
<p style="text-align: center;">0                      3                      5                      8                      10</p> <p style="text-align: center;">      </p>	
The coach sees that <i>(describe the abilities of the youngster)</i> :	
What can you do to improve your Dutch:	
We agree that:	

<b>Social network</b>	
How many people do you know in the area/neighbourhood?	
Which of these people can you contact with questions?	

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How many of those people do you speak Dutch with?	
We agree that:	

<b>Social map</b>	
Which institutions do you know to find?	
What else would you like to know?	
We agree that:	

<b>What's important</b>	
What's important to you now? <i>What are you struggling with right now?</i>	
What does your family care about? <i>What do they want you to accomplish?</i>	
What's important to your guardian?	
What needs to be done in the near future?	
We agree that: <i>Who does what, when is that ready?</i>	

<b>Final stage (optional)</b>	
What are things that you are <i>not</i> looking forward to?	
Who can you ask for help and for what?	
We agree that: <i>Who does what and when is that ready?</i>	

<b>Evaluation</b>		
Agreements for the coming time (see the previous appointments here)	1	
	2	
	3	
	4	
Evaluation (date)		



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# Module 4

## Preparing for autonomy

The third and last phase aims to bring the guidance to an end and prepare the child (and the family) for living independently at the age of 18. During each phase it is important that the contact between a coach and the youngster makes the child feel safe. Children need to be aware of the ways in which their coach can support them in different situations.

### 4.1 Step into their shoes

Amir is about to turn 18, so he will soon be expected to start living on his own and be self-reliant.

Amir is worried. How will he pay for an apartment? Where is he going to live? How is he going to find a job? A job that pays enough so that he can still send money home to his family, because his parents think that he is very successful and will earn a lot of money .... But what if I don't find a job? Who will help me? Can I still rely on my mentor, who I consider my friend?

### 4.2 Preparing for autonomy: the child's needs

#### Autonomy as part of agency

Autonomy is an important aspect of agency. According to Vervliet and Derluyn (2013), this concept refers to two important constructs: self-determination and self-protection. Self-determination means, among other things, self-reliance. Self-protection means wanting to protect yourself from external control, which manifests itself in obvious or less obvious types of resistance. About agency, a distinction is made between actual 'exercise of agency' – the action – and a 'sense of agency' – the degree to which you have the feeling that you can exercise agency (Vervliet & Derluyn, 2013). So, autonomy is a type of agency when it comes to resistance (self-protection), and an expression of self-determination when it comes to self-reliance.

Migrants need to be self-reliant in their new situation. This applies to adults, but unaccompanied children also need to gain autonomy and the skills to be sufficiently self-reliant when they reach the age of majority.

In a collectivist (extended family) culture, however, autonomy is not a goal in a child's upbringing, as is the case in Western individualistic culture. A child from an extended family culture generally grows up within the protection of the extended family of which it continues to be a part. But an unaccompanied child has lost part of this because of their flight, and therefore now has the new, extra task of explor-

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ing independence or living alone. Many unaccompanied children indicate that they do not want to live alone at the age of 18. Whether they can live alone is also dependent on the system and national/regional possibilities. However, the young people who do live alone often say that they miss others and feel lonely and uncomfortable. So they themselves do not always consider it self-evident, or necessary, that autonomy and self-reliance should be encouraged.

## Soft skills

### *Independent living and self-care*

At this stage, the young person is expected to take responsibility for living together with his house-mates. Because the children start their stay in the reception facility/Semi-Independent Living accommodation/family care at different moments, and each child's personal development goes at a different pace, they will also be in different phases of the guidance process. UAC who are in this last phase are the ones that serve as an example for other children. Staying on good terms with the neighbours is now also the responsibility of the child themselves, rather than of the professional, e.g., keeping down the level of noise, doing chores in the street and being considerate to others. The youngsters themselves have to look into housing options, supported by the adults that care for them.

