

The bridge to belonging

The integration journey for unaccompanied children from the Middle East to Europe



Family
for every child

Acknowledgements

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Disclaimer

The names of the unaccompanied children and young people and their caregivers interviewed during the course of this study, including those taking part in the Photovoice participatory action research method, have been changed in order to maintain their anonymity.

Key Informants were guaranteed anonymity, and asked whether they agreed to the use of quotations, as well as to reference being made to their organisations, and whether they wanted to be acknowledged by name in the report. Please see the annexes for research tools.

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Executive Summary

Children have long moved to Europe seeking safety, chasing opportunity, or creating links with other countries and societies. However, the journey to a better and safer life can be a difficult and dangerous one for many migrant and refugee children. At least 23,000 children and adolescents arrived in Europe in 2021, escaping conflict, violence, poverty or environmental degradation (UNICEF 2022: 2); approximately 10 per cent arrived unaccompanied. Along the way, many faced devastating abuse, exploitation and violence.

The bridge to belonging looks at what happens after these children – mostly adolescent boys – have arrived at their European destination. What does it mean to integrate into a new society when you are a child on your own? How do they face the challenges of building an identity without their families, process the violence and dangers of their journeys, and face a new situation that may not be as welcoming or straightforward as they had expected? How do the receiving communities change? And what can be done to make this a smoother process for everyone?

Focusing on the Eastern Mediterranean migration route, the report is built on interviews with key informants, a literature review, and research in three sites (Lebanon, Greece and Germany). It comes to a new definition of integration for unaccompanied children:

The two-way process of an unaccompanied child settling in a new country on what is anticipated to be a permanent basis, in order to receive protection and care and to find a sense of belonging in all spheres of life, and the related adaptation to the social, economic, cultural and political life of the receiving community.¹

The report clearly indicates that child protection systems around the region are often sidelined by immigration directives. At an individual level, the length and complexity of the asylum process create huge uncertainty for unaccompanied children as they grapple with the challenges of integration; these are only compounded by the various social service, health, employment and educational systems. This limbo – along with multiple forced moves (often for reasons related to regional equity and lack of housing) – make many children reluctant to put down social and educational roots in a location. It also has negative consequences on their mental health and relations with family back home. Aging out (at 18 years old) is even more fraught than for other adolescents, as these young people may lose their right to stay on in the town or even the country in which they are living; however, a number of jurisdictions are working to meet this challenge in sensitive and sensible ways.

To counter that, the research looked for allies of the child and at what can be done to strengthen and enlarge that group. The increased number of unaccompanied children arriving in Europe has meant involving the voluntary sector more, as well as increasing the number (and readiness) of legal guardians. It means engaging in more rapid family reunification within Europe and supporting relatives to receive these youngsters.

Unaccompanied children yearn to meet local peers and there must be innovation and attention brought to enable these opportunities, preferably designed by current and recent unaccompanied children and their peers. They are eager to attend school and to work, yet there seems little innovation on how both needs could be met within the first year of arrival. One important step would be to end

the provision of segregated services in areas such as education and housing. While this segregation may be a simpler and perhaps more cost-effective approach, it impedes language and cultural acquisition, limits socio-economic opportunities, and creates impediments for host communities to get to know their new neighbours.

Another under-tapped source of support is the family “back home”. While they may in some cases have a negative impact on young people’s ability to integrate, they also can be key to ensuring that children feel ‘seen’ and remain resilient in the face of a myriad of obstacles. Both adolescence and migration are periods of time that by definition encourage exploration, a drive for improvement and change, and differentiation from family and from one’s original community. Over time, many adults who were separated from family as children proudly develop a bi-cultural identity.

The report provides an extensive list of recommendations for service providers, child welfare workers, civil society groups, local and national authorities, and the European Commission. It concludes with a call to:

- (a)** stabilise unaccompanied children’s lives through time-bound immigration adjudication processes, settled housing, etc.,
- (b)** prioritise children’s best interests in the immigration and settlement processes,
- (c)** integrate services for unaccompanied children with mainstream service providers, and opt for segregated services only as a last resort,
- (d)** increase opportunities and responsibilities for guardians and volunteers, and expand and ‘professionalise’ guardianship programmes,
- (e)** actively support local communities to find commonalities and strengths with unaccompanied children,
- (f)** simplify access to services – particularly health, education, housing and legal – and clarify pathways and procedures, making sure that children receive simple, clear, realistic information on policies and procedures regarding e.g., financial assistance, services and education,
- (g)** ensure access to primary and secondary education until at least 21 and broaden access to apprenticeships,
- (h)** ensure that unaccompanied children can remain in their communities after age 18, and create a database of unaccompanied children who are about to age out of care and who may ‘disappear’,
- (i)** create public awareness campaigns about migrant and refugee adolescents, highlighting issues they face, and successful integration case studies.

1. Introduction

Children have long moved to Europe for many different reasons: seeking safety, chasing opportunity, or creating links with other countries and societies. But for many migrant and refugee children, the journey to a better and safer life can be a difficult and dangerous one. In 2021, approximately 13.9 per cent of the 166,760 children who claimed asylum for the first time in the EU were unaccompanied, meaning that they travelled without an adult who was by law or custom in the caregiving role. Along the way, such children are at risk of abuse, exploitation and violence.² The impact of these experiences can be devastating and long-lasting.

This report looks at what happens after these children – mostly adolescent boys – arrive at their destination. What does it mean to integrate into a new society when you are a child on your own? How do they face the challenges of building an identity without their families, process the violence and dangers of their journeys, and face a new situation that may not be as welcoming or straightforward as they had expected? How do the receiving communities change? And what can be done to make this a smoother process for everyone?

In 2020, Family for Every Child – working with an advisory group of colleagues from other agencies and research settings – commissioned this work. Over 18 months, a team of researchers ran focus groups with current and former unaccompanied children, caregivers and child protection workers in Lebanon, Greece and Germany, interviewed leading experts across Europe, and reviewed current literature on the integration of these children along the Middle East to Europe corridor.³ Their analysis – as reflected in this report – strives to generate recommendations on both practice and policy. The second phase of the project will draw from this report and the project's Community of Practice to create a toolkit and advocacy platform to improve the integration of unaccompanied children.

As explored below, integration can be a vague and much contested term. While the impact of an unaccompanied child's legal status has significant bearing on their integration, it was beyond the scope of this study to explore the legislation, policies and procedures of each country, which vary widely along this corridor. Furthermore, the study only touches on the economic dimensions of integration as they relate to socio-cultural dimensions. Instead, it focuses on a number of important issues, such as: the devastating psychological impact of delays in determining legal status; the fundamental importance of trust, of both the people and the information being shared; the necessity for the receiving society to be adaptable and willing to focus on the child's strengths and potential; and the need to provide for unaccompanied children within mainstream services. By working through the findings, the researchers redefined integration for unaccompanied children as:

The two-way process of an unaccompanied child settling in a new country on what is anticipated to be a permanent basis, in order to receive protection and care and to find a sense of belonging in all spheres of life, and the related adaptation to the social, economic, cultural and political life of the receiving community.⁴

The report provides a list of recommendations for child welfare workers, civil society groups, local and national authorities, and the European Commission. It concludes with a call to: prioritise children's best interests in the immigration and settlement processes; end segregated services; increase space for guardians and volunteers, and support local communities to be proactive in supporting the integration of unaccompanied children, and in building on their strengths.

2. Background

The documented history of unaccompanied children migrating in concentrated numbers to Europe goes back at least 40 years to the arrival in France of children from former colonies in southeast Asia. However, it is the more recent migrant crisis of 2015-16 that captured global attention. More than 850,000 people flowed out of Turkey through Greece and up the Balkan corridor to destinations in northern Europe; amongst them, thousands of unaccompanied children. They were set on reaching family (many of them seeking relatives that they had not lived with or perhaps even met) and communities that would provide them with opportunities for safety, learning and employment. A child might have fled from his or her country of origin (such as Syria) to a country of refuge (such as Lebanon) and then decide to journey to a destination offering more freedom, security and opportunity (such as Germany or the United Kingdom), transiting through multiple countries on route (such as Greece, North Macedonia, Serbia, or Austria).

However, the closure of the borders by the Balkan countries, and the EU–Turkey agreement in the spring of 2016, resulted in unaccompanied children having to stop and seek asylum where they were. Within weeks, Greece had to shift from temporary accommodation into a more long-term system that included integration strategies for hundreds if not thousands of unaccompanied children. This important entry point into Europe has been grappling with what that means ever since. For example, in March 2022, there were 2,079 unaccompanied children registered with the Greek authorities. Ninety per cent of them were boys and 93 per cent were over the age of 14 (EKKA 2022: 1). In 2021, 600 children were voluntarily relocated from Greece to other EU member states, thus starting the next phase of their integration into European society (UNICEF 2022: 3).

While, in principle, most countries in this study have formal policies on the integration of foreigners – including accompanied and unaccompanied children – many of the latter chose not to settle. There are two main reasons: the pull of better opportunities – education, employment, living with relatives – and the push of societal rejection: “The mixing between the components of society is very few, and the inferior view of the refugee community escalates...”⁵

As the report explores, it is important to achieve a balanced view of the risks and vulnerabilities these children – overwhelmingly older adolescents – face and their agency, strength and ability to grow through their adversities. Indeed, while ‘risk’ is generally interpreted as negative, risk and corresponding accounts can also be interpreted as positive, especially in terms of how young people view danger. This positive interpretation is especially relevant to young people who felt that their journey would also lead them to safety and security (Horning, Jordeno and Savoie 2020: 3). At some level, the children understand that there is risk to their journeys (in Lebanon, they speak of the ‘death boats’) and, at the very least, uncertainty and loneliness when they ‘arrive’. However, children are often faced with an extremely difficult situation such as that described in Lebanon:

“...the intensity of the differences is increasing, so that the refugees are considered to compete with the local community for many businesses. The society sees them as stealing the country’s goods...”⁶

It is therefore understandable that young people are willing to take the great risks of illegal onward movement, suffer months of uncertainty during the asylum process, and grapple with the multi-faceted challenges of integrating into a new community.

3. Methodology

Three different methods were used to research this paper. The starting point was a review of relevant academic and grey literature. Thirty-seven sources were identified;⁷ an additional two highly pertinent documents had been published during the research period and were reviewed during the write-up, as well as updated sources for 2021 figures. When analysed, the articles highlighted 13 distinct themes; these were used for a coding structure, which became the basis of the findings and the report itself.

The second stage was for the lead researcher to conduct 20 semi-structured interviews (see Annex 1) with experts in nine countries.⁸ The interview subjects ranged from academic/independent experts to United Nations specialists, and from government frontline workers to NGO staff. Sampling was purposive and based on key informants' relevant knowledge and experience. An ethical protocol was designed for and used in the study, drawing upon Family for Every Child's Child Safeguarding Policy and Standards for Consultation and Research, and governing confidentiality, consent and data protection. Upon gaining consent, the interviews were recorded and key points transcribed. The interview subjects were guaranteed anonymity, and asked whether they agreed to the use of quotations, as well as to reference being made to their organisations, and whether they wanted to be acknowledged by name in the report. Please see the annexes for research tools.

The final stage was for three members of Family for Every Child to engage children on the move, their caregivers and relevant workers to learn their perspectives on integration challenges and opportunities. Naba'a – Developmental Action Without Borders – is a Lebanese organisation with extensive experience of working directly with children at varying stages of movement. In Greece, METAdrasi is a national NGO working to provide a comprehensive safety net for unaccompanied children. And finally, in Germany, Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen (the Refugee Council of Lower Saxony) works at state level on both legal cases and community-level projects with refugees and migrants with an uncertain right of residence.

Between them, they collected qualitative data through focus group discussions (FGD) with a total of 25 current or recent unaccompanied children, 22 support workers, and 10 caregivers (foster parents and guardians). The national researchers also conducted individual interviews with 30 key informants who are involved in the provision of care to unaccompanied children, community leaders and smugglers.

Findings also emerged through the participatory action research method, Photovoice (Milne and Muir 2020: ch. 17). METAdrasi and Naba'a staff received training on this approach and then conducted sessions with a total of 14 young people. These aimed to:

- a)** actively engage them in discussing their strengths and concerns by using photography as a tool,
- b)** raise community issues via group discussions,
- c)** advocate for the matters that unaccompanied children find important, with the aim of seeing change on matters that affect their well-being. The photographs in this report were taken by Photovoice participants.



Drawing exercise with Naba'a

As with any piece of research – particularly one as complex as this – there were a number of limitations. The most significant was the COVID-19 pandemic which curtailed meetings, prevented face-to-face training, delayed stages of the research, and at times, led to a sense of uncertainty. The national research teams proved to be highly adaptable in their ways of working. While initially the project had hoped to look at the preparation for return (often through deportation) and reintegration in the country of origin, as well as integration in Europe, the former topics did not emerge in the discussions with children and practitioners. Thus, the report focuses only on the integration of unaccompanied children in the European countries where they choose to (or circumstances dictate that they) settle. It should also be noted that the research – whether the literature review or discussions – can only be done with unaccompanied children (or former unaccompanied children, now young adults) who wish to be identified as such; therefore, it is very difficult to fully grasp what leads some children to go ‘underground’, leaving us with gaps in our knowledge. Finally, the report tries to balance the fact that all the FGD and Photovoice findings were done by service providers who the unaccompanied children, guardians, etc. might know, with the fact that independent academic (and grey) literature tended to be more critical of workers’ skills and attitudes.

4. Key concepts

See Annex 2 for a list of definitions used during the research.

