

YOUNG PEOPLE IN RECEPTION CENTRES

VERONIKA HONKASALO, KARIM MAICHE, HENRI ONODERA,
MARJA PELTOLA & LEENA SUURPÄÄ (EDS.)



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office@youthresearch.fi

The Finnish Youth Research Society

Asemapäällikönkatu 1

00520 Helsinki

<http://www.nuorisotutkimusseura.fi>

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Article collection examines the lives of young asylum seekers in the reception phase

The global migration of today has a strong impact on the lives of young people and children. The number of young people in the world is higher than ever before in history, and the young generation is among the most active migrants – be it migration within a country or between countries or continents, forced or voluntary. More than 80 per cent of the 32 476 asylum seekers who arrived in Finland in 2015 were under 35 years of age according to the Finnish Immigration Service. The proportion of unaccompanied minors was around ten per cent (3024 persons).

Youth research and youth policy in a broader scale provide a fertile framework for examining migration and immigration. When examined within this framework, questions about the young people's life courses and transitions, injustice between the generations, young people's right to have a home and live in safety as well as their experiences of human dignity, belonging and participation are highlighted. Such perspectives have been overshadowed by the public debate on asylum issues, which is characterised by fears and confrontations. The young asylum seekers arriving in Finland have everyday experience of escaping, applying for asylum and building a new life from scratch. These issues are left in the margin also in the political and administrative debate.

The article collection *Young people in reception centres* presents how the young people applying for asylum in Finland and the people working with them experience the first few months that follow a young person's arrival in Finland. The authors cast light not only on the official status of young asylum seekers but also on their efforts to build up a new life in a foreign country, filled with new social relationships, lifestyles and obligations as well as with waiting, feeling of not belonging anywhere and insecurity about the future. This is a multivoiced collection of articles where the lives of young asylum seekers are analysed by both researchers and those working with the young people.

Behind the article collection lies a research and voluntary project carried out by the Finnish Youth Research Network in cooperation with Save the Children Finland and the Advisory Council for Youth Affairs. The research group of the project consists of Veronika Honkasalo, Karim Maiche, Henri Onodera, Marja Peltola and Leena Suurpää. The group took part in the activities of a housing unit for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, located in





Photo: Mostafa Mohammad Ali

the Helsinki capital region, between January and July 2016. They organised events such as excursions and open youth activities for the young people living in the unit. During the spring and summer, the housing unit in question accommodated around 40 young men aged between 16 and 17 who had arrived in Finland as asylum seekers. In addition to the fieldwork, the researchers interviewed around twenty young people living in the unit and employees working there.

In addition to the observations made by the research group of the Finnish Youth Research Network, the article collection includes analyses by researchers who have worked with young asylum seekers elsewhere in Finland and perspectives on the lives and status of minor asylum seekers provided by people working with asylum issues.

The articles were originally published as an article series in Finnish during the autumn 2016. The photos published in the article collection are taken by a young asylum seeker Mostafa Mohammad Ali.



Participation requires safety, real listening, friendship networks and knowledge

Veronika Honkasalo

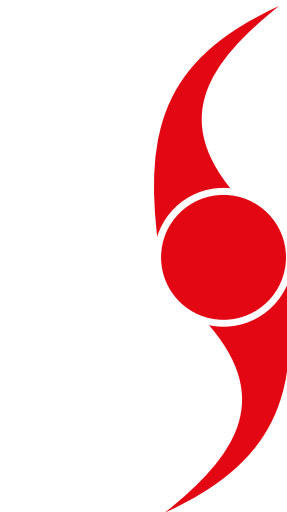
International human rights treaties (including The Convention on the Rights of the Child) and Finnish legislation, such as the Youth Act (unofficial translation), state that children and young people must be heard in matters that concern them. The idea is that, by being heard, young people can feel that they are a part of society. But being heard is only one form of participation. Therefore, we must consider what “being heard” means. And what do we mean when we talk about issues that focus on children and young people? Being heard does not mean just pattern like situations where one is heard only through verbal communication. It is equally important to examine how we can promote participation when the status of the young person is fragile or when no common language necessarily exists. One possible indicator for participation is how strongly the young person feels that they can influence the important aspects of their life.

How can we promote participation in this intermediate space?