### *A supportive network*

Having friends and role models is important, as well as a supportive network with people who can help the young person with their questions related to entering adulthood. Young people often worry about all the administrative tasks and other responsibilities they are going to have to deal with at the age of 18. Uncertainty about where they are going to live is another worry. An unaccompanied child, just like their peers who were born in the host country, often still need adult support after turning 18. That is why it is important to build a strong social network that they can fall back on. Often this network is already there, and a young person can get help from other people from their country of origin who live in the same city or belong to the same religious community.

For youngsters who arrived in the host country just before the age of 18, or who have just moved to SIL accommodation, focusing on building this network is essential. There is only a short period in which support is available to assist them in finding their way and preparing for adulthood. If there is no supportive network, or their prospects are unclear or disappointing, then the coming of age period can be very stressful. A coach – as well as the guardian – must watch out for signs of this. If they all feel that the young person needs further support, then appropriate organisations can be approached who could provide the young person with this even after the age of 18.

### *Health and well-being*

The unaccompanied child's migration process usually takes place during adolescence, which is an important period for developing their identity. Vulnerability and the migration itself might affect this identity development. A young person develops their identity by combining the values and norms of the different cultures and social groups to which they used to belong and now belong to. But they have lost their old role models, such as family members, friends, peers and parents as their key figures for identification. So they need to find new role models in their new country. Developing your own identity smoothly is challenging. Many unaccompanied children struggle with complicated questions about their identity. They are searching for their own cultural roots and ways to shape them in a new, Western society (Plysier, 2003).

Berry (1990) distinguishes different migration strategies for adapting to another culture: integration, assimilation, segregation and marginalisation. These are also called acculturation strategies.

*Acculturation strategies*

Social adaptation to another culture		Adaptation to a dominant culture	
		Yes	No
Preserving the own culture	Yes	Integration	Segregation
	No	Assimilation	Marginalization

If young people have a residence permit, and are close to turning 18, they generally focus on finding their place in the new society. Which of the four strategies they adopt will depend on their personal development, in combination with the time already spent in the host country and experiences gained. The extent to which the young adult can adapt to the dominant culture of the country, while still maintaining a connection with their own culture, is seen as one of the key elements of being resilient. Research has shown that most prefer the strategy in which they adapt to the new culture without forgetting their own (Sleijpen, 2017).

**Hard skills**

*School and work*

In EU countries, young people have the right to education. Access to education can, however, be complicated when they turn 18. How this changes varies from country to country. In Germany, for instance, youngsters can in some cases obtain a temporary permit and stay in the country until they are 21, so that they can complete their education. In Greece, children go to school until they are 18, and the regulations that allow them to work are very strict, meaning that most of them cannot actually work legally. To be able to supply a young person with the right information, it is important to be aware of the general laws and rules on labour and taxes.

*Healthcare*

Once the young person is legally an adult, they become fully responsible for their own health. The youngster is expected to be able to arrange any necessary healthcare and the cost associated with that care. Talk to them about it, to make sure they know how to do so. Try to find out how independent a youngster is in this respect by going through the healthcare procedures with them. Tell the child, for example, that they might need to get a new doctor or dentist after moving home.

**4.3 Preparing for autonomy: tasks for the professional**

**In general**

Ideally, this phase would begin three to four months before a young person turns 18. If possible, start preparing the youngster for their transition to adulthood even earlier, approximately six months before they turn 18. This is important from a practical point of view as well. In some Member States, youngsters are allowed to stay in SIL accommodation up to age 21, and are provided with prolonged guidance and care, for instance in some regions in Italy and Catalonia. But in most cases youngsters



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are expected to move out and find a place of their own at the age of 18. Although they are regarded as adults in their own cultures, and they might be very independent, they may not be aware of the fact that rules and regulations that apply to them in their new country will change things when they turn 18. Preparing them for changes in general rights and responsibilities, income, the right to education, housing, health insurance, etc. is very important.