4.1. Children on the move

While the concept of ‘children on the move’ is very broad,⁹ for the purpose of this research, the focus was on unaccompanied children who are moving, voluntarily or involuntarily, into and through Europe (particularly west and central Europe). Separated children – i.e. those who travel with relatives who are not their usual/legal caregivers – are neither well-researched in Europe (and thus were rarely mentioned in the literature review) nor formed a significant, differentiated component of the various focus groups undertaken in the three countries.

This conceptualisation of ‘children on the move’ allowed the research to include children who were trafficked, migrated, seeking asylum or otherwise displaced. Their tremendous diversity is often underestimated in public discourse and government policies (Kauhenen and Kaukko 2020: 878); this diversity covers not only their age and gender, but their ethnicity, level of abilities, religion, sexual orientation, level of schooling, etc. On top of these factors are the cumulative reasons why they left their homes, what they have experienced during their journeys, and whether they are arriving to a specific person in Europe.

The legal classifications of this group of children vary across the corridor but often differentiate unaccompanied refugee minors (who have the right to remain) from unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors (who do not yet have the right to remain). In some countries, it includes those who were not found to be refugees but have either indefinite leave to remain or permission to remain until 18 years of age. At that point, their ‘suitability’ is assessed based on successful integration (see section 4.2 below).

While many observers tend to frame children on the move as either resilient or vulnerable, they embody – like any other child or adolescent – a mixture of both. This can be a ‘double-edged risk’ for unaccompanied refugee children who straddle the line between childhood and adulthood. Refugee children are seen as ‘at risk’ because of their trauma. However, children who migrate without guardians and who seek asylum also challenge the idyllic notions of childhood and the fragility of youth (see Ni Laoire et al. 2010).

The argument is that these children managed to get ‘here’, and therefore do not need much help to find employment and integrate. Research by Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen in Germany indicates that

“the forced strategies to survive on their own that young unaccompanied refugees developed during their flight ‘are equated with independence in the sense of everyday practical skills and thus associated with supposedly lower needs and correspondingly lower benefits are justified.”

(Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen 2022: 7)

In Sweden, Narbutaite Aflaki and Freise (2021:11) found that “In fact, in 2016, the Swedish government undertook ‘a conceptual and legal re-classification of unaccompanied children – especially those aged 16 and above – as a less needy group’. The consequence was a restriction of their entitlements to housing with regular staff and care.”

One source puts forward that these children are “resilient, but they lacked agency in many respects due to age and the constraints and dangers of being young, unaccompanied asylum seekers”. (Horning et al. 2020: 10). As is typical for an adolescent and for someone starting life in a new setting, they want agency now:

“...they are most eager to improve their situation and have knowledge and expertise to contribute. It has long been recognised that children and youth can and want to effectively participate in issues affecting themselves, and that their perspectives often lead to significant and positive policy changes.”

(UNHCR, UNICEF and IRC 2017: 20)

Key informants stressed that children on the move dislike being depicted as victims or passive and their message is to “save them from people trying to save them”,¹⁰ and that they want a chance to thrive and give back to society.¹¹

It should also be noted that many young adults who migrated alone as children continue to feel comfortable moving around. A Slovenian worker shared that amongst those who choose to stay, once they have status, they go to visit relatives elsewhere in Europe; however, they return to Slovenia because they found the other country had a fairly similar way of life and here, they already understood the language, had some friends – and a future.¹² In another example of travel, according to the organisation Safe Passage in Greece, some former unaccompanied children return there for the weather, culture and informality of the economy.

Thus, in this report, the term ‘unaccompanied child’ is used for any child who is moving into or through Europe without his or her parent or usual caregiver.

4.2 Integration

Integration – particularly what constitutes successful integration – is a complex and much debated concept across Europe and beyond. It raises three fundamental questions about power.

1. Who gets to define integration?
2. Who gets to decide how to measure successful integration?
3. Who measures any individual against those benchmarks?

The International Organization for Migration defines integration as:

The two-way process of mutual adaptation between migrants and the societies in which they live, whereby migrants are incorporated into the social, economic, cultural and political life of the receiving community. It entails a set of joint responsibilities for migrants and communities, and incorporates other related notions such as social inclusion and social cohesion.

It also speaks of “respect for a core set of values that bind migrants and receiving communities in a common purpose”.¹³

On a more personal level, integration is often described as a feeling of belonging somewhere, of having made a “successful transition from a time of deep vulnerability to a period of relative coherence and calm after the storm” (Moberg Stephenson and Källström 2020: 742).

“The endpoints of journeys, as they are experienced by migrants, often have less to do with migrants’ arrival in a particular place, and more with a growing sense of belonging, through periods of integration in their host society or identity formation. Those who do not experience a sense of belonging even after reaching their intended destination country may not perceive themselves to have ‘arrived’ anywhere in any meaningful sense.”

(Mishra, Digidiki and Winch 2020: 2)

The voices of unaccompanied children in the FGD and literature review are very clear about the internal tension they live between belonging to the new society and holding on to their cultural identities. It is a long process to balance their family’s expectations with the realities in their new home.

According to METAdrasi, the children’s ideas of integration stress peace, respect, belonging, and a future of satisfying work.



“Our modern society is depicted in this image where we can see various nationalities all together. All live together in respect with no arguments. Our society should be like this, we should feel safe.”

– Participant in METAdrasi’s Photovoice project (METAdrasi 2022: 26)

The specific measurements that are used to assess ‘successful integration’ tend to be ‘performative’: attends school, has a job, volunteers, takes language classes, etc. Furthermore, the exact definitions of ‘successful schooling’, etc. are unclear. This creates a norm that barely fits the reality and struggles of unaccompanied children and places the burden of integration solely with refugees and migrants. This is particularly the case for those who do not have long-term leave to remain:

“so-called training tolerations or a residence permit via a hardship claim... allow ‘well-integrated’ young people to obtain the opportunity to stay if they are currently in an apprenticeship or provide the so-called ‘integration achievements’. These achievements include things like successful school attendance for four years or an acquired degree and a ‘positive integration prognosis’”

(Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen 2022: 19)

Instead, unaccompanied children want their feelings of belonging to be valued over their performance as ‘model citizens’.¹⁴ They want to be well-established on a track that leads to university and/or a job, to have family and have the latitude to achieve their goals.¹⁵ To achieve these goals requires services and systems which match one’s personal development trajectory.

The final question was on who gets to measure the achievements of the individual; this line of inquiry is under-examined in the literature. Certainly, immigration officials play the decisive role for hardship (leave to remain) cases. Often, case workers are asked to provide information on school attendance, links with the majority community, general attitude, etc.

All of these questions focus on the child; however, as we have seen, the IOM definition of integration stresses its two-way nature. Therefore, a broader set of questions needs to be considered.

- Are care arrangements and other services of the same quality as for other children in the territory? In positive developments, this has become the stated benchmark in Ireland and, for younger children, in Sweden. In Germany, there have been similar legal rulings recently, which are “a ray of hope among the social codes” (Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen 2022: 8).
- Has the host society adopted an open and inclusive approach to cultural diversity? Is this implemented in policy and practice at the levels of schools, community projects, housing, employment opportunities? Has there been proactive, effective use of the media to mitigate negative stereotypes?¹⁶
- While integration happens locally, what happens at other levels? Is there effective delegation of authority? Do national social and asylum policies and budget allocations promote the smooth, successful integration of unaccompanied children? Do they limit uncertainty and repeated moves? Do they provide clear, supported opportunities for children to express themselves and reclaim their agency?

It must be noted that some children have no intention of integrating into a new community at this stage in their lives. They wish to cycle from country to country with a group of national peers, working in the informal economy and sending money back to family members (and to pay off smugglers or traffickers). In these cases, while they are still entitled to services, it is not effective to use an 'integration' lens.

Finally, success can be seen in the fact that the protection of children on the move in Europe and their 'integration' are being studied and discussed,¹⁷ good practices are being documented, and lessons shared across borders. For too long, the language has been about the 'challenge' of integrating unaccompanied children, instead of the opportunity that such integration provides for the growth of societies.

The working definition of 'integration' for this research was:

The process of a separated child settling in a new location on what is anticipated to be a permanent basis, in order to receive protection and care and to find a sense of belonging in all spheres of life (e.g., legal, socio-economic).

It was adapted from global guidelines on the reintegration of unaccompanied children. However, it is clear from the evidence above that there needs to be a clear acknowledgement of the mutual effort that is required for 'success'.

5. Legal frameworks, systems and services

5.1 Legal frameworks and status

It is understood that the process of identifying and working to protect an unaccompanied child requires a number of formal systems to engage: education, social services, health, immigration, etc., and that these systems have both advantages and disadvantages. They can allow for the generation of expertise, as well as – with standard operating procedures – a certain measure of speed. Of course, to achieve both does require proper training and retention of staff.

Child protection vs immigration systems: contradiction and complexity

In jurisdiction after jurisdiction across the Eastern Mediterranean corridor, it is clear that unaccompanied children are caught between conflicting administrative systems: child welfare/protection and immigration/asylum. The latter – particularly asylum – is defined by an official designation in a fixed moment of time, whereas the childhood and integration of unaccompanied children are by definition journeys, stories, narratives.

Research for this project indicates that – at times – immigration concerns not only trump child protection concerns but also daily life, circumscribing unaccompanied children and young people's accommodation options, access to secondary healthcare, privacy,¹⁸ etc. One respondent in Serbia went so far as to suggest that the national immigration policy framework is “We are here to help you not be here” and that the monitoring and tracking of unaccompanied children by immigration was purposefully weak. In such an operating climate, “[T]here isn't an incentive for national child protection systems to account for these children.”¹⁹

Most jurisdictions surveyed, however, are trying to balance this equation, which is particularly difficult when one set of policies is usually set at a national level and the other at the local level. In a positive development, Scottish authorities have ruled that while immigration concerns are ‘primary’, the best interests of the child are ‘paramount’.²⁰ Some nations – such as Germany – have immigration mechanisms which allow children without leave to remain to prove that they are well-settled and productive as they turn 18. Key informants reported that this policy can act as an incentive to concentrate on language acquisition, schooling and making friends in their new society.

Fundamentally, it is crucial that local authorities provide unaccompanied children with access to effective protection immediately and holistically, even when they are in transit to other European countries. However, research respondents – both children and adults – and the wider literature indicated that the complexity of the various asylum and child protection systems impeded integration. Studies on post-migratory stress have shown that “unaccompanied refugee children struggle because of the difficulty to cope with new rules and regulations and the nightmare of navigating a ‘maze of systems’” (Neag 2019: 259). UNICEF France (2021: 12) concluded that “asylum and family reunification procedures are too complicated to be effective.”²¹ Even something as fundamental as health care, which for unaccompanied children in France includes both complementary insurance and primary

access, has “a high non-take up of services because the healthcare system is complex and difficult to navigate” (Guerra and Brindle 2017: 18).

The asylum system is so complex that one respondent with a background in English law argued that it is as if it was designed to put people off from claiming asylum or regularisation.²² They can certainly face disheartening prospects: for instance, unaccompanied refugee children who arrived in Sweden from 2015 often had to wait years for their asylum interviews and decisions. The Migration Board implemented new ways of interpreting asylum laws, placing the burden of proof of identity on the child and arbitrarily changing the age of the refugees to be older than they claimed to be, thus allowing easier deportation (Horning et al. 2020: 3). Indeed, when only three or four unaccompanied children received refugee status in Serbia between 2016 and 2020, and all came through the NGO-run migrant shelters, it is understandable to question the notion of justice in international protection.²³

Another recurring complaint was that legal decisions and service entitlements are rarely explained and decision-makers are faceless authorities, as one German service provider explained.²⁴

“The young person comes to us and the first person he or she knows are the caregivers. They don’t know the bureaucracy around them yet. [...] When [the bureaucracy] is then let loose on our young people, you notice that there is a bit of panic.”

(Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen 2022: 9)

In fact, at the heart of the asylum system lies a clash of cultures for many children. They are required to prove themselves by producing various documents, as countries in western Europe believe that “paper records reflect the reality”. And yet many of them have not grown up in such a system.²⁵ Even when they do have relevant paperwork, these adolescents are tasked with accessing it from their home country within very strict time limits, something even an adult struggles with. Successfully navigating this maze comes from finding an individual who will be your ‘bridge’. One young person explained how overwhelming he had found his new life in Germany:

“To come to Germany for the first time at the beginning, everything is still new. The language is difficult, the culture is difficult, you have to integrate and the entire system is different. You have no prior knowledge of it and you don’t know exactly whether you could stay here or not. It’s all hard to plan. You just have zero idea, without support it’s impossible.”

(Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen 2022: 9)

Many respondents felt that there was a lack of coordination between actors within a country, let alone across borders. This can lead to significant discrepancies in legislation and policies – and in their application (Narbutaite Aflaki and Freise 2021: 7):

“Socio-economic factors and municipal tax revenues as well as the individual priorities and problem diagnoses of the youth welfare offices have led to wide regional disparities [in Germany]. For instance, there are major differences concerning the quality and number of shelter homes and educational assistance.”

In such a context, it is very understandable that a newcomer adolescent would move around seeking the best option for themselves, only settling when they feel that they have found it.

Immigration systems

As explained in the introduction, it was beyond the scope of this project to analyse the asylum, immigration and other legislation and regulations that impact an unaccompanied child's integration process in each country along the Middle East–Europe corridor. However, in every country, a child's immigration status was one of the most important factors affecting their emotional well-being, their access to services, and their commitment to the integration process itself. It was also an important factor in some service providers' willingness to engage, especially in the Balkan countries. Two interconnected issues warrant greater exploration: the length of the legal process and its opaque, destabilising omnipresence in a child's life.

