

ALFACA II

Improving reception and care for unaccompanied children by structurally increasing the quality and quantity of family based care



COUNTRY REPORT GREECE

State of the art on family based care
for unaccompanied children

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Published by: Stichting Nidos, Maliebaan 99, 3581 CH Utrecht, The Netherlands

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Language review: Mandy Savage

This country report has been published as part of the ALFACA II project (February 2018-July 2019). Its aim is establishing sustainable family based care in Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece and Italy.

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Co-funded by the
REC Programme of
the European Union



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a presentation and analysis of the current situation in the foster care service for unaccompanied children in the Greek context, with a focus on its implementation by METAdrasi. As a starting point, it should be noted that there is no specific provision regarding foster care and third country nationals: unaccompanied children. The report draws attention to the procedures and child protection services provided for the high numbers of unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) that have been arriving in the country since early 2015 and have remained in Greece. It highlights the fact that the system is oriented towards institutional care, while there are limited places at adequate accommodation facilities. Taking into consideration the children's internationally recognised right to a safe environment and housing, the report presents the Greek legislative framework on foster care and the positive prospects of the recently passed law 4538/2018 'Measures on the promotion of Foster Care and Adoption Institutions plus other provisions'. It also focuses on existing foster care programme practices as implemented by the NGO METAdrasi. According to the report's SWOT analysis, a lack of public awareness along with a widespread and common misinterpretation of foster care as a prelude to adoption are considered to be the major areas of weakness, while recent legislation for foster care is regarded as a favourable opportunity for the establishment of a foster care system specifically for unaccompanied children.

The recommendations discussed include:

- The adoption of a comprehensive national child protection strategy for the promotion of foster care and increased implementation of more family based models
- The creation of a framework for optimal networking between all implementing actors to facilitate coordination and procedures
- A structured system of foster care specifically formulated for cases of unaccompanied children is the first and crucial step towards challenging current methods. Monitoring the application of a system like this, as well as further development of a standard promotion strategy for dissemination of information to recruiting families, even at a low scale, could be considered a necessary dimension of any type of starting point

The last part of the report provides action and dissemination plans, with tables presenting the action required for further, sustainable implementation of foster care.

DEVELOPMENTS SINCE ALFACA

According to the outcomes of the RLF report¹, Greece is considered to be one of the countries where, despite having a legal framework providing for the placement of children in reception families, there is no system that specifically applies to cases of unaccompanied children. Although the number of unaccompanied children has been greatly increasing since the height of the refugee crisis in 2015, state policies have been oriented towards an institutional care approach, highlighting the need for more suitable accommodation facilities for unaccompanied children. It was only during recent years, when the crisis started to diminish but the issues of limited accommodation facilities remained, that the concept of foster care started to gain some ground, although it was still not common practice among private and state stakeholders.

In Greece, foster care is organised and stipulated through the general youth care system with the same criteria and standards applied to all children living in the country, regardless of their nationality. It has to be noted that public and private bodies are responsible for the implementation of foster care, from the first stages of recruiting up to the placement of the child in a family. Most of the placements of unaccompanied children are with families of Greek origin rather than those with the same ethnic background.

As described in the RLF report, Greece needs to take further steps to promote foster care and challenge the existing approach on institutional care. In the next few sections of this report, there is greater focus on the details of the current national situation and foster care for unaccompanied children in the Greek context.

¹ From September 2013 to March 2015, Nidos (the Netherlands) in cooperation with Counter Human Trafficking Bureau (CHTB, UK) and SALAR (Sweden) ran the RLF project with co-funding by the European Commission, aiming to develop knowledge on the reception provisions within families for UAMs. The goal of the project was to map the current practice and promote the reception of UAMs in families. The final report of the project (RLF report) provided an overview of the then current state of the art on family based care for unaccompanied children.

1. STATE OF THE ART ON FAMILY BASED CARE IN GREECE

1.1 Current Greek national context

As one of the major entry points into Europe for refugees and migrants, Greece has received over a million individuals since January 2015, around 60% of them women and children. During October 2018, 4,100 individuals arrived via sea and 1,550 through the land borders of the Greek state². UNHCR estimations for annual arrivals for 2018 was 41,252.

