

CarINg

Fare rete per l'autonomia dei care leavers



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CarINg partners

LEADER



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The CarINg project

CarINg is an EU-funded **action-research project** (Right, Equality, and Citizenship - REC-RCHI-PROF-AG-2018) supporting boys and girls leaving the care system to realize their life project. Its main goal is to **make care leavers protagonists of their future, making them feel part of a caring community**. The intervention lasted two years, from April 2021 to March 2023.

Our goals

- Develop **recommendations** aimed at increasing the participation of care leavers and future care leavers
- Provide tailored **training** for professionals
- Motivate the community to **network** around the needs and aspirations of care leavers.

What is a care leaver?

Care leavers are young adults who spent time living in the care system, away from their families of origin, either in a foster family, in a children's home, or supported housing service. Young people usually leave care when they are 18 years old.

Why a project on care leavers?

When a child's family is unable, even with support, to provide adequate care, the State is responsible for ensuring appropriate alternative care. The DataCare project has calculated **a total of 758.018 children in alternative care in Europe**. Among them, 55% are placed in residential care.

Although the legislation aims to ensure that the placement outside the family of origin is transitory, in most cases, they stay within alternative care until they turn 18. Then, the State's guardianship

ceases and leaves them in a limbo that risks putting them at a disadvantage. Care leavers are at higher risk of poor outcomes as compared with their peers, especially regarding education, health, well-being, and social exclusion. Furthermore, although the UNCRC affirms the right of the child to participate evidence shows that this is often not the case in care regimes.

What is the situation in Italy?

In Italy, children and teenagers living outside their family of origin numbered almost 35.000. In Florence and the Prato area – CarINg's implementation areas – there are 240 and 118 (2021) young adults in family foster care or community-based care, respectively.

While in Italy many young people continue to live with their parents into their 20s and 30s, care leavers suddenly find themselves outside the care system, without a family safety net or a secure base (either economic or emotional) to face the transition to adulthood on their own.

Local protection systems are essential to support minors during this delicate phase and to prevent future scenarios of poverty, social exclusion, and violence. Indeed, in recent years they have been increasingly attentive to this issue.

In Italy, thanks to the tireless work of many organizations – including Agevolando, SOS Villaggi dei Bambini – **the Care Leavers National Project** was born, promoted by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies, and carried out in collaboration with the Istituto degli Innocenti.

The CarINg project fits within this context and aims to further strengthen local alternative care systems by giving **centrality and prominence to future care leavers so that they have the opportunity to desire and build a future** for themselves well before the age of majority.

Theoretical Background

The project is embedded within the framework of the Capability Approach, a theoretical framework for social justice developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. On a strictly theoretical and philosophical level, the approach differs from other theories of social justice in its focus on the concrete dimension of the freedom of individuals, defined as the real capacity for self-determination and the pursuit of a life to which individuals ascribe value.

All individuals, including children, should be able to influence their own lives and be active agents of change. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that children within protection systems should be involved "in all matters affecting them."

Although children's participation rights are now well established in the normative framework, **in practice society lags in ensuring that they have the opportunity to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect them.** The lack of participation is even more marked within the care system, where there is a sharp tension between children's right to protection and their right to participation.

Failure to exercise participation during the period of guardianship often translates, for care leavers, into a situation of vulnerability and disadvantage. Conversely, **providing space for children to participate – that is, to be involved in planning and share responsibilities with adults during care – can protect them from these same risks.**

The Meaning of Participation within the Capability Approach

The right to participate, to be heard, and to express one's views is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. **According to the Capability Approach, participation is both a right and an opportunity.**

Although they are naturally dependent on others and need care, protection, and support, **children are endowed with agency since they are born.** By participating in social change, children get empowered. Participation, awareness, and self-esteem are self-empowering, making children and adolescents less vulnerable and more secure.

Indeed, participation develops individual and collective agency and strengthens friendship and sociability. Through participation, one learns the importance of having his/her rights respected and of respecting the rights of others, as well as the need to balance one's freedom with the rights of others.

Unfortunately, within care systems, the right to participation is often sacrificed in the name of the right to protection. Nevertheless, **participation is proven to be instrumental in achieving other important "capabilities"**, such as having a good education, being able to aspire to a quality job, and having healthy relationships.