Length of immigration process

It is clear from the literature review, expert interviews and research project with current and former unaccompanied children that long asylum processes hinder a child's integration. As one respondent said, "How can a child feel at ease when they don't know what their future holds?"²⁶ How can they feel that they belong? A recent study in Sweden determined that unaccompanied children are up to nine times more likely to commit suicide than Swedish-born peers and that – counter to general discourse – the attempts primarily occur not on rejection of their asylum claim but after living in immigration limbo for over a year (Mittendorfer-Rutz, Hagström and Hollander 2019). It should be noted that days and months can be long for children and adolescents, and that work slowdowns due to COVID-19 have delayed asylum processes and accommodation decisions even further.

Several articles and respondents spoke to the challenges of implementing the Dublin III regulation and felt that this was owing to a lack of financial and human resources.²⁷ The consequences of the delays in identifying and moving to the country where someone would settle led to diminished trust in authorities, lack of effort to integrate locally, and months of childhood slipping by in uncertainty. This led some children to undertake illegal onward movement.

Unaccompanied girls and boys speak with great eloquence on the impacts their precarious status has on their lives, when immigration laws, regulations and administrative practices change constantly, altering procedures completely from one day to another.

"We think all the time about this and it brings a lot of stress; you can be rejected and you may have to leave and have no money."

(18-year-old Afghan woman, METAdrasi 2022: 22)

This lack of certainty means that they cannot properly settle, as described by one young man in the focus group discussions carried out in Germany:

"I couldn't plan my future and I didn't know whether I could stay here in Germany or not. [...] If you know very concretely: OK, I'll stay in Germany, then you can also plan. In three years, five years I'll do an apprenticeship, then I'll work or I'll study. But if you don't know yet or you don't have a residence permit, then you're still desperate, so you try to do some planning, but you're not 100 per cent motivated to do it."

(Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen 2022: 34)

One of the impacts is that the children may not feel confident enough in their immigration status (or the information – in its translated form – that they have received) to stand up for their rights in other areas of their lives. The way that this affected children in Sweden is described by Horning et al. (2020: 21).

“They were reluctant to complain about Sweden or advocate for themselves or other UMRs [unaccompanied minor refugees] when addressing recent policies. We quickly realized that young people in this precarious position were unable to register more threats or they were too afraid to complain about harmful or discriminatory policies or the violence that occurred so close to the asylum-centres. In their need for safety and due to their young age, they did not have much agency or self-advocacy in terms of policies that directly influenced their lives. [This self-protective approach is understandable when] ... the one UMR who complained was consistently viewed as a ‘problem’ by Swedish authorities and supposed helpers. UMRs’ self-advocacy can be interpreted as dangerous...”

It is not just the physical or administrative acts of violence and rupture that impede a child’s smooth integration pathway but the awareness of the structures and policies that enable them.

“The psychological strain caused by deportations does not just arise when a deportation has actually been announced or is imminent, but merely from the fact that the option theoretically exists. This trend is reinforced by the development of increasing revocation and withdrawal procedures... [where] asylum procedures that have already been decided positively are re-examined once the person reaches the age of majority.”

(Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen 2022: 20)

These can be summed up as the ‘limbo years’ – where a child has a document that permits residency until age 18 and, understandably, thinks “That’s enough for now; who knows what the future brings and if I actually need to integrate.” If this level of insecurity about one’s legal status is coupled with repeated relocations for housing or services, then it is understandable that “new beginnings feel like false starts”.²⁸ In addition, these false systems “create a huge extra expense that is in no one’s interest”.²⁹

Alternative care system

Many unaccompanied children who move along this corridor would like to reunite with close or extended family members in Europe. However, the various national family reunification processes remain ponderous and opaque, allowing for many months of a child’s life to pass without reunification being prioritised. For example, in Slovenia, one 12 or 13-year-old waited patiently to be reunified with his mother in France; eventually, he used smugglers and three days later reported back to his case workers that he was living with her.³⁰ The respondent in Serbia reported just one successful family reunification case in three years.³¹ There has clearly been no major investment from the EU states in strengthening the process and services.

In Europe, kinship care is a very common model of support for this group of children, as a large number have extended family whom they are trying to join. The research found no literature

concerning the pressures on ‘kin’ to accommodate their young relatives, with whom they may never have lived. And yet, interview subjects in England and Germany knew of ‘a lot’ of relationship breakdowns.³² It appears that the national authorities do not keep such data.

In the case of England, members of an unaccompanied child’s extended family may have to show that they have the financial means to support them. However, social services are not obliged to do an assessment of the home/family (and this is certainly not standardised across the country). In contrast with local children, there is little preparation of the child or relatives for the ‘reunification’. One new arrival felt belittled as his urban cousins who “make me feel like I am from a village”.³³ An unaccompanied child may have become more independent and mature than a typical age mate; they may have become more worldly, and yet many diaspora populations are known to be more conservative and religiously observant. The new child may be resented by members of his or her new household; for example, a Muslim aunt or cousin may now have to wear a head scarf in her own house because a teenage boy from the extended family has arrived. Thus, there is a clear need to honestly prepare the various relatives and for culturally-sensitive case workers to actively monitor the arrangements with visits, calls and texts over the first year.

In England, an unaccompanied child who is reunified with relatives does not receive legal advice because it is deemed that a family’s income will cover it. Thus, it is better financially to move into state care, receive services for unaccompanied children, and only visit one’s relatives. This is, understandably, perceived as a burden by the local authorities who are responsible for policies on housing and care services, but not legal support.³⁴ Similarly in Germany, unaccompanied children need to continue to have the right to access additional or specialised supports post-arrival and to be automatically registered for them.³⁵

Aging out of the system

“And then there is a rupture and, so to speak, a complete cessation of any support structures.”

(Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen 2022: 13)

Many of the challenges that an unaccompanied adolescent faces when aging out of the child protection system (usually at age 18) are those of a local peer. However, having arrived at 16 or 17, many unaccompanied adolescents have only just started to access child welfare services; many also have special needs (such as learning a new language, catching up on their education, or healing from traumatic events). In many countries in the corridor, on reaching adulthood, they are “no longer able to benefit from subsidised shelter, enrolment in reception classes, customised training and the support from a legal guardian. These young adults are very often unqualified, not in education, employment or training, and have higher chances of developing protracted dependence on social welfare” (Guerra and Brindle 2017: 32). The main additional factor is, of course, that they age out of an immigration status and enter the adult system, which can have significant consequences as it tends to be ‘tougher’. Let us examine each of these challenges in turn.

Across Europe, social services ministries agree that it is important to guarantee an aftercare package to former unaccompanied children to support their transition to adulthood. It has been noted that the transition to independent life can be successful, but it takes several years and depends on the successful coordination of all stakeholders involved (Guerra and Brindle 2017: 31). In promising

developments, several countries have demonstrated flexibility about services for this group of young adults:

- Germany and the Netherlands transition these youth to new services over a three-year period.
- A recent English law required children who are looked after by the state to be supported until they turn 25. However, unaccompanied children turning 18, who have not yet received a response from the Home Office, cannot claim state benefits.
- In Romania, this group can continue to receive some specialised support until age 26 if they are in full-time education.
- In Ireland, those who have been granted refugee status can stay with their foster families if they are in full-time education (Guerra and Brindle 2017: 30).
- When the Government of Turkey was unable to extend services to unaccompanied children on turning 18, UNHCR was sometimes able to assist individuals.³⁶

There have also been a number of innovative approaches to strengthening social ties at this important milestone in a young adult's life. In Belgium, CURANT is a project that places local young volunteers for six months as housemates for small groups of former unaccompanied children. In Germany, one jurisdiction has created a network of volunteer 'grandparents' for this young population of newcomers.

However, many challenges remain. For example, even amongst the Nordic countries – which are known for a high level of care, as well as rigour in learning from policies and programming – there is a lack of coordination of the 'aging out' process for this population (Rehn-Mendoza 2020: 35). There are also other examples of challenges:

- In Ireland and Sweden, turning 18 usually triggers the transfer from children's services to adult or migration services, which in turn may require moving to another part of the country where reception centres for adults are located. "[There] is a growing concern because many young people... are pulled out of their education programmes, social networks and communities, thus jeopardising the integration efforts made until then. In most cases, this leads to them not continuing education or losing contact with their child protection social workers or guardians" (Guerra and Brindle 2017: 30).
- In Germany, turning 18 means young people moving out of "their municipally arranged youth housing into state-run adult facilities, often large barracks, where they are cut off from rights to care, social assistance and legal representation. Moreover, as they often have to leave the municipality, the youngsters lose their social network and place in school. To avoid this, many choose to stay in their municipality of residence, but then lose all economic support entitlements, thereby creating new social problems for municipalities" (Narbutaite Aflaki and Freise 2021: 12).
- In Serbia, unaccompanied children who are not in school at 18 will be removed from their shelter and sent to the adult and family refugee camp; child protection staff report a lot of regression at this stage.³⁷

In terms of changes to one's immigration status, as we have seen, some jurisdictions will move to deport 18-year-olds who have not attained refugee status. One Norwegian study ascertained that half of Afghan boys disappear before they turn 18 to prevent deportation (Guerra and Brindle 2017: 29). In England, one not only loses access to social services, but also the right to family reunification rights. In fact, some practitioners in England and Sweden felt that the government sometimes purposefully drags out the asylum process, in order for complicated or 'undesirable' cases to age out.³⁸

5.2 Service delivery and service providers

The reception and integration of unaccompanied children – especially during the large-scale movement in 2015/16 – challenged a number of aspects of the existing models of service delivery.

The first was the provision of social services by the state. Some children struggled to feel loved when surrounded by people working in the state (or NGO) system:

“...these young people lived among official relationships. Legal guardians and staff at their living units became close, yet these relationships remained professional. Some of the children and youth in the studies described how their needs as children, in particular, the need for reciprocal care, love and support, were not recognized by the staff at the living units, the legal guardians, teachers or other officials in their lives.”

(Kauhenen and Kaukko 2020: 878)

In fact, ‘care arrangements’ often stopped at adequate shelter or accommodation. “Too often shelter or accommodation is mistakenly used as a synonym for care arrangements, while social and psychological components (in the form of mental health and psychosocial support... education, health services) are neglected” (UNHCR, UNICEF and IRC 2017: 25). While this may also be accurate for nationals who are in state care, unaccompanied children tend to have far fewer relatives, old friends or neighbours who continue to stay in touch and provide help and hope.

In many countries, extensive volunteer networks have sprung up to provide a variety of services for unaccompanied children, including legal guardianship. In some locations, it proved to be an opportunity to revitalise community service organisations and establish innovative partnerships. For example, over 200 children were assisted “in establishing long-term social contacts with volunteering Swedish families and were offered prompt and continuous complementary psychological counselling, tailored on-the-job practice opportunities and labour-market training as well as leisure-time activities allowing them to establish contacts with civil society associations. Trust-based partnership relations even allowed testing of a new specialized form of housing for children with greater psycho-social care needs” (Narbutaite Aflaki and Freise 2021: 15).

These efforts often gave children the sense that people truly wanted to meet them, and not just as part of their job (Narbutaite Aflaki and Freise 2021: 14). However, some social service workers felt the institutionalising of voluntarism was made to compensate for weakened public sector capacities, or perhaps even lack of responsibility, and that it led to a general lowering of quality (Narbutaite Aflaki and Freise 2021: 14). Whether the role is paid for or not, children want and need to have that ‘one caring adult’.

The other main challenge was whether to organise specialised or integrated services. Along the migratory corridor, different approaches were taken to education; for example, in Slovenia, there was a separate, but co-housed, school for unaccompanied children, where language and socialisation were the initial priorities. Owing to the small numbers of children seeking to integrate locally, there was the possibility for one-on-one or small group learning. In larger European cities, unaccompanied children were sent to separate schools for adapted curriculum and pedagogical approaches (see section on education and employment). The majority of feedback from these students (whether in the FGD or literature review) was that they were disappointed in being outside of mainstream schooling. They found it hard to make friends with local youth, learn the language, and feel accepted.

The provision of mental health services presents a similar challenge. When mental health provision is already stretched, particularly for adolescents, it is difficult to find practitioners and translators who can work well with this population. The usual model is for highly specialised centres of service. However, given the stigmatisation of mental illness in most cultures, research shows that a better model for most refugee communities is community-based and for programmes to be, as far as possible, run through well-trained peer support (Rehn-Mendoz 2020: 32).

In some countries, integration and access to services for refugees are particularly difficult. Naba'a reported that, in Lebanon, integration is

“very difficult and that the prospects for children on the move are bleak. Not only is there a lack of constitutional protections for refugees, but basic needs are not being met, and children and families face obstacles to employment and economic opportunities, social security and health care. Refugees are subject to different kinds of discrimination, are barred from civic engagement and many lack any sense of belonging in the country, which is a fundamental aspect of integration. In the absence of state services and financial support, NGOs are unable to facilitate integration for children and their families.”

(Naba'a 2022: 10)

Trusted information and translation

At home and during their journey, it is smugglers who provide the main source of information for many children. However, that information is often flawed: “Children reported having received information in their country of origin and from smugglers about the rules relating to family reunification in host states that they later discovered to be inaccurate” (McGovern and Devine 2016: 10). Understandably, they expressed frustration over the disparity of information they had received at different stages of their journey (McGovern and Devine 2016: 8).

Upon arrival in the new country, public servants in different capacities (police officers, social workers, guardians, educators) and private actors (aid workers and NGO workers) provided the newcomers with information. However, UNICEF France (2021) concluded that once they had access to information, it was often partial and contradictory.³⁹ Mishra et al. (2020: 4) found that:

“When it [information] did not resonate with what they actually experienced, [the children] became distrustful of bureaucratic actors. This often happened when youth asked staff what was going to happen to them. Given the shifting policies..., the sheer number of independent NGOs involved and negotiations between them and the Greek government, and the scarcity of children’s shelters, it was not possible for staff to accurately answer questions about youths’ futures. However, youths perceived NGO staff as authorities who were responsible for their lives in this new environment, rather than well-meaning actors employed by separate entities who were working with incomplete information. As a result, when youths’ perspectives contradicted what staff said, staff were perceived to be lying.”