When we focus on unaccompanied children and young people, it is important to remember that, instead of their voices, we often hear the voices of others, such as experts, authorities and the media. It is essential to note that these perspectives often emphasise worry, fear and control (e.g. Sirriyeh 2013).

The line between participation and forced participation is often unclear. In other words, young people should have the right to participate in activities that are arranged for them, but also have the right to retreat from the watchful eyes of adults. In housing units for minors, the right to privacy is a controversial issue: despite efforts to have everyone participate, everyone should be provided with a private space. During the waiting process, these young people live in a type of intermediate space in institutions where there is little privacy to begin with. The counsellors therefore have to evaluate where the boundary lies between respecting their personal space and being indifferent to their needs and worries.

To better understand how the status and participation of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in Finland could be improved, we must take into account their various backgrounds and fragile state during the reception phase and whilst waiting for their residence permit.



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Lengthened waiting periods lessens the enthusiasm and joy of studying, which ties young people to their own lives

“The good part is that I can study and live in peace, and I haven’t had this sort of life before.”

The description above comes from a young man from Afghanistan who arrived in Finland in the autumn of 2015. He describes the positive emotions that he associated with living in Finland. Going to school and living in peace and safety were things that made the waiting period for a residence permit somewhat tolerable. However, in their interviews, many young asylum seekers described how this kind of peace can turn into boredom. Due to lengthened waiting periods, anxiety for the future can take over all other thoughts, leading to a weakened ability to focus on their studies and a reduced will to live: *“When you’re under a lot of stress, nothing sticks.”* Especially during the evening and at night, it is hard to calm down, which then deprives young people of their sleep. Fatigue makes it hard to fully participate. When working as volunteers in the housing unit, we noticed that the employees focused on a lot of issues that were related to the everyday rhythm of the young people: Should they be woken up during their holidays? What should be done with young people who stay up all night and wake up late in the day? For many of the young people, going to school was not only important because of their studies, but because it provided them with an everyday routine.



Photo: Mostafa Mohammad Ali

Unaccompanied minor asylum-seekers are not provided with information on the progress of their asylum procedure (e.g. interviews, interrogations, decision timetables) while they wait. This affects their lives so completely that the level of participation of these young people must also be assessed against this framework. Employee interviews also focused on the despair and frustration caused by long periods of waiting, which manifested as “waves”: In the housing unit, where young people live closely together, it is common for one young person’s anxiety (for example concerning their parents) to spread onto others, and therefore the despair of one can influence the emotions and enthusiasm of all young persons present. This leads to situations where everyday tasks like eating and other communal routines, counsellors and free time activities start to seem meaningless. The employees emphasised that a profes-

In the housing unit, where young people live closely together, it is common for one young person’s anxiety (for example concerning their parents) to spread onto others, and therefore the despair of one can influence the emotions and enthusiasm of all young persons present.

sional counsellor must be able to live closely while providing support for these young people, but also to have the ability to distance oneself from different situations so that the young people's experiences do not "get under their skin", as otherwise they cannot cope with the work.

Thinking about family – and wishing for more young Finnish friends

The status of unaccompanied minor asylum-seekers is fragile in many ways. The lives of children and young people in this situation are special because their families are not physically present (see also [Mikkonen 2001](#); Kaukko 2015; Kuusisto-Arponen 2016). However, their parents and relatives are still mentally present, and this can manifest as longing, constant worry and attempts to contact them. Of the young people included in our project, some kept in regular contact, some did not know the whereabouts of their parents, the parents of some were deceased, while some had intentionally chosen not to keep in touch with their families, as it would have been too painful.

When their families are not present, their closest circles are formed by their counsellors and the young people living in the same unit. At the same time, many of those who we interviewed said that the emotions that were caused by the longing and the waiting process were hard to share with even those young people who were in the same situation. Many said that they felt like they were left alone with their worries and sadness. Meanwhile, it was hard to get to know young Finns in school or through hobbies. Many felt that friendships that go beyond cultural boundaries would have significantly helped them to connect with Finnish society and to find meaning in their lives. We could therefore ask how can young people feel that they are a part of a society where it is very difficult to find new friends. In the future, we must examine how friendships that go across cultural boundaries could be formed in housing units and during free time. And how can we create forms of communality that initiate a "family-like" feeling of participation in situations where the young person's family and relatives are far away?