These changes often create a lot of uncertainty, especially since most youngsters cannot depend on family and parents in the way that local young people can. In many cases, follow-up housing or support is not arranged properly, while young people do still need it. Starting to investigate possible options for follow-up reception and guidance at an early stage is not only important for the youngster, but also for the SIL staff.

Sometimes there is very little time for this final phase if, for example, the child comes to live at SIL accommodation just before they turn 18. Going through the three phases (settling in, developing and integrating, preparing for autonomy) will then have to be accelerated and you need to decide, together with the youngster and the team, which aspects of guidance would be most beneficial for the young person.

The final guidance phase focuses on being independent and self-reliant at the age of 18. Self-reliance is an important factor in increasing young people's chances of a positive, independent life. It is a part of autonomy – of personal development and personal strength. Self-reliance also contributes to experiencing agency and self-confidence, thereby increasing the resilience of the child.

Besides self-reliance, there are more factors that are important for youngsters when turning 18: having a supportive network, contacting family (in the country of origin), speaking the language of the host country, and having clear prospects for the future.

As time goes on, professional help should be phased out, while the professional themselves still ensures that the youngster has enough information to become independent. Group meetings can be a good way for professionals to give the children a lot of practical information. As in previous phases, professionals will then facilitate a 'safe' setting in which the young person can practise the skills they need for their future.

### **Practical guidance**

- *Local housing situation:* the coach, or other professionals involved, should look into the local housing situation and build a network of organisations that can offer support with this, e.g. local councils or student housing organisations.
- *Sharing information:* the youngster will be responsible for paying their own rent, health insurance, school costs, etc. During a group meeting, the youngsters can be told about the costs involved in independent living, plus moving there and furnishing their new home.
- *Moving out:* to facilitate a safe new start, it is advisable to help the young person move. Encourage them to ask any friends who want to help too.
- *Saying goodbye:* to bring the guidance to an end in a symbolic way, it is nice to organise a farewell party. This could, for example, be having a meal together.

### **Practical guidance on leisure time**

In the previous phase, the youngster will hopefully have found some activities to do in their spare time. Maybe they joined a sports club or started playing an instrument. Make sure they are aware of the

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changes that will take place once they turn 18. Will they have to pay membership fees? Is there any funding available that will ensure that they can continue to be a member after turning 18, even if the membership costs are too high for them? You can help unaccompanied children by giving them some insight into possible funding options.

### **Practical guidance on a supportive network**

- *Additional support:* for each young person who is about to turn 18, you need to look into every aspect of their life to determine whether additional support will be needed. For example, assistance with anything on the medical, educational, legal, psychological and/or social side. During a process like that, the young person and the social worker may find they have opposing opinions on the additional support needed. In this phase, think of ways to 'test' the young person, with the aim of making clear why extra help for certain tasks might be needed. An example: reading your post or emails and knowing how to file it. Another example: allocating your income to different expenses. If extra support for learning this kind of task is organised for the young person, they are expected to make and comply with arrangements with the relevant professionals themselves.
- *Smooth transfer:* if follow-up assistance is needed, it is important to plan a meeting with all parties. It is a good idea to start this extra support a few months before the youngster reaches the age of 18, so that the coach can assess whether the follow-up assistance is adequate and their own guidance can be ended when the child turns 18.
- *The child's social environment:* try to gain a clear picture of the people within the unaccompanied child's informal network who are willing to support them. See what is already in place and try to expand the network. It can help to make this visual by drawing it. Make sure you provide the young person with contact details of organisations that might be able to provide any necessary further support as they move into adulthood, such as Citizen Advice centres for taxes and benefits, or migrant drop-in centres in their local area for advice on immigration and other entitlements.

### **Practical guidance on school and work**

Discuss with the young person what the changes at 18 in terms of going to school would require of them. If they are no longer obliged to go to school, will they still have enough motivation to go? Speak about what the future will look like. If the young person is attending a language school, what other kind of education would they be interested in? Make this as concrete as possible by dividing their goals into small steps. If the youngster is already working, ask them whether they are aware of the upcoming changes.