Unaccompanied children also received information through interpreters who did not speak their native language or a common language but only a similar language, which is obviously a barrier to good communication. In fact, the information that youth received from interpreters was often of limited quality, as the interpreters had not been trained for the kinds of unscripted conversations that the children wanted. Furthermore, the information they received from interpreters was limited by the questions that they thought to ask (Mishra et al. 2020: 4).

Service providers

It is difficult to draw findings from such a range of situations in which frontline workers along the Middle East–Europe migration corridor support unaccompanied children. This section focuses on countries that are known to have low rates of integration and examines what service providers might do to increase the children’s consideration of staying and settling. This is particularly important as some respondents acknowledged that attitudes both in the wider society and amongst service providers can be “Why bother as they will leave?”⁴⁰ And some professionals refuse to provide services because of the amount of paperwork.⁴¹ One researcher in the Balkans concluded that there is a level of resentment felt by some child welfare practitioners, as they “consider the reception of these minors a responsibility of the European migratory policies, not of the local authorities for the protection of the [sic] childhood. They also point out that the profiles of vulnerable native children are set apart from these resources more often, given the scarcity of places...” (Gimeno-Monterde and Gutierrez-Sanchez 2019: 38).

The question then becomes: “When should integration efforts start?” To which the answer seems to be: from the first instance.

While acknowledging that the window for influencing a child’s decision to stay is very small, it is possible to offer information and guidance about onward dangers, as well as to present clear options for staying for a shorter or longer period. To do that effectively, one must understand what motivates these children (particularly migrant, adolescent boys)⁴² and what their experiences have been, and be able to build trust with them very quickly. It is clearly no easy task and does not fit every profile of worker; however, cultural mediators (see section 7.3 below) can be crucial at this point of the migration journey. To approach each newly identified unaccompanied child as an individual who may stay and integrate also requires a high level of human resources⁴³ at a time when they may well be overstretched and needing to rely on volunteers, new hires, retirees, etc. Section 7.3 examines the different traits and supports that a caseworker needs for high quality work. As one key informant articulated, there is a need to see the child as an individual and not just provide a tickbox of services. The worker’s and wider community’s awareness of needing to create space for integration is tied to seeing the child’s strengths and not just their risks and potential to depart.⁴⁴

6. Emotional well-being and mental health

It can be argued that the research in Europe on the mental and emotional well-being of this group of children reflects an either/or mindset that limits understanding. On the one hand, given the cumulative nature of the hardships that contributed to their decision to leave their homes and families, as well as the difficulties and tragedies on route, and setbacks on arrival, unaccompanied children generally function well and adjust long-term (even those diagnosed with a mental disorder). Alongside this, there is the fact that rates of depression and anxiety, as well as suicide, are high in this group. These two realities co-exist and the young people want the ‘helpers’ to better understand that fact, as one 20-year-old explained (Brook and Ottemöller 2020: 8):

“I think caregivers should not ask so deeply about how we have experienced events from the past. The person who has fled is grieving, he just arrived. Instead of asking about the past, teach us about how society works. Instead of asking about the journey here and experiences in our home country, talk about something else. For example, our futures!”

6.1 Identity and integration

Repeatedly in the literature, unaccompanied children expressed their desire to be accepted as the nuanced, multi-faceted individuals they are, and not limited by the seemingly faceless but shameful concept of ‘refugee’. Adolescents (and young people) wish to study and contribute to society, and not feel as if they are a drain. One respondent, however, spoke of how being constantly asked about their status – as opposed to their present life and hopes for the future – has a detrimental psychological impact; it is as if they must constantly justify their existence to strangers. Ironically, many unaccompanied children feel that in fact they are waiting for a nameless bureaucrat to validate their existence.⁴⁵ Indeed, this state of limbo is perhaps the most harmful factor to an adolescent’s emotional well-being and sense of self. The research in Lebanon (Naba’a 2022: 12) found that “many refugees feel isolated, with discrimination being a huge barrier to integration. One young person described the social marginalisation they experience: ‘We become victims of social marginalisation and face difficulties and restrictions in accessing education, employment, social protection and other basic rights.’”

Both adolescence and migration are periods of time that by definition encourage exploration, a drive for improvement and change, and differentiation from family and one’s original community. Over time, many adults who were separated from family as children proudly develop a bi-cultural identity.

Deciding that one ‘has arrived’ and determining that one is safe and stable enough to start to invest in people and places is not a decision to be taken lightly. It occurs through a combination of trust (such as information on the dangers ahead), motivations, and an understanding of opportunities (such as language acquisition and schooling).

Whether the child had planned to be in the location they ended up in along this corridor is an important factor. Generally, for this population, one can speak of transit and destination countries, and those that are both:

- **Transit countries:** Lebanon, Turkey, Greece, Balkans (Serbia, Slovenia, etc.)
- **Mixed destination:** France
- **Destination:** UK, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark – though as explored below, there can be multiple voluntary and involuntary moves within a ‘destination country’.

The young people can be extremely driven to arrive at their sought-after destination: “Even those who seem to be doing well still travel onwards at the earliest opportunity.”⁴⁶ In Sweden, Gimeno-Monterde and Gutierrez-Sanchez (2019: 38) reported that they may “flee from the observation and diagnostic centres, sometimes in just a few hours... Among the possible causes, they indicate the presence of relatives in that same region, as well as the exploitation networks and criminal groups that capture some very vulnerable profiles.”

The first hurdle that arises in the integration process for unaccompanied children is usually age assessment, which becomes a constant questioning of their legitimacy. For example, after identification in Turkey, UAM are registered with accommodation (and undergo testing for sexually transmitted infections and drugs) and then are taken straight to the juvenile police for age assessment. It may leave them asking: “How long are we going to be here? What’s the next test?”

The next hurdle may be to find settled accommodation- in any community there is often a limited supply of empty housing. Research by Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen (2022: 15) found that Germany allocates where a child will live based on how many people each state has taken and where beds are available:

“It is hardly possible for unaccompanied children to guard their rights in the process of allocation and the allocation does not respect child safeguarding. Although it is legally stipulated to do so, the allocation law does not take into consideration the networks that unaccompanied children might have in certain places in Germany. Numbers calculated by the federal government show that 23% of [unaccompanied and separated children] leave the welfare system before being allocated [to accommodation], mostly to make their way to their relatives or friends on their own.”

Dislocation and multiple moves are common in the destination country. A sixteen-year-old boy described his experiences on arriving in France (McGovern and Devine 2016: 9):

“The first day... I lived in the street for a week. I was found by the Red Cross and then I was put in a shelter and I had some age assessment interviews and then I was driven to a hotel. I spent a month in another town then I was sent to another association; now I live in an apartment with other children.”

Relocations, school changes and changes among legal guardians and social workers are shamefully frequent. Kauhenen and Kaukko (2020: 879) found that:

“Additionally, some young people must go through various procedures of first being denied asylum and later given it or with age disputes resulting in being recognized as a child or being defined as an adult. All these changes constrain possibilities for experiencing stable, trusting relationships. This may result in the loss of motivation to study or plan for the future, as the future remains uncertain.”

It is common for children to be unable to differentiate between government and NGO workers, and to feel disappointment in both actors. Mishra et al. (2020: 7) found that:

“Despite the fact that youth were legally recognised as asylum seekers or asylees in Greece and given a certain set of rights, they may not have perceived the attitudes of NGO staff to be meaningfully different from the hostile or neglectful state institutions they experienced during their clandestine journeys. Consequently, they may not have felt that their journeys had ended, and thus they had little to lose by once again becoming irregular in an effort to move forward in Europe to find a more meaningful life.”

For some, their minds are made up before they speak with child protection workers in what they see as a transit country; others – as described below – can hear new information once they rest, especially if the immigration process drags on and delays them.

Unaccompanied children need space and time

“Sometimes we just need time to forget what we went through before talking about it.”

(14 year old, in McGovern and Devine 2016: 15)

One frontline worker who works with children in supported independent living (SIL), quoted by METAdrasi (2022: 21), stressed that children “who enter [SIL] are already exhausted and mentally affected due to their past experiences, journeys and reception conditions in Greece”. METAdrasi practitioners felt that those who had been living in Greece for years were seeing the possibility of remaining in a more positive light than the newcomers.

Workers spoke of how they feel they are giving false hope when setting up test appointments, registering children for school, taking them to see immigration officials, etc. In the research carried out in Germany, one worker described how difficult this can be (Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen 2022: 19).

“Sometimes it already starts when young people come here to Germany and you can actually say [...] right from the beginning: ‘Well, your prospects of staying here are poor. So you probably won’t get a residence permit’, and then you just start and already build up this pressure, because you then say: ‘Okay, you just have to go via the integration track, after finishing school, vocational training and so on.’ And I notice myself that this also puts additional pressure on the young people and that you actually should say, ‘Man, they’re coming

here to Germany: the first thing they really have to do is learn the language, and you can't expect them to be just as fast as the kids here in Germany.' But they have the feeling that this is expected of them, and then they also expect it of themselves, and that definitely puts a lot of pressure on them."

It is the role of the adult to create a safe environment in which these children – most of whom have experienced a lot and at a young age- can process their past, present and futures. Such environments should provide “places where their systems can rest.”⁴⁷ It is important to take into account the time this takes, and that children should not be pressured to talk about difficult experiences when they are not ready: “Once they feel safe, they can unravel things.”⁴⁸ In Germany, one young focus group participant described how a sense of security is the very first condition for them to be able to think and learn and to simply be able to function (Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen 2022: 21).

“With us, I think what is very important is security. If you feel secure, then you can learn better, think better and work better. But if you don't, and there's no security, you can't work, you can't learn, you can't do anything. That's why security is very important for us. And we also feel better in Germany than in Afghanistan. Yes, that was important to us.”

It must be stressed that this need to give unaccompanied children some time and space to reflect and regroup extends beyond just the decision to stay in one place and try to settle. One caregiver illustrated how young refugees are often advised early on to leave school and start an apprenticeship. He instead called for some time for them to get settled and stable. In his opinion, staying in school for longer allows the young people to settle in and get familiar with their new living situation “So that they also have time to acquire the culture, the language, and to graduate from school, in order to then really open the door for a future outside of our house” (Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen 2022: 16). At the same research site, one boy reflected that “in his opinion the idea that refugees mainly want to do apprenticeships or immediately start working without further education is connected to societal prejudices and stigma about them... This illustrates a contradiction between the young people's wishes and freedom of choices and a societal discourse around the utility of migration as an influx of workforce” (Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen 2022: 22) and contradicts society's responsibility to support a child's integration.

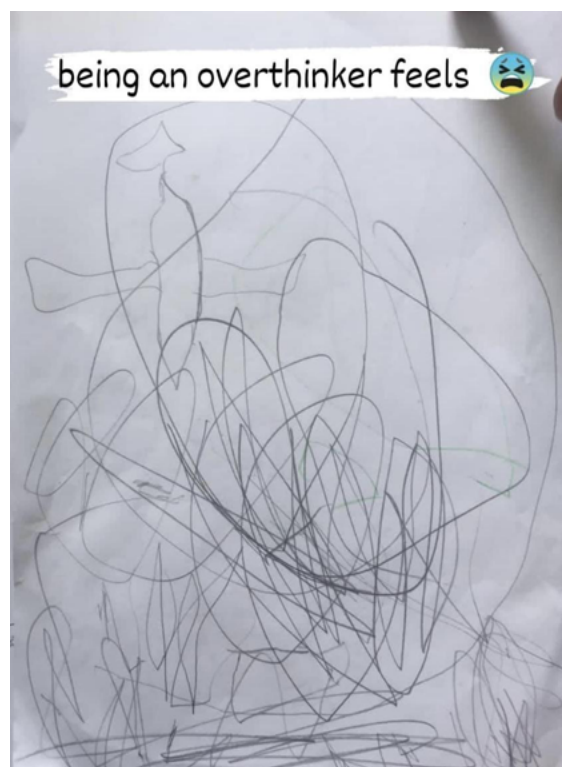
6.2 Mental and physical health needs

In addition to the range of cumulative, traumatic events that this population has experienced, it appears that two factors place them at higher risk of needing psychological or psychiatric support during the integration period: being in the asylum-seeking process for more than a year and/or having four or more relocations within the country (Rehn-Mendoza 2020: 24). It is often particularly challenging when the relocations are to small, isolated communities. One study (Omeland and Andenas 2020: 929) indicated that:

“The separation of friends as part of the resettlement procedure was acknowledged by the professionals as emotionally difficult for the young ones, but as something they just had to live through. Staff at the care centres seemed to expect they form new affectionate relationships relatively swiftly after moving, as they had already shown such a capacity. Yet, in the second interview at the group homes, this was not the story told. Moreover, the same young persons described by staff at the care centres as social and extroverted could be characterized by staff at the group homes as introverted and lacking social skills.”

Common symptoms of distress in this population are sleep disruption, poor concentration in school, anxiety, and depression. As Alexis Wright, the manager of a Scottish project supporting trauma recovery, describes (Brooks 2021): “Sleep is one of the main problems that affects our young people. For some, their sleep has been so disrupted for years that it is hard to break that pattern. For many, nighttime was a dangerous time. During their journey, they speak of taking turns to stay awake and keep watch.” Linton, Kennedy, Shapiro and Griffin (2018: 129) report how, during medical visits, one boy “revealed that he suffered from intrusive memories and nightmares so terrifying that he feared going to sleep. For this reason, he worked two jobs, went to English classes and spent hours in the gym – all to avoid going to sleep.”