Many felt that friendships that go beyond cultural boundaries would have significantly helped them to connect with Finnish society and to find meaning in their lives. We could therefore ask how can young people feel that they are a part of a society where it is very difficult to find new friends.

Little information on the long trip to Finland – mobile phones help maintain friendships and a meaningful life

For many children and young people, the trip to Finland was long and arduous. For example, of the young people we interviewed, many of those who left Afghanistan spent several years in the countries that they passed through. Their trip included many periods where they had to work various menial jobs and live with their relatives. During their long trip, they might have seen things that left permanent scars of mental trauma. During their trips, many had left their traveling companions and relatives behind and had witnessed for example people being thrown overboard from rubber boats that were too full (see [Iso Numero](#) (in Finnish)). Even losing one's possessions could have a great significance: for example, one interviewee explained how their mobile phone had gone missing during the sea trip, and with it, all contact information of relatives and friends.

Mobile phones also serve a central role in the everyday lives of these young people in Finland – mobile phones are used for gaming and social media, but also for watching music videos from back home, keeping in touch and creating new contacts in the receiving countries. Many of the interviewees said that their mobile phone is used first and foremost for keeping in touch with acquaintances and friends in other parts of Finland. Mobile phones are therefore a central tool for participation in a transnational world. When we take

into account how isolated many of the young people are during the reception phase, their mobile phone can at best provide an experience of social cohesion with the outside world. Mobile phones also serve as a communication tool when there is no common language. This dimension is demonstrated by how, during the participatory observation, one of the young people wanted to show the researchers pictures and videos of their country's cuisine. Familiar-tasting food is one of the things that embodies the longing of these young people. During their interviews, several young people also said that some of the best moments in the housing units were celebrations that featured familiar foods.

Participation cannot be created from thin air

“I go to school in the morning and stay until 12 pm, and after 12 pm I’m back here. And there’s not much else, I go to my room and study for an hour or two. After that, we often go play football or do some other sport.”

The increase in the number of asylum-seekers in autumn 2015 affected the field of Finnish organisations and civic activity in many ways. The housing unit where we conducted our research had been arranging recreational activities for the young people by the involvement and cooperation of volunteers, the municipality and other organisations. In the interviews, recreational activities were highly valued and many of the young people reacted positively to the help provided by volunteers. Several of the people we interviewed told us that they played football during their free time, and many also visited the municipal library and youth house. The interviewees also emphasised that these meaningful activities along with their studies eased their frustration related to waiting during this intermediate phase.

In autumn 2015, [the Ministry of Education and Culture granted](#) funding for e.g. recreational activities for young asylum-seekers. In addition, many volunteers around Finland participated in helping these young people by providing them with recreational hobbies and activities. However, organizing these recreational activities did not always go smoothly. Both employee interviews and other studies (e.g. [Bahmani and Honkasalo 2016](#)) have highlighted that the coordination of activities requires a great deal of effort and work, and even if the activities are organized, this does not guarantee that it will increase the participation of young people. For example, NGO employees emphasised that to ensure a safe atmosphere for hobbies and freetime activities it was important for young people to be accompanied to these activities in order to ensure that they were welcomed by other group members. They also noted that to remove prejudices, the activities of youth houses and NGOs should include discussions on the growing number of asylum-seekers and the altered societal situation.

In the interviews, recreational activities were highly valued and many of the young people reacted positively to the help provided by volunteers.

Conclusion: making young people wait without providing information on the asylum procedure complicates their participation

“It’s hard to live when you’re not told anything, and it really annoys me that no one will tell me how they treat minors here.”

The participation of unaccompanied minor asylum-seekers seems to be best ensured when their everyday lives are safely maintained and they are surrounded by safe adults and peer counsellors who are ready to listen to their worries that are related to the reception phase. During the interviews, many of the young people talked about how matters relating to their trip, the ab-

sence of their families and the residence permit process had taken over their thoughts so thoroughly, that they found it hard to concentrate on other matters in their lives. At worst, the long wait could cause for their will to live to disappear completely.

The work of the counsellors contain the difficult balancing act of ensuring the participation of these young people. On the one hand, they must support the growth of young people into adults during the fragile transition and reception phase, but on the other hand they must provide these young people with the space and peace they need so that they are free to live their young lives as “normally” as possible. Many counsellors noted how the difficult and taxing residence permit process also affected their work and energy levels, especially as they had to witness the suffering of these young people so closely.