2 years of CarINg in a nutshell

1. Exploring the alternative care system and what participation means for different actors

CONSULTATIONS WITH CARE LEAVERS

We held a series of **consultation meetings with care leavers** to explore **what participation means to them** and what are the real opportunities to exercise it.

We used **game-artistic methodologies**, with the creation of **collages** and **biographical collections** derived from memories through a game of Snakes and Ladders designed with the participants.

[Click here for more information!](#)

CONSULTATIONS WITH FOSTER FAMILIES

We organized **meetings with foster families**. Participants were encouraged to share their experiences and reflect on their own roles.

Through **game and storytelling activities**, we explored how participation is constructed and structured in foster care, by fueling the **sharing of different experiences** and a self-reflection about the role of foster families in the “exit” from the alternative care system.

PEER-TO-PEER SESSIONS

We held two **consultation and exchange meetings with social workers, educators, and operators** in care facilities.

Participants were stimulated to **share their experiences** and reflect on **their role** within care leavers’ life, redefining what **participation** means to them and **taking stock of the care system**, its different articulations, resources, and criticalities.

[Click here for more information!](#)

CARE LEAVERS SURVEY

We reached a **large majority of care leavers and future care leavers** (14-21) within the Florence and Prato area with a **questionnaire** built to investigate:

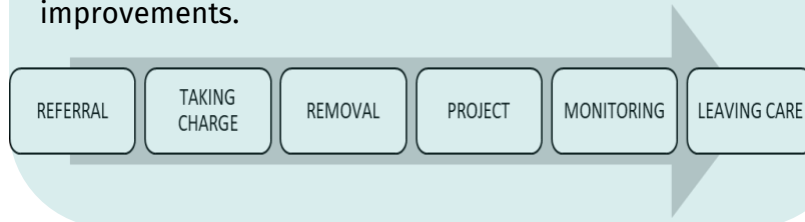
- degree of **participation** in decision-making;
- degree of **autonomy**;
- degree of **well-being**.

[Click here to explore the results of the survey!](#)

THE SOCIAL SERVICE WORKFLOW

During the peer-to-peer sessions, we also reconstructed, with the support of facilitators, the **workflow of social services**.

This process started with the identification of the main junctions of the workflow, followed by a **discussion around the main critical points and resources**, the spaces for young people's participation as well as possible improvements.



DESK RESEARCH

We studied the state of art of the alternative care system, as well as current best practices, to determine what could be improved.

Although there are **consistent standards and innovative pilot projects** in some major cities, there is not an **equally clear and timely framework regarding the concrete participation** of boys and girls in the decisions that affect them and their life projects.

For this reason, CarINg has focused on a dual track: the **empowerment** of care leavers in participatory processes and **increasing listening** capacity of the care system.

SITUATION ANALYSIS REPORT & ANALYSIS OF STANDARDS FOR ALTERNATIVE CARE

These reports 1) analyzed the **state of the alternative care system** in Florence and Prato, as well as 2) **framed the standards regarding alternative care** (whether in a residential community or foster family) in these areas.

[Click here to download them!](#)

GOOD PRACTICE HANDBOOK

The Handbook identified several **existing good practices**, based on internationally recognized standards and guidelines. In particular, it focused on **prevention**, approaches to caretaking in **foster care**, actions for **care leavers**, and **M&E**.

[Click here to download it!](#)

2. Participation beyond Consultations: an Emancipatory Approach

What does “participating” in the research mean precisely for children and young people? As argued in the position paper "The Right to Participation in Child Protection Pathways" by SOS Villaggi dei Bambini, participation means being involved in the decision-making process, but not taking full responsibility for the decision, which remains with the adult.

All CarING initiatives are aimed at fueling an ongoing dialogue about the critical points and best practices concerning the daily work of social workers, educators, and tutors, as well as stimulating the community to network around the needs and aspirations of care leavers.

At the same time, the project adopted a **multidimensional emancipatory approach to boost the empowerment of care leavers** in participatory processes, that took form along the way and were fueled by different factors:

- **ongoing dialogue** and sharing opportunities;
- **active involvement** of a group of care leavers in all consultations and planning;
- offering different opportunities to reclaim their **right to voice** their experiences and thoughts.