These children feel under a lot of pressure. For example, should they lie about their age or their place of birth? Living with such lies over a prolonged period can feel psychologically overwhelming. In addition, they may feel the need to hide important facts from their families, such as details of their journey, their inability to find work or access schooling, or that they are involved in behaviour the family would consider offensive (i.e., smoking, alcohol use or same sex relationships). They may feel anxious or even guilty toward those who were left in the home country, or peers who were detained or even died during the migration.



Drawing by a child in a workshop run by Naba'a

Often, these children go through a phase of mourning the loss of family. As one researcher noted as she arrived at a youth asylum-centre (Horning et al. 2020: 15):

“We saw written on a whiteboard in Swedish ‘My life is full of pain. I long for mother’s touch.’ Many of their families spent their savings in the hopes of saving their entire family and now these young boys were stranded alone in faraway places.”

It is worth noting that adolescence is an important stage in child development and that the majority of unaccompanied children come from highly collective upbringings. While they tried to be as independent as possible during their journeys, they yearn for a sense of community and positive peer groups. Some of the literature indicated that even though they were surrounded by people, they missed their

families and friends and wished to have someone in their lives they could lean on and trust (Kauhenen and Kaukko 2020: 878).

At the most severe end of mental distress are attempts to end one's life and, as noted above, there is a shockingly high level of suicide in this small population (Mittendorfer-Rutz et al. 2019). Professional services for children and young adults with symptoms of mental illness are overstretched across the continent, and the COVID-19 pandemic has led to even greater demand for and challenges in providing them. It is unsurprising therefore that respondents – particularly in Greece and England – were fairly critical of both mental health policy and the provision of services for unaccompanied children. In countries with high cultural heterogeneity (such as Greece and Slovenia), there were few specialists (i.e., psychiatrists, counselling psychologists, psychiatric nurses, clinical social workers) with identity-informed practice and, reportedly, little empathy for refugees amongst mental health service providers. In other countries, there were very strict criteria for seeking treatment for mental illness. For example, in England an unaccompanied child could receive a mental health diagnosis but no treatment, without certainty that he or she would be allowed to remain.⁴⁹ It should be noted that those with active guardians or foster parents tend to be identified and referred to mental health supports sooner than other peers (Rehn-Mendoza 2020: 27). Young people often take measures to improve their own emotional well-being. For example, many boys use physical exercise – and team sports – to improve their mood. A 17-year-old Afghan boy in Greece reflected (METAdrasi 2022: 24): “Exercise is something that helps me, encourages me, makes me a stronger person to go every day and see a positive development in myself through it.” Other children turn to their faith or increase contact with loved ones back home. Of course, the most common response was to turn to peers and share some of their burdens.

There is relatively little literature on the physical health challenges unaccompanied children face as they settle in a new country. There certainly should be an initial set of medical visits to establish a baseline and build a rapport with health professionals, especially if they are to tackle sensitive topics, such as torture, sexual abuse, sexuality, mental distress, etc. In the review, a number of obstacles to accessing suitable healthcare were identified: a lack of awareness and information on entitlement amongst children on the move; the complexity of some European health systems and administrative obstacles preventing access to services; and the lack of training and guidance for health professionals. In Greece, the focus group raised the issue that “they didn’t have quality healthcare whenever they went to public hospitals and that they had experienced hostile attitudes on the grounds of their race and ethnicity” (METAdrasi 2022: 23). Other barriers identified were a child’s inability to regularly attend appointments, frequent moves, and interpretation requirements (Guerra and Brindle 2017: 18). All of these challenges are even harder to navigate when a child also lives with a physical or intellectual impairment.

7. The human factor

7.1 Relationships with family

An unaccompanied child's family 'back home' can be an enormous source of support and encouragement when he or she is sad or discouraged. However, there are many documented examples of how they can also delay successful integration.

A common complaint is that family members "don't have the concept of their child's reality abroad"⁵⁰ – with out-of-date information or misunderstandings about immigration rules, reunification, benefits, and their child's mental and physical state. Many workers along the migration corridor feel that families push for action – seen as short-term gains, such as onward movement, starting work or applying for reunification – when perhaps more time for healing and learning would be wise. Possible paternalism must be acknowledged, however: "They [children] want to get out of the clutches of the people who think they have rescued them and get back to work."⁵¹

Indeed, a child's earning potential – whether to pay for smuggling loans, save for another person's journey or pay bills – is a significant factor in their interaction with relatives back home. As highlighted in the research by METAdrasi (2022: 24), there are many obstacles and misunderstandings:

"Once in Greece, many children want to work and send money back home, prioritising this over the work towards an integration pathway. ... [These children and young people] often get disappointed when they realise that there are several steps they need to take before actually being able to find work in Greece, such as legal and residency procedures, learning the language, receiving education or vocational training. Some come to terms with this realisation and make an effort to follow the recommended plan while others try to find alternative solutions, such as being involved in formal/informal jobs through the contacts they have with people of the same ethnicity."

While more-established peers may tell newcomers "The money is never enough. You send it and they will want more and more and more,"⁵² their employment signifies not only economic independence but also enables them to be seen as adults fulfilling obligations to the extended family (Wilmsen 2013: 256).

The omnipresence of smartphones is something most adolescents grapple with but for this group, "socially they are really still somewhere else – [having] long conversations over the internet."⁵³ Sometimes the family pressure is so great that the children hand their smartphones over to shelter staff to stop the messages or even suffer a mental 'breakdown'.⁵⁴ The internet allows for migrant and refugee children to be much more aware of events back home than in decades past; some practitioners question what and how they are learning about what is happening in their new communities.

There is research pointing to the positive impacts of engaging directly with family members in the sending country, as highlighted by Gimeno-Monterde and Gutierrez-Sanchez (2019: 41):

“...the incorporation of the family is necessary for... successful accompaniment. This process lacks viability if local authorities do not incorporate the adolescent’s family into the protocols. Not as a control strategy, but as an integral part of the transmigrant status of these young people. The proposal of transnational social work is a first step in that direction... Meanwhile, it opens the door to a more mature model of foster care, which would broaden the horizons beyond the residential-based programs.”

A few agencies have taken the approach of co-creating a child’s case plan with absent family. Nidos, in the Netherlands, for example, makes a joint commitment with parents, using that process to have a frank and open dialogue, and to manage family expectations.

It should be noted that some children do not have a means of contacting their family, which causes them huge concern: perhaps they have lost a phone number or worse, it goes unanswered. Other stressors may be the fact that they were explicitly or implicitly escaping an abusive home life and have little desire to stay close to their family at this time.

While there obviously can be much joy in reuniting with parents and/or siblings, sponsoring family members can be disruptive to a child’s integration process. One mother in Zagreb withdrew her two sons from school and moved without notification; in other cases, unaccompanied children have dropped out of school to find a job and support their families financially (Guerra and Brindle 2017: 28). There are many potential difficulties that arise when parents arrive to join their children; after years of autonomous living, it can be hard for these children to live with their families again. Unfortunately, the research found no structured programmes to support unaccompanied children before or after their families’ arrival.

7.2 Social networks

Both the literature reviewed and the research respondents emphasised the importance of social contacts to facilitate the integration process, as described by Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen in Germany (2022: 10):

“Compared to the maps [diagrams of care networks] drawn by the caregivers, the young people’s maps focused on the aspects relevant to their living realities. It shows that the complex legal system, with its multitude of different actors and institutions responsible for the [unaccompanied and separated child’s] life, is not very significant in their everyday life. Instead, a daily routine based around friends, school and hobbies demonstrates that [unaccompanied and separated children] are still teenagers, despite all their experiences and the challenges they face.”

A young Palestinian refugee in Lebanon described what children can lose through migration (Naba’a 2022: 13): “In the course of migration, we may lose our social connection or networks, as well as [experience] the absence of family members who would look after us and provide support.” Some unaccompanied children quickly develop a large social circle, while many others struggle to find

a sense of belonging, especially in terms of making friends with local peers. It raises the question of “who shows them how?” to integrate. What is it that the new society needs to know about you and what does it want you to know? In a few places, cultural courses have been offered as part of integration. These discuss how local teens express themselves, how to pick up social cues, ‘rules’ on dating, how the school system functions, and social media, etc. However, there has been the charge that offering these courses can re-enforce bias that newcomer adolescents – especially Muslim boys – are dangerous ‘others’. Another way of answering the questions above was offered through an integration programme that Terre des Hommes just completed; it included four child-friendly videos about the national and cultural specificities of the host countries.

Locals

Almost universally, these children yearn to meet and be accepted by a group of local peers. They envy their sense of ease and belonging, the fluency of the language and how they navigate their schools, homes and cities. For younger children, finding a peer group of locals tends to be easier than for older adolescents – but it is not without its challenges.

One of the possible settings for this befriending to occur is at school; however, when unaccompanied children are integrated into mainstream schools, they often report feeling different because of their older years and lack of educational attainment (Kauhenen and Kaukko 2020: 880). Slovenia’s model is to house a specialised school within a traditional secondary school, sharing a games room, sports facilities, and cafeteria to foster peer interaction.

Another opportunity is through volunteer-led activities, as highlighted by Narbutaite Aflaki and Freise (2021: 7). “Many municipalities have built up new or upgraded existing networks with local sports clubs, which traditionally attract the most volunteering in Germany. Today, they offer manifold activities, such as soccer camps, swimming lessons and bicycling courses, for unaccompanied minors.” As one author observed (Neag 2019: 25), “Playing can become a language that all children are familiar with.”



“People are gathering together to enjoy this event; they are probably friends and they are part of the community. Sports make communities come together and connect people of a society.”

– Participant in METAdrasi’s Photovoice project

In a number of countries along this migratory route, there is very little ethos of volunteering. Thus, there is a need and an opportunity for innovation on how to attract volunteers. It is important to identify “key groups that are willing to act as door-openers”,⁵⁵ particularly amongst adolescent males, and then allow for connections to grow naturally. Possible activities could include gaming, computer coding, phone and computer repair, snowboarding, etc. In several of the countries in the migratory corridor, Terre des Hommes’ MINT programme facilitated one-to-one support over six to nine months; local volunteers – usually girls – received training and resources to help their new buddies, and sports, art workshops and group trips to museums and the countryside were organised. However, one of the most appreciated aspects was the unstructured time when the two young people would navigate the city together – learning about bus routes, cheap places to eat, etc.⁵⁶

That said, senior staff in the unaccompanied children’s dormitory in Slovenia also stressed the importance of having the children themselves lead activities in the community – such as gardening, cooking sessions, or talks in host homes about their lives and/or cultures of origin.⁵⁷

Unfortunately, quite quickly in the integration process, many children are left wondering if locals see this as a mutual process and if they even try to adapt to them. Horning et al. (2020: 17) reported how one young person in Sweden felt about this. “‘They don’t want to communicate, then they don’t know you, they do not know where you are coming from.’ Mahdi proceeded to discuss his isolation from the Swedish students and wondered whether their ‘coldness’ was cultural. He admitted feeling invisible, but then he spent a long time justifying why they may be distant from him.”

In fact, the word ‘hostile’ came up in all three research locations, and yet many actors ignore the dual approach to integration, as described by Maclin (2017: 5): “What has been somewhat ignored in the past, however, is that the presence of refugees has deep implications for host communities’ everyday lives. Just like refugees, host communities require support that reflects the multi-faceted ways – economic, political, social, and developmental – in which their lives are affected.” The aforementioned MINT programme included ten child- and youth-led videos to help raise the awareness of the general public on the realities – be they positive or challenging – lived by young migrants.

Other unaccompanied children

The literature spoke to the strong relationships that unaccompanied children formed with each other. While many gravitated towards those of the same nationality and faith, they were also exposed to others with similar experiences. Indeed, the first place of residence was often where they made their closest set of friends (Omland and Andenas 2020: 922), which demonstrates how harmful multiple relocations can be to this group.

Owing to the lack of family, various ‘surrogate’ relationships were formed, as the boys and girls shared similar experiences prior to the migration, during their journey and now in the integration stage. Omland and Andenas (2020: 923) described how one boy “empathetically asked the new Pashtun-speaking boys to tell their stories of their journeys to Norway. ‘It makes me think of my own journey’, he said.” Sharing their individual narratives was a way of making collective meaning out of their experiences, and was woven around cultural practices, faith, traditions and language.

Unaccompanied children often take care of each other emotionally and help newcomers widen their social networks:

“But if I have private problems, then maybe I can share that better with my best friends. About the problems I’m having. Yes, because here everyone is alone without a family. And they always think about their family... Because when a new boy arrives here with us, then they are completely new and they don’t have so much contact with each other. That’s why we take care of each other. For example, if Hashem is a bit sad, then I just go to Hashem and then I say: ‘Why are you sad?’ Yes, that is life. Sometimes life is good and sometimes it’s hard. But you always have to be strong.”

(Young FGD participant, Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen 2022: 15)

One study found that some of the “more experienced young persons helped those who were newly arrived (and often frightened), making them feel welcomed and cared for, such as by offering enjoyable activities like playing computer games or watching amusing videos on YouTube. Some of these practices were initiated by the young persons, and others by the staff who encouraged the more experienced to take special responsibility for the newly arrived” (Omland and Andenas 2020: 925). This ‘special responsibility’ is recognised in some programmes, and more experienced children have set duties as ‘supervisors’ to the newly arrived, who usually speak the same language (Omland and Andenas 2020).

Earlier, it was mentioned that many unaccompanied children come from more collective cultures than the new society. They may also come from cultures where there is more bodily closeness between young males, which gives them a sense of security: “Some claimed that they appreciated being near to each other at school when meeting new peers. Sleeping beside one another constituted a further example of this practice of bodily closeness. This widespread practice was particularly commonplace when the young persons experienced nightmares and anxieties at night” (Omland and Andenas 2020: 226). Another example was traditional dancing; this “collective practice... seemed to function as a field where they explored and tried out ways of making connections between the old and the new, between the ‘here’ and ‘there’, and between ‘them’ and ‘us’” (Omland and Andenas 2020: 226).