But what could help promote participation during the difficult waiting phase?

The young people emphasised the significance rhythm had on their everyday life and their studies, and how important hobbies and friends were. They also stated how important the need for information on the rights of young asylum-seekers in Finland and the practical progression of the residence permit process were. Young people especially wished for young Finnish-speaking friends. The lack of friends who speak Finnish is a point that has been emphasised in many previous studies (e.g. Honkasalo 2011) and clearly requires focused future investments for example in youth work.

Based on the interviews, it must be noted that participation does not develop only through asking the young people questions about their views and opinions. In fact, many of the young interviewees thought that the housing unit’s weekly meetings were challenging, even though from the adults perspective their purpose was to specifically increase participation. Instead, it seems that young people participated best when they felt that their troubles were taken seriously, they were listened to, they could rely on a comforting shoulder, and the rhythm of their everyday lives were ensured with meaningful activities.

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The young people emphasised the significance rhythm had on their everyday life and their studies, and how important hobbies and friends were. They also stated how important the need for information on the rights of young asylum-seekers in Finland and the practical progression of the residence permit process were.

Author



Veronika Honkasalo
Researcher
Finnish Youth Research Network



We cannot compromise the principles of international protection when it comes to minors

Mirja Piitulainen

Asylum-seeking children are part of global migration flows. Children migrate both within Europe and between continents, freely or under duress. In addition to official migration, there is unofficial migration, which does not appear in official statistics. It may be that these children are migrating without their parents or other guardians, or they could have been separated from them during their travels. Sweden, Germany and Norway receive the largest number of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. In 2015, 35 000 children arrived in Sweden unaccompanied, 20 000 in Germany, and under 5 000 in Norway. In Finland, the Finnish Immigration Service registered 3024 unaccompanied children as asylum seekers in the same year. This is ten times the figure from 2014.

This article describes the legal status of asylum-seeking children who arrive with or without a guardian, as well as the challenges and problems of the asylum procedure in relation to the rights of children.

The legislative basis for the rights of children

The legislative basis for children is laid down in Finland during the asylum procedure on the level of international agreements and standards as well as national legislation.

Children constitute a vulnerable group whose global mobility involves the risk of abuse and human trafficking before they leave, during their trip and migration, as well as at the endpoints of their trip. Due to their special vulnerability, the status of children is separately defined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN's Human Rights Instruments and actors as well as the European standards that have been derived from the Hague Convention form the common basis that is recognised by the countries in Europe and ensures the legal status of children. According to these regulations, all those who are under the age of 18 are considered children and possess these rights, regardless of their nationality or asylum status. Every state must guarantee both access to the state's area and an individual asylum procedure for those children who are not citizens of that country. Their obligations also include providing guidance and protection. The state must also decide the country where the child's case will be processed. The responsible parties for the realisation of the child's human rights



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are the state, the service providers, the private sector as well as the child's guardians. (Save the Children 2016.)

In Finland, the Child Welfare Act encompasses the protection of all children as well as the special welfare that is required by children who are in a vulnerable state. Child welfare is implemented especially by the social, educational, health, safety and legislative sectors by influencing the general conditions that affect the growth of children. In principle, every sector of society, be it via legislation, procedures, regulations or services, should support the realisation of the rights of children.

When receiving asylum seekers, a wide group of professionals and authorities are responsible for the everyday lives and services of children who are seeking asylum. The needs of children must be recognised and acknowledged in connection with both the special circumstances presented by the asylum procedure and from the perspective of individual children. Even though under international and national legislation a person is considered a child if they are under the age of 18, on the basis of the Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers, municipalities are also reimbursed for any costs that are comparable to child welfare aftercare that is offered to those unaccompanied asylum seekers between the ages of 18 and 21 who are entering adulthood and require special support for attaining their independence. However, the availability of aftercare services in the different parts of Finland can vary. ([Martiskainen 2016](#)).



Photo: Mostafa Mohammad Ali

The legal status of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers and the terms for hearing them

When a child arrives into the country with their parent, the parent speaks for the child when it comes to the matters that are related to the child. Before the situation is assessed in more detail, it is not necessarily certain who the child's primary guardian is, and so it is important that the child is heard during these situations. Here, the primary responsibilities, rights and obligations on the upbringing of the child are still primarily with the parents or other guardians. In such cases, children who are within the age of early childhood education or

younger spend their days in the reception centre with their parents, and the children who are old enough for compulsory education can begin attending school.