AUDIOVISUAL PRODUCTION WORKSHOP

We organized, with the collaboration of a director and a technician, an **audiovisual production workshop to give care leavers opportunities and tools to express themselves**. In addition to an initial phase of work on writing styles for video and filming, the process was carried out through the care leavers' identification of keywords from their experience, which was in turn transformed into images and finally into video.

What does it mean to be within the alternative care system? What does it mean to participate, and what is independence? Community, relationships, family, and autonomy, are just some of the keywords from which each participant made a short film with a subject of their choice.

Through collective reworking and discussion, care leavers involved came to transform their own emotions, feelings, fears, aspirations, reflections, and ideas into a story, each one building his or her storyboard also through discussion with others. **Through mutual support and the intervention of the two directors, the stories came to life.**



PLANNING SESSIONS AND PILOT ACTIVITIES

We organized, together with care leavers, two days of **Planning Sessions (attended by care leavers, social workers, and educators) to co-design a series of pilot activities** to improve and innovate the alternative care system. Four working tables were formed and continued to work in the following months on the chosen activities.

WORKSHOPS FOR AUTONOMY

Starting with the question "**What is needed to be autonomous?**" the aim was to create together with the participants a checklist of what is essential to learn in order to be autonomous and to be prepared for life outside the guardianship system. Together with them, a discussion took place on the possibility of preparing a kind of **workshop for all care leavers where they could meet opportunities and build a network of relationships to support them**. Relevant objects of discussion were: economic education (financial and daily); training/employment services; housing; digital literacy; sexual health; ...).

THE BAP IT TOOL

The development of an **application for social service workers** to assess the well-being of care leavers in the care system.

A POLICY TOOLKIT

The development of a **set of recommendations** to improve in practice the spaces for autonomy and participation within the foster care facilities.

AWARENESS RAISING

The identification of **forms of awareness raising** on the topic of "Community Living and Family Foster Care."

VISIT TO THE FIRST ITALIAN CARE LEAVER CENTRE IN ROCCAPORENA

CarINg group of care leavers, together with the PI and an educator, participated in **the concluding event of the IEA project, "Inclusion, Empowerment, Agency to Fight Inequality,"** funded by the Ministry of Labor and has CNCA (Coordinamento Nazionale Comunità di Accoglienza).

They had the opportunity to participate in several meetings/workshops, as well as to present their experience. This was a meaningful opportunity to:

- get to **know similar experiences** and participate in activities together with care leavers from all over Italy;
- **make the CarINg project known** within a national network such as Agevolando;
- foster the construction/formalization of a **Tuscan representation within the Care leavers Network**.

MARCH 30, 2023: THE VOICE OF CARE LEAVERS AT THE CARING'S FINAL CONFERENCE (EXCERPT)

For us, the final conference **gave meaning** not only to the project we have been working on for almost two years but **also to our pain and moments of confusion during our individual journeys**. We finally found ourselves, as every boy and girl in our situation would want, to speak up, to **make our voices heard**, and our emotions felt, and to expose the real needs of kids like us. [...]

During the CarING journey, we tried our hand at producing a video that could best represent the issues that were closest to our hearts. [...] In our journey, **one theme of reference was autonomy**. Talking among us kids, we realized how around the age of 18, if not before, we are somehow burdened by this word: "autonomy." We are told that to be autonomous we need to know how to clean the house, pay the rent, pay the bills, and go to the post office, but it is never explained to us how to do all these things: it is like giving a pen in a child's hand without ever teaching him how to write. So we asked ourselves: **but what is autonomy?**

[...] Everyone thinks they know the definition of autonomy, but **this is not trivial and can be nuanced**. [...] We understood that autonomy also means **being aware of oneself, one's limits, and resources**; it means making peace with one's past that conditions the present and the future.

Autonomy for us, as care leavers, means **knowing how to ask for help, knowing where to turn to find useful information**, and knowing how to build and nurture meaningful and balanced relationships, but above all, being autonomous **does NOT mean doing everything ourselves**.

THE ALTERNATIVE CARE SYSTEM WE WANT



The alternative care system should not be a band-aid to put on our wounds but should allow us to pursue our aspirations and dreams.

For the system to be functional...