Finally, it would be a false narrative if the reality of peer conflict and exploitation was not mentioned. When it does arise in the shelters or programmes, it seemed that those involved were open to turning to adults for assistance in resolving it.

7.3 Role of professionals

There is a range of professions who work with unaccompanied children; here we will reflect mostly on case workers/social workers, guardians and cultural mediators, though the discussions have wider relevance for teachers, nurses, even foster parents, etc.

In many locations⁵⁸ there was trouble recruiting and/or retaining staff to work with unaccompanied children. Certainly, there is no glut of trained frontline workers waiting for employment along this migratory corridor. However, it seems that the challenge goes deeper than weak social service contracts and it is not clear whether this is due to a lack of interest or willingness to work with this population, difficult working conditions, or poor terms of employment. Smaller communities, with little to no pool of language and culturally appropriate services that received an ‘allocation’ of

unaccompanied children struggled even more. One respondent felt that the quality and types of service were based on a 'postal code lottery'.

Caseworkers

The frontline workers have a range of titles, qualifications and roles. For example, they may be government certified social workers; they may be para-social workers who receive in-house training from an NGO; they may be young outreach workers from a church or other community group, or counsellors at a shelter.⁵⁹ What they have in common is an empathy for the particular needs and desires of children on the move and – hopefully – an ability to build a rapport with them based on trust. It is a difficult task, especially when conveying messages the children do not want to hear, or representing a society that does not fully welcome them. This section examines challenges around the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the caseworkers.

It must be stressed that well-recruited and supervised staff demonstrate good intentions. Unfortunately, the research shows that there are some exceptions: “Youth who felt that staff responsible for them were indifferent to or were impeding their efforts to build better futures typically had intentions to leave Greece, even if they had already been granted asylum. This was commonly seen in the context of inadequate educational or personal growth opportunities” (Mishra et al. 2020: 15). In fact, one key informant from Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen’s research believes that attitudes amongst social workers towards unaccompanied minors is becoming more negative: “Minors, especially male refugees, have been criminalised [...] This [negative] talk about young refugees [...] is finding its way into social work and in the din of these various legal changes [occurring in German immigration law] ... social work has also changed” (Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen 2022: 7).

In addition, when staff do not know the correct legal advice or what entitlements there are, good intentions are not enough.⁶⁰ It is critical that caseworkers know and understand the lived experiences of these young people: the cumulative reasons why they fled, the dangers and opportunities that their journeys presented, how they are living now, and what their aspirations continue to be:

“All too often, there is too little understanding of why the young person always comes home late during the week or things like this. [...] Or why the young person behaves the way he or she sometimes does, simply because they are under a lot of pressure, have a lot of crappy experiences to deal with and often have the feeling that their paths are being blocked or that their options for action are limited. This sometimes leads to a certain despair and may also cause problematic behaviour. Sometimes there is simply a lack of trauma-sensitive understanding of how to deal with such things in counselling.”

(Refugee Council Thüringen, Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen 2022: 12)

Caseworkers are expected to work with professionals in other domains, such as doctors, teachers, and immigration lawyers, and other cultures, such as community leaders, religious elders, translators. They need to be the unaccompanied child’s advocate in complex systems. They also have the challenging task of quickly setting a tone that meets the child’s needs. Ideally, this allows the child to have a sense of trust, or the belief that a person may be trustworthy, as well as a good sense of agency. As one woman who participated in a focus group explained, in youth welfare, the young refugees may be treated in a way “which somehow hurts them and takes that strength away from them and you don’t have the strength to go on any more” (Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen 2022: 23).

Trust is a key concept in the integration process, particularly for migrant adolescent boys who are understandably wary of authority and paternalism:

“Children feel scared and lonely while often being under severe pressure from smugglers and/or their family in their country of origin. Practitioners and UASC [Unaccompanied and Separated Children] have therefore highlighted the centrality of trust for an effective and protective response. Every step of the response, from the identification, registration, prevention of uncontrolled onward movement and family tracing, to the implementation of a durable solution, greatly depends on the existence or ability to build a trust relationship with the child.”

(UNHCR, UNICEF and IRC 2017: 5)

For young people to consider local integration as a viable option – particularly in the ‘transit countries’ – it is important for the system and individual staff to invest in a trust-building mindset. The use of outreach teams and cultural mediators, the immediate appointment of guardians, and the provision of child-friendly information procedures can enhance the trust of children (UNHCR, UNICEF and IRC 2017: 10). See Annex 4 for some practice tips.

When working with unaccompanied girls, who are always significantly in the minority, staff will find it useful to use a gender analysis and programme accordingly. In one Finnish study, while the participants “were provided with a variety of activities, the girls complained that they had nothing to do in their free time and that the hobbies offered (e.g., football) attracted many boys and some girls did not want to take part in activities together with boys” (Brook and Ottemöller 2020: 3). While the girls were clearly aware of and appreciated the practical, daily support of the workers, they “found it more difficult to reach out for emotional support to deal with feelings of sadness” (Brook and Ottemöller 2020:3).

Ideally, over time, the young people gain confidence that their caseworker will steer them to growth opportunities and help them to resolve peer problems. But for this to happen, they must have huge trust in professionals’ competence and, often, their discretion. They want their caseworkers to create a safe, non-bureaucratic space “deemed not to be full of lies and propaganda”.⁶¹ Harder borders have shifted ways of working in transit countries: “Increasingly agencies are being honest about what the real options are as closed borders means people are stuck for longer and lower numbers pass; thus, the trust and rapport can be built with the better of the bad options; not having the state (and the threat of funding) hanging over their shoulders.”⁶²

To sum up, frontline workers can be placed under a lot of pressure from their community, the unaccompanied children and their families, other agencies, etc. They often have very limited time to spend with an individual child and a lot of misinformation to wade through. And yet, they have the opportunity to be one of the few voices that the child hears saying “Stay. You are wanted here and there is a bright future for you.”

Guardians

There is a growing interest across Europe in the role of ‘guardians’ for unaccompanied children, and a variety of models to select from. Networking between the jurisdictions (which could lead to common standards, etc.) gained momentum in 2016. Evidence from Scotland and the Netherlands on cost-efficiency “demonstrated that qualified support from a guardian improved the quality of decision-making processes leading to not only more positive outcomes in the best interests of the child but also a positive cost-benefit outcome” (UNHCR, UNICEF and IRC 2017: 17).

Not all models of guardianship require ‘professional’ designations (i.e., trained, paid for their services, potentially a full-time job) though those same guardians may have significant responsibilities for their charges. Some models are based on emotional support; others focus only on administrative support; while others have full legal responsibility for the child while in the country.

“I have a guardian. He helped me a lot. And he took me from the camp to a safe house. He explained the procedures through which you need to go, and also took care of me. He gave me a phone number where I can call or write to message me if you need anything. My guardian is constantly with me and I can talk to him whenever you want.”

(16-year-old boy, UNHCR, UNICEF and IRC 2017: 18)

Guardians must receive a high quality of training, on topics including inter-cultural and intergenerational communication, the lived experiences of this population, and the relevant components of the child protection and asylum systems. Where the guardian is the child’s legal advocate, it is vital that they continue to have up to date information on relevant laws and procedures, so as to provide consistent, quality legal representation.⁶³ Unfortunately, there is often an insufficient pool of guardians and, even if there are funds, it takes time to recruit, vet and train them, given the potential harm that could occur. This leads to delays in appointing guardians and to children waiting in reception centres and/or with limited access to an advocate. Another point of note was the limited use of citizens from the diaspora, which would be a means of expanding the guardianship programmes into new cultural communities.

Cultural mediator role

Cultural mediators are a source of comfort and familiarity, as they speak the child’s language, are aware of both their culture and the culture of the host country, and can smooth out or prevent misunderstanding that may arise due to differences in language and culture (McGovern and Devine 2016: 13). They can be drivers of social change, building the cultural bridges needed to develop a trusting relationship with the children, as well as mobilising refugee and migrant communities to support the protection of the children (UNHCR, UNICEF and IRC 2017: 5). Given how much this mechanism seemed to be valued by every actor, it is surprising how rare the role of cultural mediator features in national child protection systems. This warrants further investigation.

Police/immigration

Unaccompanied children and child protection workers see how poorly the police treat this group of young people. Children have two main complaints:

- **They are detained unfairly, and when released, not provided with basic information:**
“Of the children who had experienced detention, some spoke about administrative detention as prison or as a punishment and did not seem to have received information about the reasons for their detention, children reported not being told where to go on release or informed of their rights once they were released from detention” (Mishra et al. 2020: 7).
- **They are living in fear** because they have experienced violence from these ‘protectors’:
“The vast majority of UASC (Unaccompanied and Separated Children) consulted highlighted their fear of police and existing police brutality as major reasons for trying to evade identification and registration... ‘Children would register [for possible integration] if they would be treated nicer along the route’ (Female, 16, Afghan)” (UNHCR, UNICEF and IRC 2017: 11).

Even when the children arrive at their destination and start the integration process, police are not necessarily able or willing to keep them safe.

“The conditions in their countries of origin and the dangerousness of the journey made any dangers in Sweden seem minuscule. These [unaccompanied minor refugees] were aware of the local arson attacks. These hate crimes targeted refugees... Most of them did not want to discuss discrimination, especially hate crimes. However, off the record, one unaccompanied minor admitted that they were aware of this and they discussed and tracked these events in an online chat room.”

(Horning et al. 2020: 16)

On a related note, young people also complained about asylum officers’ misuse of power: “Aggressive attitudes and psychological pressure are frequent in those interviews which are aimed at minors in order to make them fall into contradictions when accounting their migrations” (Gimeno-Monterde and Gutierrez-Sanchez 2019: 38). This tactic is difficult enough for adults to handle and certainly falls far short of being a ‘child-friendly procedure’.

8. Day-to-day life

8.1 Living arrangements

Across Europe, accommodation arrangements for unaccompanied children range widely in terms of models used,⁶⁴ quality of service, and level of coordination. It is usually provided – and certainly overseen – by government authorities, typically at the local level. There is, however, a strong argument for national oversight to ensure a balanced approach that does not create or exacerbate discrepancies between regions. Unfortunately, as caseloads are balanced across a country and/or accommodation spots become available, individual children may be moved repeatedly, often against their wishes.

In addition to national oversight, it is clear that there is inconsistent legislation on placement in alternative care across the continent.⁶⁵ In countries like Greece, Romania, Czech Republic, Austria, France, Germany and Italy, structured alternative care arrangements are either very limited or fragmented (Brook and Ottemöller 2020). Indeed, there was a sense in some locations that the local authorities may try to deter unaccompanied children because they are seen as expensive or may force them into certain accommodation because they do not want a risk to the local reputation.

Most countries in the corridor use or have used temporary reception centres for this group, especially when the numbers were high. In cases like Greece, children have stayed there for months with little emphasis on integration and more on survival and containment. In Turkey's 'children's institutions', migrant children live with those charged with crime or behavioural problems. One respondent spoke of lots of different groups that are divided by nationality and religion 'like in a prison' and stressed that child-focused agencies need to be active there.⁶⁶ The use of designated centres in Sweden has raised some concerns, as they can easily be identified in smaller communities and targeted for hate crimes (Horning et al. 2020).

In Slovenia and Serbia, there are small, specialised shelters which aim to provide a good model to engage unaccompanied children in pathways to remain and integrate. In Slovenia, those under the age of 15 are mixed in with local cases, and there is an excellent staff to child ratio, so they tend to learn the language fast.

As a measure to ensure safety and good integration, the foster family model is used in many countries, particularly with younger children and girls, who are easier to place. It "facilitates a faster and better integration due to the security and safety provided by the family" (Guerra and Brindle 2017: 16). Indeed, studies indicate that it can be the most cost-effective arrangement:

"In the Netherlands, the foster care model where children were placed in families of their own community has demonstrated its economic benefit and value, providing the most appropriate care."

(UNHCR, UNICEF and IRC 2017: 27)

It has proved hard to recruit families in countries like Slovenia or Serbia, where there is little tradition of fostering. There have also been times when the demand has been exceedingly high: "Earlier this year, the city of Hannover had to issue an urgent appeal for carers for 180 unaccompanied children, mainly boys aged 13 to 17" (Montero 2016: 1). In the Netherlands, Nidos has had success in recruiting foster families from diaspora communities. Connecting old and new foster families can help in sharing experiences and training newcomers.

Kinship care has also been widely used in some countries (such as Sweden), and young people praise the practical and emotional support they receive through it: “The social exchange and symbolic ties within their kinship networks have made it possible for the young people to maintain a connection with the places where they grew up, making home in Sweden part of the transnational space they inhabit” (Moberg Stephenson and Källström 2020: 745). However, critics are quick to point out that many of these families live in cramped housing conditions in peri-urban neighbourhoods that have been ‘problematized’ (Moberg Stephenson and Källström 2020: 747). They themselves are marginalised within the majority society, and can only provide limited opportunities to speak the local language, learn about local culture, and socialise with peers from the majority community. In fact, given the households’ economic constraints, “two of the young people expressed loneliness in connection to the kinship home, and they were often home alone” (Moberg Stephenson and Källström 2020: 744).

When there has been a lack of home placements, volunteers have stepped in with mixed results. There can be a lack of professionalism, with inappropriate promises or gestures, but there is also the reality that it creates bonds between the children and volunteers in the community.