UNHCR estimates that some 67,100 refugees and migrants, of which 49,200 on the mainland and 17900 in the islands, are currently in Greece³. In the mainland, people are hosted in approximately 25 government-run sites (camp-like and buildings), as well as in rented housing for more than 53,400 asylum seekers and refugees provided by UNHCR with contributions from municipalities and NGOs. Furthermore, UNHCR provides a cash assistance programme, which has benefited more than 90,400 households since April 2017⁴. The situation is more challenging on the islands, where there is not enough capacity and sufficient services to respond to the needs of refugees and asylum seekers.

As a result of international protection applicants' prolonged stay in Greece, the protection situation has been transformed from 'protecting people on the move' to protecting people in different types of Greek sites. The needs and protection risks faced by 'persons of concern' vary, depending on the site, location, nationality, legal status, vulnerability, and date of their arrival in Greece. Moreover, as the population becomes more settled in Greece, access to effective asylum procedures, documentation, and services (e.g. health, education) increases in importance. Without this, a minimum level of living standards cannot be ensured.

As far as the most vulnerable groups are concerned, such as unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), the situation across the whole country remains uncertain. There is a limited number of trained and experienced professionals who can promptly take charge of the overall protection of UASC. This results in a lack of constant and appropriate case monitoring, and hinders the children's access to services and their rights. An additional issue in the field of child protection is the limited number of sufficient age- and gender-appropriate accommodation spaces. According to the latest data, 3.680 UASC are estimated to be currently in Greece. The number of available places in long - term accommodation facilities are 1.213 and the number of places in safe zones or hotels are 855. According to EKKA^[1] (National Center for Social Solidarity), 736 and 1009 UASC are placed in short – term and long – term facilities respectively, with 1.935 UASC being in none of such accommodation, forming the waiting list for long - term or transitional accommodation. The children on this waiting list may be in various locations, including detention facilities, official and unofficial camps, or left homeless on the streets

² UNHCR estimation in Announcement for the period 1-31 October 2018, available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/66993>

³ Id

⁴ Id

in dire conditions, having experienced or being exposed to risks of violence, abuse, exploitation and trafficking.

With regard to foster care in Greece, it has to be stressed that, at the present time, there is no official documentation on the exact number of candidate foster parents in the country. As a welcome development, on 16 May 2018 the Hellenic Parliament passed Law 4538/2018 ‘Measures on the promotion of Foster Care and Adoption Institutions plus other provisions’⁵. This law will be examined in the following sections of this report (see section 2). Hopefully, it will provide and regulate solutions to the previously mentioned crucial problems.

In general, foster care in Greece is supervised by Public Child Protection Authorities (e.g. municipal and regional) as provided for in Article 13 of Law 4538/2018. Private law bodies are allowed to provide foster care services, on the condition that they comply with the relevant law and work in close cooperation with the Public Child Protection Authorities.

One of the fundamental rights of all children is the right to safe and adequate housing. In this context, Article 20 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child⁶ (Greece is a State party) specifies that: “A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State.”

Moreover, according to article 27 of the same Convention⁷:

“States parties recognise the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.”

METAdrasi is a key actor in the field of child protection, offering a comprehensive safety net of activities for the protection of UASC which fills long-standing gaps in the national protection system.

Many unaccompanied children arrive in Greece having lost or having been separated from their parents or relatives. One of their fundamental needs is the provision of safe and adequate housing. In order to bridge the gaps that are not covered in that area, METAdrasi has developed a temporary foster care system: safe housing in families who can offer the security and integrated support the children need until they are reunited with relatives in Europe. Following the abrupt increase in mixed migration flows since the beginning of the summer of 2015, METAdrasi provides UASC with safe housing in families after their transfer from the entrance points.

This practice has been in existence for decades in other European Union countries and it has been shown that children staying with families is the optimal option and in the child’s best interests. This foster care activity is implemented by METAdrasi, in accordance with national law and the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in cooperation with the local Prosecutor’s Offices and authorities. In addition to this, METAdrasi has been offering, among other things, long-term fostering since January 2018 (see section 1.3 for more information).