... it needs to **build and give extra tools to practitioners** on the issue of leaving care through training, building an effective network, and involving boys and girls, who are the key players. In addition, it would be essential to invest economically in foster care.



... it needs to **build and give extra tools to operators** on the topic of leaving care, through training, building an effective network, and participation of the boys

and girls, who are the protagonists. In addition, it would be essential to invest economically in foster care.

For the system to be effective, it must become participatory.

Indeed, it has to protect us, but protecting also means making the protagonists participate: awareness and shared paths protect more than protection for its own sake.



Building a good relationship with a boy or girl does not need to move heaven and earth, as some people believe, but all it takes is a simple yet powerful ingredient: **transparency**. Communication and transparency of decisions are key; boys can withstand situations if they are communicated with the right tools.

For the system to generate trust, it must be stable. We like to use the metaphor of a trampoline, as we would like to be pushed up by the alternative care system and not sink into the events of our past.

We talk a lot about trust and reliance, but the Alternative care system must prove itself capable of such honors. Trusting and especially relying on adults is a big and beautiful challenge when we come from a history where we have been betrayed or abandoned by them specifically. We are asked to trust but often lack the right conditions and demonstrations to be able to do so.



The balloon card represents well how we would like the Alternative care system: the balloon is composed of helium inside and the container-balloon outside. The boy/girl is like the helium inside and the safeguard system is like the container-balloon. Without the container, the helium would fly away without a direction, while without the helium, the container-balloon could not fly: the

two, the helium and the balloon, like the boy/girl and the Alternative care system, must co-exist together to be able to fly high.



3. Innovate and improve the system

TRAINING FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

SOS Children's Villages held a **training session with social workers and educators** to provide knowledge and skills useful for supporting young adults during the **leaving care** process and to reflect on the system's room for improvement.

Thanks to the participation of **co-trainers with experience in alternative care** and numerous activities, it was possible to delve into the emotional, relational, and practical issues that characterize the youth's exit from care, as well as solicit the social workers/educators' reflection on the implications of their daily work with care leavers.

[Download the training curriculum!](#)

THE WELL-BEING/AUTONOMY/PARTICIPATION (BAP) TOOL



The BAP tool is a **monitoring sheet** for boys and girls in the Alternative care system, providing information concerning the **degree of (i) satisfaction, (ii) autonomy, (iii) participation, and (iv) well-being of care leavers** and future care leavers.

The development and use of the BAP Tool aim to improve the care system by giving **centrality to the perspective of care leavers**, but it targets both care leavers and social workers:

- filling out the BAP Tool provides boys and girls a **moment of reflection** on their life projects;
- practitioners and social workers can align their **perspective** with that of the minor and have an **aggregate overview** of all care leavers' paths.

Indeed, the results allow for easy comparison to observe how the situation of boys and girls evolves and how this situation differs, for example, among different out-of-home care situations.

THE POLICY TOOLKIT

We transformed what emerged from the CarINg experience into a **set of recommendations for improving policies for care leavers**, with a focus on preparing, facilitating, and accompanying young people during and after the process of leaving the Alternative care system.

Best practices and recommendations cover various aspects of life within the guardianship system and relate to the capabilities framework:

- **Life/health:** relationships with the health care system.
- **Control:** spaces for participation, economic autonomy, daily living, rules, and preparation for the future.
- **Belonging (friends/relations/parents):** awareness campaigns, relationships with peers, relationships with professionals, relationships with relatives.

[Download the Policy Toolkit!](#)

AWARENESS RAISING AND INFORMATION

Beyond **dissemination activities** carried out by partners, a sharp need of raising community awareness of what the Alternative care system is and how it works emerged among care leavers. Therefore a series of **other initiatives** took form to build a **more aware and welcoming community**:

- production of **accompanying materials for the documentary**;
- creation of a **vademecum with materials for a class** on what it means to live outside the family and on care leavers in particular;
- production of **informational materials for local realities** that manage activities relevant to young people (sports, services, employment, housing, etc.) to tell who care leavers are and explain their needs;
- meetings to **disseminate the video-documentary** produced by CarINg care leavers;
- participation, together with the CarINg care leavers, in **initiatives of other institutional actors** (e.g., the Minors' Court) to raise awareness on this issue.



Empowering child care system and
Supporting leaving care from the inside

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