Supported independent living (SIL) is also a popular model, both with adolescents and social service providers. There can be comradery in group living, an opportunity to learn the skills of living with peers, and becoming more independent through cleaning, cooking, managing household bills, etc. SIL is often organised by nationality or cultural group, which can be advantageous for familiarity but limit the practice of language and certain social skills. Unfortunately, discrimination in finding suitable housing was reported in multiple countries. Indeed, the location of accommodation seemed to be an important factor in integration efforts. Often, like kinship care, rentals were only to be had in the more impoverished and distant neighbourhoods. As one researcher phrased it, “the local community became an arena that is inclusive with regard to relationships within migrant networks but exclusive when it comes to making [local] friends” (Moberg Stephenson and Källström 2020: 746). A few respondents commented on privacy issues in communal/family living, and that pre-existing problems (such as speaking on the phone to one’s lawyer) were made worse during COVID-19 restrictions.

Unfortunately, the ebbs and flows of migration rely on “the hasty recruitment of inexperienced practitioners and the urgent implementation of precarious foster care modalities: sometimes without educators (youth hostels, boarding houses, etc.) or in spatially segregated peri-urban environments” (Gimeno-Monterde and Gutierrez-Sanchez 2019: 38). Thus, whatever the living arrangements, it is important to both thoroughly vet and train the staff, families and/or volunteers and closely monitor the settings for any harm to the child.

Given the above, the “varying reception conditions ... in different European states contribute to onward movement and expose children to further danger” (UNHCR, UNICEF and IRC 2017: 25).

8.2 Education and employment

Employment and education are two of the main aspirations of unaccompanied children travelling along the Middle East–Europe corridor. Under European law, all of them are entitled to an education; however, that applies only to compulsory education which may end at 15 years old. One source reported on delays in enrolment if the newcomer was within six months of ‘aging out’ of compulsory schooling, and certainly in some countries, such as Bulgaria, asylum-seeking children remain barred from schools until they obtain refugee status.

Much of the improvement of the integration experiences of unaccompanied children over the past decades has come through the education sector. It is an excellent entry point for working with newcomer and host communities. Indeed, child protection workers, guardians, health workers, foster parents, etc. need to prioritise building bridges with school staff. Overall, the literature and respondents felt that teachers welcome unaccompanied pupils and understand their role in helping them adjust and integrate into the new community. For example, unaccompanied children talked about having difficulty focusing on classes when there were stressors related to their personal lives:

“Participants spoke of being in class and their minds wandering to the situation of their families overseas. Some felt that this had impeded their capacity to learn English” (Wilmsen 2013: 251). They reported that it was their teachers who brought them back to the present and to the current task.

The main challenge for teachers arises when a threshold of language overwhelms them.⁶⁷ The literature and interviews indicate that classroom staff have a clear need for i) specific pedagogical training on second language learning and accelerated instruction for non-traditional students; ii) specialised equipment in the classroom (i.e., tablet for online learning and translation); and iii) on-going mentoring as they meet the challenges and maximise the strengths that these new students bring to the school community, including how to help the majority students adapt to the newcomers.

Good practice is to assess at the outset what formal education the children have had, including their level of literacy in their native language. The initial focus is usually language acquisition, as it is the key to friendships, employment, education, independence, and navigating the bureaucracy of a new society. Many students will also be below grade in their academic knowledge, and one of many accelerated learning models may be used. In fact, a strong ability in literacy and numeracy opens up the world of vocational training and employment.

Many countries, including Greece and Germany, offered specialised schools in larger, urban centres. However, as one respondent related, unaccompanied children find it difficult to understand that the German education system differs greatly from what they may know and are discouraged that they cannot join mainstream schools. Instead, they are offered an adapted curriculum, which includes German regional cooking.⁶⁸

A review of the integration literature indicates that, as far as possible, children should be entered into mainstream education. This is the approach in England, Serbia and for under 15s in Slovenia (though they have additional language classes). Students, even older teenagers, learn the language and make friends faster when blended into a typical, neighbourhood school. Where integrated classrooms are not feasible, then at least co-locate them for shared teachers and classes (such as physical education, life skills, music) and resources (gym, science labs, libraries, etc.). In either approach, fellow classmates need support, such as an anti-racism curriculum, cultural awareness activities, technology in the classroom, a teaching assistant to provide some daily one-on-one language support, etc. In order to be productive in the classroom (and at home during COVID-19 lockdowns), refugee and migrant students may need to be provided with their own laptops, headphones, special software, etc.

Most unaccompanied children have been raised from a young age to be ‘providers’ for their families. When they decide to settle, they are often highly motivated to send remittances home and/or save money to sponsor (or smuggle) a relative. Work is a clear entry point for engaging and garnering the trust of these adolescents (particularly the boys). Yet too often, on arrival in Europe, they are forced to choose between working or studying,⁶⁹ which can push them into the informal economy and a lifetime

of precarious and underpaid jobs. However, part of successful integration is “Can they compete for jobs on a par with others, rather than feeling obliged to only work within their own community or resort to the informal sector fairly systematically?”⁷⁰

The importance of networks for finding a first job was very clear from the focus groups and the research literature. Sometimes it was the case worker, guardian, etc. who made a connection with an employer; however, often it was another migrant from the adolescent’s country of origin. Those youngsters were very appreciative as, contrary to some public perceptions, overall, financial independence is their goal.

Too often, the talents and courage that these children have demonstrated in their journeys are undervalued in the educational and employment settings of the integration stage. The research did not reveal any programmes that meet them ‘half way’: something that combines academic studies with both vocational training and an income.

9. Conclusion

This report has sought to highlight how much resilience and adaptability unaccompanied children have as they face the pressures of settling into a new location. There is a clear need for an asset-based mentality when working with – and certainly when assessing the integration of – unaccompanied children. The current bias towards ‘integrational achievements’ are “putting a lot of pressure on unaccompanied children, causing them to drop out of educational paths or forcing them to choose careers against their will, thus once again increasing their burden” (Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen 2022: 20). Instead, we need to create a ‘learn and earn’ model that will allow young people to keep career options open and help them learn more about their new home. To do that requires a shift away from segregated, specialised service sites; where highly specialised services are required, they should be cohoused. And whether the service is psychiatric or educational, service providers need to harness the very technology that the young people themselves are using.

But beyond policy and technology are people. As we have seen, it is trusted information and a caring adult that plays the largest positive role in the integration and overall well-being of an unaccompanied child. To truly benefit from the arrival of young people from other places, a society must be open to change and humble enough to learn from others. There are many ways to achieve that, but they require leadership: at the top, but also in churches and community centres, businesses and schools. Let us close with an image: a two-lane, three-pillared bridge. The first pillar represents the child’s past, the second their present, and the third, their future. The unaccompanied child is journeying across this bridge, but there are people, mostly locals, in the other lane; they meet the child where they are, are interested in where they have been, and provide the insight and encouragement they need to get to the end of the bridge.



Part of the children’s photographic exhibition concluding their Photovoice project with Naba’a.

10. Recommendations

For service providers

1. Adopt a strengths-based approach to direct and indirect work with unaccompanied children.
2. When providing services:
 - avoid multiple placements of unaccompanied children;
 - implement and document a feedback and complaints process;
 - establish staff outreach teams during periods of high migration;
 - include a cultural mediator as a core, funded member of the service team;
 - train translators to participate in conversations with children. Virtual interpretation services are acceptable and national authorities should ensure access to secure IT services (such as those used by telemedicine). Interpreters must speak the child's native language or a common language, particularly when dealing with immigration or administration (education, access to entitlements, etc.).

For frontline workers (including volunteers)

1. Stay informed on the range of services available to any specific child and the timelines for accessing them, and be trained to speak to children about the options available in a realistic and meaningful manner.
2. Strategically engage family members. This may include opening up lines of official communication with the family of origin; using peers to educate on realistic and healthy 'financial responsibility' for relatives and on what to do if family contact is detrimental or too intrusive; implementing pre-reunification counselling for unaccompanied children and their relatives, and/or undertaking in-home, nationally standardised assessments of family arrangements prior to placement and continuing in-person visits for 12 months.
3. Facilitate physical visits between unaccompanied children and their friends and siblings, including those from whom they were separated during the journey or allocation process.

For civil society organisations, working independently or as a consortium

1. Place pressure on national governments, including through the submission of a legal case to the European Court of Human Rights, to ensure an unaccompanied child's right to a timely administrative process (i.e., a decision within six months). Where this right is violated, use global precedents and the growing research on the impact of delays on child development and wellbeing to force governments to grant indefinite leave to remain.

2. Work with unions, associations and others on national campaigns to ensure that the best interests of unaccompanied children are “paramount” over the requirements of immigration systems, budget, etc.
3. Coordinate work to document and campaign on cases where local authorities have not provided unaccompanied children with access to effective protection immediately and holistically.
4. Create a database of unaccompanied children who are about to age out of care and who therefore may ‘disappear’ and live undocumented (whether locally or in another European country) or return to their countries of origin. Where safe, profile individual stories and humanise disappearances.
5. Observe and report on whether government bodies can explain in simple and accessible terms the relevant policies and procedures for unaccompanied children (i.e., financial assistance, services, education), including through translation and recordings in main languages.

For local or national level authorities / General

1. Establish robust coordination mechanisms for matters relating to unaccompanied children at both national and local levels to ensure effective and coherent planning and implementation of legislation and standards including in education, social protection, budget allocations, child welfare, immigration and asylum, sports and recreation, social planning, social housing, police, etc. Review all relevant procedures to improve the implementation of standards.
2. Increase financial and human resources to manage the timely adjudication of asylum claims.
3. Simplify access to services – particularly health, education, housing and legal – and clarify pathways and procedures. Integrate services for unaccompanied children with mainstream service providers, including phasing out specialised schools (it may be helpful to look to deinstitutionalisation processes); identifying and using technological supports in schools, medical clinics, etc.; training staff; and reviewing and re-allocating budgets.
4. Create public awareness campaigns about migrant and refugee adolescents, highlighting issues they face as well as successful case studies, and make these available in schools and public spaces and on social media.
5. Ensure that a child protection actor is present at the first point of foreseeable interaction between an unaccompanied child and the police/other forms of law enforcement, including ensuring such staff are on call 24 hours a day.
6. Expand and ‘professionalise’ guardianship programmes for unaccompanied children and set targets for both the speed of appointments and the diversity of guardians.
7. Harmonise cross-border communication of information and trends in the profile and programming for unaccompanied children.

For social and health services providers

1. Hire and/or otherwise involve members of the child's culture (including in the case of children who arrived several years previously) in the design, implementation and evaluation of social service programming.
2. Adopt, where possible, community-based and peer-led service models involving vetted and supported volunteers.
3. Foster pride in frontline service providers' work and, where morale and attitudes are low, examine the motivations at play and ways to address the issue.
4. Innovate to increase the pool of 'one caring adult' (guardians, social workers, school staff, volunteer grandparents) and 'one local peer' (particularly through leveraging the strategic contribution of the school system).
5. Increase access to culturally competent mental health service providers, including through investing in virtual appointments, licensing practitioners from similar jurisdictions for particular profiles, etc.
6. Register any unaccompanied child and provide them with access to additional or specialised services post-arrival.

For housing authorities

1. Ensure that no child is moved more than twice after the week they are registered as unaccompanied (unless for family reunification) and invest in housing for foster families and guardians and in long-term housing.⁷¹
2. Review the vetting and training process for staff, families and volunteers who live with unaccompanied children, and consider delegating this to a guardianship institution (where this model exists).
3. Review and improve on policies and practice to ensure that unaccompanied children can remain in their communities as and after they turn 18.

For education authorities

1. Establish a 30-day target for commencement of schooling of any unaccompanied child who wishes to enrol; report related data every six months, and review numbers and the reasons for any 16-17-year-olds failing to enrol.
2. Allow full, free access to primary and secondary education until at least age 21.
3. Develop a model for and evaluation of 'learn & earn' programmes (blending language, academics (numeracy, civics), and work).
4. Work across the labour and education sectors to develop a model to broaden access to existing, formal apprenticeships for unaccompanied children.

For the European Commission

1. Fund the creation of an independent, regularly updated, pan-European website for asylum and integration legislation and policies, relevant for each country.
2. Create standards for guardianship of unaccompanied children and support a network of national guardianship programmes.
3. Build a model curriculum that is positive, strengths-based and co-developed with unaccompanied children and support member states to develop training packages for police, educators, case workers, administrators, frontline health, guardians, etc. to familiarise them with patterns in unaccompanied children's experiences and motivations.
4. Develop with unaccompanied children a positive, strengths-based newcomer orientation course for migrant and refugee adolescents (including an introduction to the education system, 'rules for schools', non-violent communication, online safety and social media norms, diet and nutrition, relationships, labour law and job hunting, etc.) and support member states to refine and implement this.
5. Fund longitudinal research and comparative studies into models of integration, including standards and indicators, and multi-country research into the possible correlation between the length of unaccompanied children's asylum processes and their integration outcomes, including attempts and deaths by suicide.

For researchers

1. Consider an evaluation of 'youth colleges' for older adolescent refugees and migrants who have dropped out/failed to enrol in school; (language intensive with academic assessment, including a range of learning options, extra-curricular interests, cultural courses etc.).
2. Research the impact of unaccompanied children's journeys and their integration process on their sense of self and well-being, and follow this with sensitive public awareness campaigns.