⁵Law 4538/2018, Government Gazette, 85/A/16-5-2018, available in Greek at <https://www.e-nomothesia.gr/oikogeneia/nomos-4538-2018-phek-85a-16-5-2018.html>

⁶UN General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 November 1989, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577 available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

⁷Id

1.2 SWOT analysis

Internal	
Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close collaboration with UASC guardians • Fruitful cooperation with Public Prosecutor's Office and other public stakeholders • Flexibility of METAdrasi's foster care programme which is adapted to four different situations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent ambiguities on the scope and framework of foster care • Foster care is interpreted as a version of adoption, leading to limited interest from families • Candidate reception families' expectations regarding child's age and ethnic profile do not match with target group trends • Delays in family reunification cases can alter the initial type of placement
External	
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The new law is a step towards a more active role of the state in foster care • Best practices and expertise to be adopted by state institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible donor budget cuts can affect the programme's operation • Fluctuating political context and the forthcoming election period may act as a deterrent to implementation of the new law • Low level of cultural sensitivity since candidate foster parents' expectations differ from UASCs' actual ethnic background and age

1.3 Good practices in the Greek context

Since September 2015, METAdrasi has adopted a foster care programme for unaccompanied children, in cooperation with the state social services, which implements the social assessments mentioned in the Greek foster care legislation. The programme works with families consisting of a couple or an individual, with or without biological children, who wish to take care of and raise an unaccompanied or separated child.

To date, a total of 72 children have been placed in reception families under the auspices of METAdrasi's foster care programme. The foster care team consists of six professionals with experience in foster care and child protection: four social workers, one psychologist and one lawyer who were specially recruited by METAdrasi for this work. The team has built an excellent working relationship with the Public Prosecutor's Office, as well with other important stakeholders such as regional and municipal authorities, children's hospitals and NGOs. It should be noted that the programme is scientifically supervised, and its goals and principles have been set after an exchange of know-how with other EU Member States such as the Netherlands, Italy, Belgium and France.

METAdrasi's foster care programme offers four types of fostering. The first is emergency foster care, when an unaccompanied child needs to be placed immediately in a suitable reception family, either because they are very young or because they have been hospitalised. The second is kinship foster care, which refers to cases where the child is fostered by their relatives (e.g. uncle, aunt, grandparents). The third is short-term foster care, lasting from two months to two years, and is recommended for children who are expected to be reunited with their families. The fourth is long-term foster care. This is recommended for UASC who are seeking asylum in Greece and are expected to remain with their reception families until they reach the age of majority.

It should be stressed that the reception families receive ongoing support from METAdrasi to facilitate the fostering. First and foremost, preparatory and regular meetings are held for the social workers, psychologist, (candidate) reception family and lawyer (if necessary). It is crucial that each reception family has access to psychological assistance and to interpretation services in order to communicate properly with the child, as most of the unaccompanied children originate from Syria and Afghanistan. Psychological support is also provided for every child that the programme places in a reception family.

A member of METAdrasi's Guardianship Network is also legally authorised to deal with each case of an unaccompanied child who is to be placed in a reception family. This facilitates the matching procedure and gives the social worker a better insight into the child's profile. The professional also helps with practical matters, providing administrative support during school enrolment, doctor's visits and other activities. Social workers and members of METAdrasi's Guardianship Network work together, and can both intervene if a child voices any type of concern or need. A welcome development is the 300 euros monthly allowance provided for every reception family in the METAdrasi foster care programme.

1.4 Weaknesses of alternative family care in the Greek context

The lack of public awareness of foster care in Greece has been identified as a major weakness. There are ambiguities regarding the nature and purposes of foster care, while the rights and obligations of foster parents are not widely known. On the contrary, there is a false and widespread belief that foster care is a prelude to or substitute for adoption. As a result, few families apply in relation to the number of unaccompanied children in need of foster care, so this reduces the number of matching options. And the problem can worsen if there are only a few families with ethnic backgrounds integrated into Greek society.

Another weakness that needs to be considered is that there are only limited numbers of cooperation protocols used by all the relevant stakeholders and institutions – a fact that may make it difficult to manage cases where children are placed in alternative family care.