### **Practical guidance on health and well-being**

- *Identity development:* as a coach, you have no direct influence on the acculturation strategies outlined above. You approach young people in a culturally sensitive way and try to guide them in shaping their future. However, it is good to be aware of the four strategies and keep them in mind during the guidance, so you can discuss the topic with the child if necessary.
- *Free healthcare up to age 18:* when it comes to free healthcare, a young person under 18 often has different rights compared to an adult. For example, a dental check-up before their 18th birthday could be free, because the youngster is still a minor, but will cost money afterwards. It is good to check whether they know that. In the Netherlands, this also applies to some vaccinations. Also check if there is other specific care that is free of charge under 18 but will be charged after they reach that age.

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### Other important issues

- *Stimulating group conversation with training sessions:* in the Netherlands, 'Turning 18' training is used, developed by coaches at the NEO – the Nidos SIL. During this training, important topics are discussed which the youngster should be aware of when turning 18. These include education, finances, health insurance, follow-up assistance, and legal procedures. It is advisable to do this training with a group of young people who are about to turn 18 (about three months in advance). By doing it in a group, you ensure that youngsters who are a bit shy can think about any consequences for their own situation by listening to answers to other people's questions. Provide some drinks and snacks, and try to create an informal atmosphere so the young people feel comfortable and safe enough to actively participate. Also try to make the training interactive, giving the youngsters the opportunity to engage in conversation and ask questions. If someone has very specific questions about their own situation, ask them to talk about that to their own coach another time, to prevent other youngsters losing interest in the discussion. This training is designed for young people who have a residence permit and are therefore allowed to remain legally in the host country.
- *Return to the country of origin:* a child whose application for a residence permit has been rejected is encouraged to think about their return. Sometimes this is returning to the country of origin, but it might mean returning to another (European) country where the young person has previously applied for asylum or where family is present. In practice, discussing return is very difficult for unaccompanied children; they often feel ashamed with regard to their family, and many still hope to somehow obtain a residence permit. This hope can be very persistent. There are young people who therefore appear to want to opt for an illegal stay in the host country. If a young person seems to be making this choice, you, as a coach, should make that a topic of conversation. Point out to the child the consequences and risks that are involved. If youngsters are considering remaining in the host country illegally, provide them with a list of organisations and services that are involved in this and might be able to provide advice and support.
- *Celebrating adulthood:* in Western countries, legally reaching adulthood is very important. This can differ from the countries of origin. Celebrating adulthood with a joint celebration ensures that young people are more aware of the importance that the age of 18 has in Western societies. At the same time, it is a way to meet each other. The aim is to bring youngsters together who have turned 18 so that they can exchange experiences. Look into the possibilities to organise a get-together like this together with other SIL locations or organisations involved.

## 4.4 Preparing for autonomy - Skills & Tools

### Handout 'Solution-focused intervision structure'

#### 1 Introduction

The introducer puts their question and gives a short explanation (factual and descriptive).

#### **5 minutes**

The facilitator does not allow the introducer to give too much information, so as to just focus on the question. Together, find the right words for the question, and write these on a flip chart or A3 sheet.

The facilitator asks the participants to write something down themselves: "What does this question bring to mind?" **2 minutes**

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## 2 Question round

The participants explore the issue by asking more information to get a clear picture of the situation, the context and the connection between the introducer and the situation (their thoughts, problems, etc). **10 minutes**

*The facilitator makes sure there are no suggestions or solutions in the questions.*

## 3 Summarising by the introducer

**max. 5 minutes**

Facilitator: "How would you summarise your question now? Has everyone got enough information for a full picture?"

*(brief opportunity for participants to ask additional questions)*

## 4 Advice round

**10-14 minutes**

- Everyone writes down two pieces of advice. **4 minutes**
- Everyone reads their advice out loud and the introducer (or someone else) writes it all down.