Annex 1 - Key Informants

Mike Dottridge	Independent expert on children on the move
Rekha Menon	Protection Officer, Regional Bureau for Europe, UNHCR
Stewart MacLachlan	Senior Legal and Policy Officer, Coram Children's Legal Centre
Gabriella Brent	Clinical Lead and Head of Programmes, Refugee Trauma Initiative
Nour Aburamadan	Program Officer, Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (ASAM)
Sinan Yolalan	Child Protection Specialist, ASAM
Chloe Levassor	Project Coordinator, Refugee Action UK
Corentin Bailleul	Advocacy Officer, UNICEF France
Alexandra Panaite	Senior Programme Manager, Unaccompanied Migrant and Refugee Children, Lumos
Maurits van Butselaar	NIDOS-NL
Renate Breithecker	Research Associate, Zefie
Gerlinde Becker	Consultant on unaccompanied, underage refugees, Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen (Refugee Council of Lower Saxony)
Marina Uzelac	Coordinator (Migrants), Slovene Philanthropy
Tina Zorman	Coordinator (Accommodation and integration of unaccompanied minors), Government of Slovenia
Nevenka Zegarac	Professor, Department of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Belgrade

Tina Kotar	Office of migrant care and integration, Government of Slovenia
Violeta Markovic	Graduate student, Faculty of Political Science, Department of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Belgrade
Jyothi Kanics	Associate Member, Child Circle
Pierre Cazenave	Regional Programme Manager (Children and youth in migration), Terre des Hommes Lausanne
Madeeha Ansari	Research and Communications Officer, Child to Child

Annex 2 - Definition of terms used in the research

Term	Definition
Integration	<p>The process of a separated child settling in a new location on what is anticipated to be a permanent basis, in order to receive protection and care and to find a sense of belonging in all spheres of life (e.g., legal, socio-economic).</p> <p>Note: For the purposes of this project, the definition therefore does not apply to children who are with their family of origin and not separated.</p>
Reintegration	<p>The process of a separated child making what is anticipated to be a permanent transition back to his or her family and community (usually of origin), in order to receive protection and care and to find a sense of belonging and purpose in all spheres of life (Inter-agency Group on Children's Reintegration 2016).</p> <p>Note: This always refers to a separated child returning to their original family whatever the location.</p>

Alternative care

Alternative care includes formal and informal care of children outside of parental care (UN 2010). Forms of alternative care include:

- Kinship care: “Family-based care within the child’s extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child, whether formal or informal in nature” (UN 2010 Article 29). Informal kinship care is “any private arrangement provided in a family environment, whereby the child is looked after on an on-going or indefinite basis by relatives or friends ... at the initiative of the child, his/her parents or other person without this arrangement having been ordered by an administrative or judicial authority or a duly accredited body” (UN 2010 Article 29). Formal kinship care is care by extended family or close friends which has been ordered by an administrative or judicial authority or duly accredited body (UN 2010). This may in some settings include guardianship or foster care.
- Foster care: “Situations whereby children are placed by a competent authority for the purposes of alternative care in the domestic environment of a family other than children’s own family, that has been selected, qualified, approved and supervised for providing such care” (UN 2010 Article 29).
- Supervised independent living: “Settings where children and young persons, in a small group, are encouraged and enabled to acquire the necessary competencies for autonomy in society through appropriate contact with, and access to, support workers” (Cantwell 2010 in Family for Every Child 2013: 22). Such arrangements may be considered to be formal arrangements which include children living in child-only households who are supervised by “a legal guardian, a recognised responsible adult or, where appropriate, a public body legally mandated to act as guardian” (UN 2010 Article 37).
- Residential care: “Care provided in any non family-based group setting, such as places of safety for emergency care, transit centres in emergency situations, and all other short and long-term residential care facilities including group homes” (UN 2010 Article 29).
- Institutional care: “Large residential care facilities” (UN 2010 Article 23).

Best interests determination

A formal process with strict procedural safeguards designed to determine the child’s best interests for particularly important decisions affecting the child. It should facilitate adequate child participation without discrimination, involve decision-makers with relevant areas of expertise and balance all relevant factors in order to identify and recommend the best option.

Community-level approaches	Approaches that seek to ensure that community members are able to protect children and ensure their right to healthy development.
Family tracing (IDTR)	Tracing is the process of searching for family members or primary legal or customary caregivers. The term also refers to the search for children whose parents are looking for them. Its objective is reunification with parents or other close relatives. The steps include: identification, documentation, tracing, verification and reunification. Reintegration is the next – but separate – phase (Inter-Agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children 2004).
Foster care	Situations where children are placed by a competent authority for the purpose of alternative care in the domestic environment of a family other than the children's own family that has been selected, qualified, approved and supervised for providing such care.
Guardian	The precise definition, function and manner of appointment of a guardian varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. However, in essence the term 'guardianship' refers to the designation of responsibility to an adult or organisation for ensuring that a child's best interests are fully represented (Inter-Agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children 2004).
Inclusion	A rights-based approach to programming aiming to ensure all people who may be at risk of being excluded have equal access to basic services and a voice in the development and implementation of those services. It requires that organisations make dedicated efforts to address and remove barriers to accessing services. Inclusion also refers more broadly to providing a welcoming environment for all children and designing a service to meet the needs of a diversity of children.
Kinship care	Kinship care is when grandparents, aunts, uncles, adult siblings, other relatives or friends of the family care for children instead of their birth parents.
Reunification	The process of bringing together the child and family or previous care provider for the purpose of establishing or re-establishing long-term care (Inter-Agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children 2004).

Separated children	Children separated from both parents or from their previous legal or customary primary caregivers, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members.
Sustainable solution	<p>UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Joint General Comment No. 22 (para 32(j)) states:</p> <p>A comprehensive, secure and sustainable solution is one that, to the greatest extent possible, caters to the long-term best interests and welfare of the child and is sustainable and secure from that perspective. The outcome should aim to ensure that the child is able to develop into adulthood, in an environment that will meet his or her needs and fulfil his or her rights as defined by the Convention on the Rights of the Child.</p>
Unaccompanied children	Children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so.

Annex 3 - Interview tool

A. Local integration

Sometimes onward movement is not possible or children reach their desired destination, either way they need to accept their new location as “home” and start to integrate into the society and often, a new way of living with family members.

- A.1. What are the successes of locally integrating unaccompanied or separated children on the move in the region?
 - A.1.1. How do you define “integration” / What does “success” look like?
 - A.1.2. Can you share some examples of “success”?
- A.2. What are the challenges of locally integrating unaccompanied or separated children on the move in the region?
 - A.2.1. What are the challenges to engage local actors / community members in the integration of UASC?

- A.2.2. What are the main gaps in policy concerning local integration - at national and regional levels?
- A.2.3. What are the main gaps in integration services? (And for which profile of child?)
- A.3. What improvements to practice and policy are needed?
 - A.3.1. At national level
 - A.3.2. At regional and international levels

B. Reintegration across borders

- B.1. What are the challenges of cross-border reintegration of unaccompanied or separated children on the move in the region?
 - B.1.1. What are the main gaps in policy?
 - B.1.2. What the main gaps in services? (And for which profile of child?)
- B.2. Could you share some successes of cross-border reintegration of separated children on the move in the region?
 - B.2.1. What does “success” look like?
 - B.2.2. What are strengths of the system?
- B.3. What improvements are needed to national or cross-border policy and practice?

And if relevant:

- C.1. As part of the search for the most appropriate sustainable solution for an unaccompanied or separated child, does your team engage in a systematic assessment of his or her best interests?
 - C.1.1. If yes, what does that look like?
 - C.1.2. What tool do you use?
 - C.1.3. How does your team involve the child in exploring the realities behind each option (local integration in transit country, repatriation to country of origin, reunification with family or independent living in 3rd/destination country)?

Interview Tool - revised

Integration & Reintegration of UASC on the Move

Europe-Middle East Corridor

Family for Every Child

September 2020

Annex 4 - Practice tips from unaccompanied children and senior practitioners

While it was beyond the scope of this research to generate practical tips for working with unaccompanied children, a number of calls for change were recurring. They are summarised (or directly quoted) below.

- Try to make a pros and cons lists with the child to understand what aspects of the decision they have thought through.
- Proactively manage their expectations and plan for what they might say (such as “You are just telling us that so we don’t go there”).
- Validate complaints of pain and bad health.
- Help them balance family pressures with “Well, who is helping you here and now?”
- Accept that “You can speak something, and they hear a totally different story.”
- Ensure that staff know how to identify and support boy survivors of SGBV.

Endnotes

- 1 -** Since this report was written, the term integration has been further refined in this project as: *The two-way process of a child settling in a new country, for an indefinite duration, in order to receive protection and care and to develop a sense of well-being and prospects and goals for the future, that is at minimum equal and equitable to other children in the country.* This change has been made to clarify the responsibilities of duty bearers.
- 2 -** These acts of violence may occur at the individual or systemic level. As Afshan Khan, UNICEF's Special Coordinator for the Refugee and Migrant Response in Europe stated at the close of 2021: "Migrant children should not be instrumentalized for political purposes and their right to safely claim asylum must be guaranteed" (UNICEF 2021).
- 3 -** Also known as the Eastern Mediterranean migration route.
- 4 -** See footnote 1.
- 5 -** Interview with Naba'a staff.
- 6 -** Interview with Naba'a staff.
- 7 -** The search parameters were: published between 2011 and 2020, in English or French, and pertaining to the Middle East–Europe corridor. The search terms were: Inclusion, Integration, Migrant, Newcomer/s, Re-integration/Reintegration, Re-unification/Reunification, Settlement services, Social cohesion AND Children on the move OR Refugee OR Migrant.
- 8 -** England, France, Germany, Slovenia, Serbia, Greece, Turkey, Switzerland, Netherlands.
- 9 -** For the purposes of this project, children on the move have been defined as: "children moving for a variety of reasons, voluntarily or involuntarily, within or between countries, with or without their parents or other primary caregivers, and whose movement while it may open up opportunities might also place them at risk (or at an increased risk) of economic or sexual exploitation, abuse, neglect and violence."
- 10 -** Interview with Mike Dottridge.
- 11 -** Interview with Renate Breithecker.
- 12 -** Interview with Tina Zorman.
- 13 -** IOM website – <https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms>
- 14 -** Interview with Gerlinde Becker.
- 15 -** Interview with Marina Uzelac.
- 16 -** One interviewee noted the need for a public awareness campaign along the lines of the de-institutionalisation campaigns of the last two decades.
- 17 -** Indeed, in 2021, Belgrade University launched an interdisciplinary university course 'Protection of Children Affected by Mixed Migration' for social work students and frontline workers to engage in the protection of the refugee and migrant child populations.
- 18 -** One respondent was particularly concerned about the introduction of biometrics to 'capture information' about individual unaccompanied children.
- 19 -** Interview with Alexandra Panaite.
- 20 -** Interview with Stewart MacLachlan.
- 21 -** Translated by lead researcher.
- 22 -** Interview with Stewart MacLachlan.
- 23 -** Interview with Nevenka Zegarac.
- 24 -** Interviews with Gabriella Brent and Gerlinde Becker.
- 25 -** Interviews with Mike Dottridge and Gerlinde Becker.
- 26 -** Interview with Rekha Menon.
- 27 -** Interview with Rekha Menon. The Dublin Regulation (also known as Dublin III) is European Union (EU) law setting out which country is responsible for looking at an individual's asylum application. This is usually the country where the asylum seeker first arrives in the EU. The Dublin Regulation applies to EU Member States and Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Liechtenstein. The UK was bound by the Dublin Regulation until 31 December 2020. Source: <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/the-facts/what-is-the-dublin-regulation/>, accessed on 22.10.2022.
- 28 -** Interview with Chloe Levassor.
- 29 -** Interview with Mike Dottridge.
- 30 -** Interview with Tina Zorman.
- 31 -** Interview with Professor Nevenka Zegarac.
- 32 -** Interviews with Stewart MacLachlan and Gerlinde Becker.
- 33 -** Interview with Stewart MacLachlan.

- 34** - Interview with Stewart MacLachlan.
- 35** - Interview with Gerlinde Becker.
- 36** - Turkey is the primary example – interview with ASAM.
- 37** - Interview with Tina Zorman.
- 38** - Interview with Stewart MacLachlan and also put forward in Horning et al. 2020.
- 39** - Translated by lead researcher.
- 40** - Interview with Alexandra Panaite.
- 41** - Interview with Tina Zorman; however, one respondent noted how difficult and thus off-putting it is for German service providers to decipher the system of government and civil society services.
- 42** - Interview with Sinan Yolalan.
- 43** - When the interview was conducted in January 2021, the UAM dormitory and day programme in Slovenia had 11 staff for 10 UAMs.
- 44** - Interview with Tina Kotar.
- 45** - Interview with Stewart MacLachlan.
- 46** - Interview with Professor Nevenka Zegarac.
- 47** - Interview with Gerlinde Becker.
- 48** - Interview with Chloe Levassor.
- 49** - Interview with Stewart MacLachlan.
- 50** - Interview with Gerlinde Becker.
- 51** - Interview with Mike Dottridge.
- 52** - Interview with Tina Zorman.
- 53** - Interview with Gabriella Brent.
- 54** - One respondent in Serbia knew of three hospitalisations that could be attributed to intense pressure from family members.
- 55** - Interview with Mike Dottridge.
- 56** - Interview with Madeeha Ansari.
- 57** - Interview with Tina Zorman.
- 58** - It was documented in at least Germany, Sweden, and Serbia.
- 59** - We shall use the general term of ‘case worker’.
- 60** - Interview with Renate Breithecker.
- 61** - Interview with Mike Dottridge.
- 62** - Ibid.
- 63** - Interview with Alexandra Panaite.
- 64** - I.e., supported independent living (SIL), foster care, kinship care, and hostels/reception centres.
- 65** - Interview with Alexandra Panaite.
- 66** - Interview with Sinan Yolalan.
- 67** - Interview with Mike Dottridge.
- 68** - Interview with Renate Breithecker.
- 69** - One exception is Slovenia where they can work straight away as long as they are enrolled in school.
- 70** - Interview with Mike Dottridge.
- 71** - In cities like Hamburg, Bremen and Amsterdam, local authorities worked to ease the housing crisis of 2015/16 by turning shipping containers into homes for refugees, migrants, and young locals. These could be used for adults, families and older unaccompanied minors, thereby freeing up existing apartments for more vulnerable cases.

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