Society has a special responsibility when a child's parents are not present when the child applies for asylum. In such cases, the district court appoints a representative for the child, and their duty is to ensure that the child's best interests are met ([Refugee Advice Centre 2016](#)). The representative ensures that the child is treated fairly and appropriately in Finland. They act as the child's aide in administrative matters and participate in for example the asylum interview that is included in the asylum application procedure. However, this representative scheme has been criticised for not containing any eligibility conditions or professional supervision. In addition, there is no party that coordinates for example how many people one representative can represent. One must also remember that even though the representative supervises the realisation of the child's interests, they do not make the decisions that concern the child, which is up to the authorities.

Both the normal asylum procedure and the asylum procedure for unaccompanied minors contain many challenges and problem areas when it comes to the realisation of the child's rights. Children who arrive with their parents are not heard separately during the asylum interview, only their parents. One of the criticisms of the Finnish asylum procedure is that the interests of the child and their interview are not acknowledged in a satisfactory manner. For example, Jari Sinkkonen has stated (Förbom 2015, 124) that the phrase "the best interests of the child have been taken into account in the decision" that is used in the decisions can mean anything. To be able to evaluate the realisation of the child's best interests in the decisions, the decisions should include actual proof that the child's situation has been evaluated, such as proof that they have been heard.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child also provides the legislative standards for the transfer of information during the asylum procedure and during the reception phase. The child must be informed of the asylum procedure in a language that they understand. Professional interpreters, cultural interpreters and the authorities' ability to present matters in plain language are important for the realisation of this objective. The procedure should consult the child and acknowledge their opinion in accordance with their age and developmental level.

The transparency and legal justifications of the asylum procedure, the mechanisms that enable reviewing and checking decisions, as well as the possibility of filing complaints and appeals are equally important for realising the interests of the child. The possibility for appeal was recently expanded when the Optional Protocol of the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child entered into force in Finland. According to the Protocol, any failure to uphold the rights of a child can be appealed to the Committee on the Rights of the Child if a result that realises the rights of the child cannot be reached in a national court. (The Ombudsman for Children 2016.) However, the process is very slow, and there have been no precedents as of yet.

The availability of legal help for asylum seekers was recently curtailed with an amendment to the Aliens Acts. This limitation does not apply to unaccompanied minors, but there is great regional variability in the availability and quality of legal help. At the same time, the appeal period for negative decisions has been shortened, which increases the time pressure for receiving legal help.

In addition, the long waiting times during the permit procedure are problematic for the realisation of the child's rights. [Section 5 of the Act on the](#)

To be able to evaluate the realisation of the child's best interests in the decisions, the decisions should include actual proof that the child's situation has been evaluated, such as proof that they have been heard.

[Reception of Persons Seeking International Protection \(available in Finnish and Swedish\)](#) references the Convention on the Rights of the Child and outlines that for example the processing of applications submitted by unaccompanied children must happen urgently. However, the waiting time for most children who arrived in the autumn of 2015 for the first interview with the Finnish Immigration Service has lasted for almost a year.

Reception centres as facilities

The capacity of the Finnish reception centre system was small until autumn 2015. It was quickly increased as the number of asylum seekers grew, and all migrants were provided with a roof over their head. In connection with this, new reception centres were established in areas that did not previously feature any reception centres for refugees or asylum seekers, which raised questions, stoked prejudices and caused uncertainty among locals and different professionals.

The primary task of reception centres is to ensure the direct protection of asylum seekers. They provide housing for asylum seekers, arrange necessary social and health services, provide financial support when necessary, arrange work and study activities and the necessary interpreter services and also provide advice for receiving legal aid. The Finnish Immigration Service is responsible for all reception centres. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the National Institute for Health and Welfare and the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities [have drafted instructions \(in Finnish\)](#) for municipalities on providing services for asylum seekers.