With respect to the children in the METAdrasi foster care programme, a number of points need to be highlighted. First, the recruitment of reception families is difficult, as the young asylum seekers are mainly teenagers (66% of them boys) that originate from Middle Eastern or African countries. It should be stressed that the candidate reception families in Greece think they will be asked to foster a young Caucasian child (preferably younger than 10 years old) and also think that the fostering will very soon become adoption. Another important fact is the lack of information regarding the social and medical history of the unaccompanied children in the METAdrasi foster care programme. Additionally, there are considerable delays in the completion of family reunification cases regarding children placed in reception families. Therefore, foster care placements that have been characterised as short-term placements usually develop into long-term placements.

It is crucial to note that Greece is no longer considered to be a country facing an emergency situation with human flows or a humanitarian crisis. On the contrary, the international community shares the opinion that Greece is now at a later stage and has to manage and confront the issue of refugee integration into society. As a direct result, donors' contribution is anticipated to be at lower levels for 2019, and this fact will clearly become an obstacle to optimal operation of the programme.

Lastly, municipal, national and European elections will be conducted in Greece in 2019. Not only the results and the exact timing of the elections, but also the political will of the new government will probably be critical factors for implementation of the new law on foster care (see section 2 - opportunities for further information). The hope is that the best interests of unaccompanied children will not be disregarded.

1.5 Current opportunities

METAdrasi's foster care programme and its professionals have been given the opportunity to participate in EU projects such as ALFACA II. It is worth noting that the participants in the project are institutions, organisations, NGOs and municipalities that manage foster care programmes for unaccompanied children. As well as a regular exchange of know-how among the participants, METAdrasi's professionals receive training and are provided with a high level of relevant expertise and knowledge. Further exchange of know-how among participants in the project and the EU Member States concerned would be a welcome development with regard to the improvement of foster care in the European Union.

Law 4538/2018 'Measures on the promotion of Foster Care and Adoption Institutions plus other provisions'⁸ and its practical implementation are an exceptional opportunity for the improvement of foster care in Greece. The new law provides for a National Registry of Minors that should be kept by EKKA. All children accommodated in Child Protection Foundations, or who are expected to be placed in reception families, are obliged to be added to this Registry. Furthermore, according to the new law on foster care, EKKA must keep a Registry of Candidate Foster Parents and a Registry of Approved Foster Parents. And for the first time in Greece, people who have entered into a civil partnership are suitable to be approved as foster parents as long as they meet all the other criteria that the law provides for. In general, foster care in Greece is supervised by Public Child Protection Authorities (e.g. municipal and regional) as provided for in Article 13 of Law 4538/2018. Finally, it is important to mention that the new legislation for foster family care stipulates that financial support given to the reception families will be paid by OPEKA (Agency for Welfare Allowance and Social Solidarity) and will be exempt from taxes or other relevant charges. However, the amount of money to be granted has not yet been determined.

1.6 Child participation in the situational analysis

The investigation of unaccompanied children's perception of family care services was conducted through a qualitative case study of an 11-year-old child of Pakistani origin who was in foster care in May 2018. With regard to the methodology used, a list of open-ended questions was given to the foster parents so that a semi-structured discussion could take place. The reasoning for the choice of foster parents as atypical interviewers was the fact that they were considered by the child to be key and trusted figures. It should be noted that the questions were formulated by a METAdrasi social worker assigned to monitor the placement, after which preparatory talks were held to explain the scope of the interview to both foster parents and child.

The objective of the discussion was to gain a deeper insight into the child's thoughts, experiences and development during the fostering. This specific case was selected because, at the time of the interview, the fostering had reached a stage that the child could share his emotions and perspective in a safe and framed environment.

⁸See supra note 5

The discussion gave the child an opportunity to express thoughts he had not shared up to that point, probably due to cultural reasons or shyness. A remarkable issue that emerged was related to the child's initial serious concern about the family's profile and the matching. This type of information provided the professionals with a better picture of the distress and possible anxiety a child may experience before the life change which is about to happen.