**6-10 minutes**

## 5 Reaction from the introducer

**5 minutes**

"What is helpful to you? Which advice are you going to follow? What will your first step be? What are you going to do?"

*The facilitator asks these questions to make it as specific as possible.*

Check: Was this sufficient for the introducer?

## 6 Short evaluation by the facilitator

**5 minutes**

- For the introducer: How did doing this make you feel?
- For the participants: Who would like to share their experience of this session? What did you learn?
- How do we feel about using this structure?

What was agreed for next time

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# Module 5

## Good practices

This last module presents three exercises that are used on the final day of training to help participants put their newly acquired knowledge and skills into practice.

### 5.1 Sharing good practices using a World Café

In order to have an interesting World Café session, the organisation hosting the training invites three to four social workers from another organisation with specific expertise in working with UAC.

These social workers introduce themselves during a 10-minute plenary session, explaining who they are and what they do. Then the group is divided in smaller groups, each containing one social worker from outside the organisation. Participants give a brief introduction about themselves, their experience with UAC and their professional contexts. Then they exchange good practices on shared topics. These topics are written down on a sheet of paper that is lying on the table.

Examples of topics:

- Differences and similarities in the way reception is organised for UAC in each organisation/context/country
- How is child participation organised in each organisation/context/country
- Who is responsible for keeping an eye on safety ?

The session ends with a short plenary recap.

### 5.2 First steps in implementing knowledge and skills

This exercise is meant to set an intention for implementing the knowledge and skills gained during the last two days, and to create a strong (creative) image to support the participant's intention. It can be done through drawing, scrapbooking, mind mapping, writing a haiku, etc.

Each participant is asked to reflect individually on the following two questions:

- What will you take away from the training?
- Why is this important for your work?

At one of the tables, the participant chooses from the materials available to express the main insights gained from the training in a personal creative image: drawing a picture, making a mind map, writing a poem or a song, etc.

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By the end of the exercise, 15 different 'artworks' have been created, each reflecting the most important insight or intention of an individual participant.

### 5.3 Applying it to your own context

In pairs, the participants reflect on the following questions:

- What do you want to achieve with regard to the reception of UAC?
- Who do you need to achieve this?
- What will your first step be?
- What will help you to hold on to this good idea?

These questions help each participant to create an implementation plan for putting the knowledge and skills into practice in their own contexts.