Children who arrive unaccompanied are placed in units for minors, group homes that are comparable to child welfare institutions (ages 0–15) or supported housing units (ages 16–17). In addition to the aforementioned tasks, an important part of the group homes is to provide age-appropriate care for the child: care, nurturing and support. Folk high schools in Finland have also offered supported housing. These experiences have been positive, as the folk high schools have also been able to provide education for those children who are above the age of compulsory education. The other essential fact is that this has enabled young asylum seekers to meet Finnish students. ([Ritari & Piitulainen 2015.](#))

Based on descriptions provided by both personnel and asylum seekers, living in reception centres is challenging. Families have to live in tight spaces and close to unfamiliar people who come from different cultures. The future of every occupant is uncertain. Tired and stressed parents do not always have the functional capacity for providing the care and nurture that children need. Children can express their symptoms in different ways, for example with tearfulness, ferocity, fearfulness, introversion or hyperactivity. Parents often require the assistance of professionals and volunteers to help find ways for calming the situation down. Reception centre employees do not always have adequate resources for working with the special questions that children have. Some reception centres have hired employees who provide family services and who are experienced in for example trauma-related work.

Save the Children has begun its [Child Friendly Spaces in Emergencies activity](#) in its reception centres, which is based on the child's and parents' estimated crisis situations and need for support. It is based on the international model that is implemented especially to support children and their families who live in the middle of or have escaped from a humanitarian crisis. The idea of the activity is to provide a safe and welcoming space for children who have expe-

The primary task of reception centres is to ensure the direct protection of asylum seekers.

rienced difficult situations and lived in exceptional circumstances, where they can recover from their traumatic events, are listened to and are provided with the opportunity to develop and simultaneously adapt to their new environment. The space features activities arranged by trained volunteers, and these activities are coordinated by Save the Children employees. The objective is to provide every reception centre that contains children with a child-friendly space.

Child-friendliness can also mean the child's right to a family. The difficulty of reuniting families can be seen as a special obstacle for the realisation of the rights of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. The meaning of family for welfare and integration are widely understood in Finland, but the opportunities for reuniting families have been continuously impaired. In its current form, the income requirements for family reunification also apply to children, and when compared to other Nordic countries, Finland's policy is strict.

The general line of thinking in Nordic countries is that we have institutions that function well and that our authorities are on top of things. This should not lead to an illusion of the system's functionality even during altered societal situations. Based on the exceptional experiences of 2015 and 2016, it would appear that the authorities do possess the necessary information, but they lack the full capability for recognising new phenomena and the requirements that they present. Instructions and training are needed during the asylum application procedure and beyond, for example in the recognition of children's rights violations and human rights violations. Around 10,000 children have gone missing after arriving in Europe. Very little information exists on what has happened to these children. Children who remain without documentation are placed in an extremely vulnerable position, and there have been reports of cases where they have been the victims of sexual abuse.

In this text, I have emphasised the vulnerable position of minor asylum seekers and the risks that are related to the violation of their rights. Despite their vulnerability, these children and young people also possess the capability to survive, adapt and learn, often faster than adults. It is evident that they are active in their own matters and communities, as long as they are seen and heard by the authorities and professionals.

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Author



Mirja Piitulainen
Project Coordinator
Save the Children Finland



Young asylum seekers and building of trust in everyday life

Karim Maiche

During the year 2015, 3024 unaccompanied minor asylum seekers arrived in Finland. By the August 2016, 323 more have arrived. The fast growth of migration has resulted in strong reactions and intensified discussions amid a difficult economic situation. However, Finns still highly trust the government and its institutions ([National Values 2015 survey, in Finnish](#)). What sorts of everyday practices do unaccompanied minor asylum seekers who have arrived in Finland use to build their trust in Finland and Finns?

In her doctoral dissertation, Kati Turtiainen emphasises the importance of mutual respect and recognition for building trust between refugees and the public authorities in Finland ([Turtiainen 2012](#)). According to Turtiainen, trust plays a central role in forming positive dependency, so that the agency and independence of refugees are not diminished during everyday situations. Trust is often linked to social capital, and strengthening this helps migrants network and connect to their new society.

At the beginning of the previous century, the renowned sociologist [Georg Simmel](#) emphasised the role of trust as a bond that maintains society: “Trust is one of the most important synthetic forces within society”. According to Simmel, trust cannot be created with just a top-down principle, but it is formed and built by human interaction.

During times of change, the trust of asylum seekers towards societal institutions is also tested beyond the scope of authorities. Mutual respect and two-way recognition are important for building trust during all encounters. This is especially true when we focus on people who have arrived in Finland from warzones and who may have experienced many traumatic events related to the methods, persecution and corruption employed by various authorities.