Furthermore, despite the fact that the child's living conditions had improved, going from dire conditions (homelessness) to a safe environment (a home setting), the child expressed a sense of insecurity and uncertainty regarding placement. The situation had significantly improved, and trust had been built, as the foster parents made efforts to maintain a connection with the child's home in the country of origin via the internet, thus preventing any feelings of isolation. On the other hand, the language barrier appeared to have only played a minor role, as the use of specific tools had proven beneficial for creating a connection between the foster parents and the child.

The child expressed his anxiety over the need to feel accepted by the reception family, not wanting to show behaviour that would be considered deviant. In this case, the professionals intervened in order to explain to the child that even if he would do something considered to be 'unacceptable' or if he could not manage to achieve a goal, he would continue to receive care and attention from his foster parents.

With regard to the child's development, the fact that he had arrived in Greece primarily to financially support his family in Pakistan presented a challenge for the family and the professionals. It meant that they had to explain and highlight the benefits of education, sport activities and the very meaning of non-child labour in the Greek context. During the placement, the child started to relish the enjoyable parts of fostering and take pride in his achievements.

As far as the bond with the foster parents is concerned, and how that was formed, it could be argued that their relationship went through different stages and mixed emotions. The early period of fostering could be described as a time of uncertainty and uneasiness, which was later replaced by feelings of strong self-esteem, sharing, stability and dreams for the future.

Lastly, the child's roots and cultural background seemed to play a crucial role, both for the fostering and for his path in life. The connection and the balance between these two pillars demonstrated that the more a child's cultural background and 'otherness' is accepted, the more the child can invest in a relationship.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 National level

The new legislative framework is considered to be a crucial step towards essential state reform of the child care system and a greatly improved alternative family care system in Greece. However, it is yet to be implemented.

Despite the fact that the number of places in accommodation facilities is limited, the Greek child protection model is primarily oriented towards institutional care rather than foster care. A possible recommendation could regard the adoption of a comprehensive national strategy structured to a large extent in terms of alternative family care.

In this sense, a national plan could be the cornerstone of clarification of the roles and responsibilities of public authorities (regional and municipal social services, children's hospitals, etc.), civil society actors and NGOs. The new legislation is a sign of progress towards the dismantlement of current institutional care and a transition to more family care based models. However, even without the legislative framework, adoption of adequate implementation mechanisms and the formulation of a child protection system from an alternative family care perspective in policy terms, could also provide fruitful outcomes. Such developments would represent a common understanding on alternative family care and would contest the current model of institutional care. In addition, non-public actors' experience and best practices in the foster care field could help steer the Greek state in that direction.

2.2 Regional–Local level

An additional recommendation on this issue would be to consider the adoption of a common framework for optimal networking between all state authorities and collaborating actors, with a special focus on a clear division of duties and labour, and the perfection of cooperation protocols, in order to facilitate the coordination of procedures. A division of responsibilities between all the entities involved at a regional and local level may help prevent any type of procedural delays and promote sustainability. With all the foundations aligned, a high level of continuity would be ensured for the provision of care and support to both unaccompanied children and reception families. Moreover, linking up public and private actors in this way, together with early investigation of the possibility of foster care during an unaccompanied child's stay in accommodation facilities/safe zones, could also prove to be beneficial to development of the programme.

3. ACTION PLAN

Attention should be drawn to investment in capacity building, stipulation of professional standards and systematic continued education of child protection professionals in order for them to gain sound understanding of the concept of foster care. Specialisation of child protection professionals in the field of alternative family care would result in a clearer definition of the concept of foster care and its legal framework. Armed with expert knowledge and know-how, these professionals would be more committed to the implementation of foster care.

Regular communication of the concept and benefits of the alternative foster care system for unaccompanied children would lead to an increase in public awareness and understanding of the issue and ignite the interest of Greek society in general.

Lastly, the vast majority of inquiries from potential foster parents are currently in the Athens region. The possibility of expanding the project to other cities in the mainland, and to the islands where refugee populations are concentrated, could also be examined. Extending the project to other cities is deemed to be a great opportunity for involving more partners and local authorities in its implementation, thus making it more sustainable.