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- 1 Article 20 CRC
- 2 Article 22 CRC, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- 3 <https://www.antislavery.org/what-we-do/past-projects/trafficking-vietnam-to-uk/>
- 4 The following text is based upon the section 'Ideas for daily youth work practice' in STEP-by-STEP together – Support, Tips, Examples and Possibilities for youth work with young refugees (Council of Europe & European Commission, 2018).
- 5 Guillaume Coron, 2021.
- 6 Council of Europe Committee of Ministers Guidelines on child-friendly justice, adopted on 17 November 2010, guideline 2.
- 7 It may not always be possible to know what information is most important to the child at that moment. It is therefore necessary to create an informational space that the child can/could invest in.
- 8 It is highly likely that the child will respond in the affirmative, even if he or she has not understood or thinks he or she has understood.
- 9 Spoken language often has simpler sentences and grammatical structures.
- 10 When you are not familiar with a language, it is sometimes difficult to know which word or name a pronoun refers to.
- 11 Most migrant children have learned the official languages (lingua franca) of their countries of origin at school (English, French, Portuguese, etc.). They are therefore much more familiar with standard forms.
- 12 For instance, say "you will have food" rather than "you will get food". It is usually only native speakers who have no problems with words that have more than one meaning. This is also the case with phrasal verbs in English.
- 13 For example, in the French region of Calais, young English speakers use the word 'process' to refer to the procedure for family reunification in the UK. Another example: young people from French-speaking West Africa use the word 'extrait' (certificate) instead of the nominal group 'extrait d'acte de naissance' (birth certificate).
- 14 For example, young people from Afghanistan use the word 'taskira' rather than 'birth certificate'.
- 15 You can reinforce access to meaning by rephrasing sentences and also by using synonyms or words that are close in meaning.
- 16 If the child does not have the experiential or cultural background to understand a word, they will not understand it in their first language either.
- 17 Save the Children Italy, 2020.
- 18 Further information on measures and actions to identify child trafficking victims can be found in the National Referral Mechanism for trafficked people in Italy, available at the following link: <https://www.osservatoriointer-ventitratta.it/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/allegato-1-meccanismo-nazionale-referral.pdf>
- 19 For a more in-depth analysis on indicators, go to: Save the Children, 2020, Saper riconoscere minorenni vittime di tratta e sfruttamento in Italia (Identifying minors who are victims of trafficking and exploitation in Italy), in course of publication.
- 20 The benefit of doubt in relation to the status of victim is applied in cases of doubts during the process of identification: the minor is classified as a victim, so that all the actions necessary for their protection and safety are adopted.
- 21 If you want to start a family reunification procedure, inform the Social Services and the competent Juvenile Court immediately, to verify the relationship between the minor and the adult, and to ascertain whether there are all the necessary conditions to guarantee the best interests of the minor.
- 22 Put under pressure by a criminal organisation, a child that is a victim of trafficking might say they are an adult so as to be transferred to a camp or centre for adults – with less restrictions – where they could more easily become a victim of exploitation.
- 23 The intervention of consular or diplomatic representatives is not requested unless the alleged minor specifically asked for personal protection, or the intention of the alleged minor to request international protection emerged from interviews, or if the alleged minor is not in need of international protection.



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- <sup>24</sup> Article 4, section 2 Legislative Decree N. 24/2014, DPCM (Council of Ministers Presidential Decree) 234/2016.
- <sup>25</sup> Article 5 section 4, Legislative Decree 47/2017.
- <sup>26</sup> Articles 343, 354, 352, 402 of the Civil Code; Article 19 section 4 and 4 Legislative Decree 142/2015 and modifications from Legislative Decree 220/2017,
- <sup>27</sup> Save the Children, 2020, Saper riconoscere minorenni vittime di tratta e sfruttamento in Italia (Identifying minors who are victims of trafficking and exploitation in Italy), in course of publication.
- <sup>28</sup> Article 15, Legislative Decree 47/2017.
- <sup>29</sup> The right of minors to be heard and have their views considered must be guaranteed according to article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, so the interviews must be conducted with a 'child-friendly' approach, the support of a cultural mediator and a structured method. More information can be found in Save the Children, 2019, Partecipare Si Può! Volume 2. Strumenti e buone pratiche di partecipazione e ascolto dei minori migranti ("Yes! We participate" Volume 2. Tools and good practices to ensure that migrant children arriving in Italy are heard and offered the chance to participate within society), available at the following link: <https://www.savethechildren.it/cosa-facciamo/pubblicazioni/partecipare-si-puo-volume-2>
- <sup>30</sup> The first risk assessment should take place during initial contact with the minor.
- <sup>31</sup> Further information on measures and actions to identify child trafficking victims can be found in the National Referral Mechanism for trafficked people in Italy, available at the following link: <https://www.osservatoriointerventitratta.it/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/allegato-1-meccanismo-nazionale-referral.pdf>
- <sup>32</sup> According to the attachments of the National Plan of Action against human trafficking and severe exploitation, the identification must be carried out by NGOs and the Public Security Forces.
- <sup>33</sup> Article 17 Legislative Decree 47/2017; Article 13 Legislative Decree 228/2003.
- <sup>34</sup> STEP-by-STEP together – Support, Tips, Examples and Possibilities for youth work with young refugees (Council of Europe & European Commission, 2018)
- <sup>35</sup> The smiley scale works well for younger children, but can seem somewhat childish for young people over the age of 16.