	Aim/Purpose	Activities	Actors	Level	Timeline
1.	Capacity building and development of common professional standards for social workers working with reception families	Providing training on the ALFACA ⁹ model, and informative sessions on the Greek legislative framework	Prefectures social services, children's hospitals social services, other NGOs, EKKA	National	July – October 2019

⁹ Within the first ALFACA-project, Nidos (the Netherlands) in cooperation with Minor-Ndako (Belgium), Jugendhilfe Süd-Niedersachsen (Germany), OPU (Czech Republic), the Danish Red Cross and KIJA (Austria) developed training for professionals working with reception families that take care of unaccompanied children. The goal of the project was to further develop and improve the reception of unaccompanied children in families by providing professionals with the tools needed for this and teaching them how to use these tools. The project implementation period was 1 October 2015 to 1 April 2017 and the project was co-funded by the European Commission.

2.	Public sensitisation on the concept of alternative family care. Promotion of the programme among ethnic communities	Strategic promotion and public awareness campaigns, field visits, organising introductory meeting for potential foster parents	METAdrasi	National and regional	July – October 2019
3.	Expansion of the foster care scheme beyond the city of Athens	Communication and presentation of the programme in municipalities and to local prosecutors	Local authorities, municipalities, local public prosecutors, other NGOs, EKKA	Regional	July – October 2019

4. DISSEMINATION PLAN

The dissemination plan consists of a series of meetings with relevant stakeholders and collaborating actors in the field of foster care. More concretely, special attention will be given to reaching public social services professionals and representatives of regular youth care. Furthermore, a conference¹⁰ will be organised for professionals working in the foster care sector. The programme will include presentations of outcomes and recommendations, opportunities to exchange good practices, and discussions on further development of the concept of foster care. The table below summarises planned activities:

	Activities/Actors	Purpose	Indicative Timeline
1.	Arranging meetings with the main public stakeholders, i.e. social services departments at the prefectures and municipalities collaborating with the city of Athens	Discussion on coordination protocols, division of duties, and facilitation of procedures	Autumn 2019
2.	Conducting meetings with social service departments at children's hospitals in the Athens region	Discussion on coordination protocols, division of duties, and facilitation of procedures	Autumn 2019
3.	Organising a conference for professionals working in the foster care field in Greece	Discussion on further development and improvement of family based care	Winter 2019

¹⁰ When funding is available

APPENDIX

Alfaca training in Greece

In May 2019 a two-day ALFACA training for child protection and foster care professionals was held in Athens. It a good opportunity for further promotion of the ALFACA material. The training also proved to be an exceptional opportunity for the exchange of and discussion of good practices of the ALFACA model. Representatives and social workers from the Social Service Departments of the Districts of Athens together with members of METAdrasi's guardianship coordination team and social workers of METAdrasi's foster care programme attended the training.

The training focused mainly on the following topics.

Day 1

Background information on unaccompanied children

The child's cultural and ethnic profile, identification of children's different past experiences protective (e.g. ability to speak the language , social support, continuity in reception and religion) and risk factors (e.g. trauma, unpleasant experiences endured during the flight, worries about family and legal status) and safety risks (e.g. trafficking, sexual abuse or forced labour).

Working in an intercultural environment

Need for understanding the UASC's cultural context, 3-step method by Pinto, need for understanding the "misunderstandings" (Shame vs Guilt culture, Direct vs Indirect, Rational vs Relational, family's high expectations and Honour vs Interest or perception on health).

The need for guidance

Significant developmental issues of UASC after the flight, initial phases of reception (rest & safety), basic needs' coverage (shelter, communication with relatives), contact with children based on interest and reliability, positive support and patience, increasing protective factors and minimising risk factors by focusing on the future (self-reliance, reunification and return).

Day 2

Recruiting families

Significance of having a recruitment plan (strategies, methods and activities), focus on specific characteristics of families (ethnic or indigenous), persisting effort in recruiting new families, small steps and progress are considered essential.

Screening families

Who and when to screen, screening, tools for assessment of families (list of questions, attitudes, views and qualities), sustainability factors and prospects.

Matching and placement

Profile and best interests of the child, profile and commitment of the family, wishes of the child, commitment from all the involved actors (child, biological family, candidate foster parents and guardians), guidance after the placement and breakdown prevention.