Building trust in reception centres: waiting and uncertainty

Children and young people who arrive in Finland unaccompanied are placed in separate group homes, support housing, or private accommodations provided by possible relatives, where they are guaranteed immediate protection and a safe environment, any necessary social and health services, an income, study activities, interpreter services as well as legal guidance. Together with the research group from the Finnish Youth Research Network, we conducted field work in a housing unit in Southern Finland where around 40 unaccompanied minor asylum seekers lived. We did not focus on their countries of



origin or their trip across Europe to Finland, but on the construction of their everyday activities after they arrived in Finland.

These young people have been separated from their families and closest friends. The experiences that these young people attain in their housing unit play an important role in building their trust towards the authorities, the housing unit's personnel and the local community – both young and old. We saw how the young people in the housing unit formed close bonds, despite the formation of groups and changes in personal relationships. [According to Director Markku Heikkilä from the reception centre in Hennala](#), the rough treatment that they have experienced during their travels plays a part in the formation of a certain type of group behaviour model and a “shared defence system”: if an individual is threatened, everyone in the group is ready to defend them.

These young people receive mutual support from one another, and they have a keen need for building friendships that are based on trust.

“We have shared experiences. We’re all far from our families.”

“One problem is that we’re lonely, far away from our families. We have to deal with that thought and focus our attention on something else.”

“We’re always together and we talk, going from room to room.”

The relationship between the young people and the counsellors working in the housing unit appears positive, and the young people reported that they often receive help from their counsellors. The counsellors displayed different roles in relation to the young people living in the housing unit. For these young people, it is significant that trust is established within all situations and roles. For them, help and a feeling of closeness are the central sources of and the criteria for trust.

“They can only help us by planning our everyday activities.”

“I can’t say that I’m too close to them. I don’t talk a lot with them, and I have a lot of requests, and they can only fulfil just one of them. So I don’t feel too close to them.”

The employees have to balance between creating personal bonds and their professional role. The counsellors felt that when they were able to build trust with the young people, it was a source of success – a kind of reward and recognition of their work.

Adam B. Seligman has emphasised that experiences of uncertainty drive people to trust other people (see. [Ilmonen 2002, 31](#)). These young people would likely be more willing to seek deeper friendships, but the counsellors’ professional ethics require that they maintain a certain distance. Every employee has to decide where to draw the thin line between professional ethics and friendship. For example, the counsellors said that they do not include the young people who live in the housing unit within their social media circles. The language barrier also affects the trust between the young people and the counsellors as well as their everyday relationships.

And could the counsellors trust these young people? One counsellor noted:

“It’s a tricky question. When I’m working with these boys, I basically have to believe and I want to believe everything that they tell me. Then eventually during these everyday circumstances we see that when we imagine that

we know these boys, that we've spent time together with them and you begin thinking that they're our well-behaving boys, then during some circumstances it becomes clear that we don't really know them. We don't know their backgrounds. We know what they've wanted to tell us. We don't even know what they've told their representatives and social workers, since it isn't our business, unless they want to share it with us."

The role of social workers and healthcare professional in conveying confidential information is central. When the intimate matters or therapy-related questions of these young people are being reviewed, the role of the interpreter also becomes more pronounced. Interpreter turnover complicates the building of confidential relationship in important care relationships, as one healthcare professional noted:

"It's been really difficult to find an interpreter who can commit to the therapy that one of our boys is attending. It should always be the same person. Now we've been calling people to find a third interpreter for him, so that we could find someone that he could trust."

The housing unit forms a central window into Finnish society and is the first environment for the young person to build their understanding of everyday life and practices in Finland. The slow residence permit process and the associated waiting time (see [Honkasalo](#) in this article collection), the uncertainty of their future, their missing friends, and their possible traumatic experiences play a central role in the formation of the trust of these young people. The transfers from one housing unit to another do not promote an increased feeling of security, as can be seen in the description provided by one young person on the closing of his housing unit and the move to a new place:

The housing unit forms a central window into Finnish society and is the first environment for the young person to build their understanding of everyday life and practices in Finland.

"This is really difficult. When I came here from there, it was like starting from scratch. I was beginning to get the hang of the programmes in the old place. Now I've been here for three weeks and I still don't have any plans."

These young people have not had much of a chance to influence where they or their possible closest friends are transferred after they have arrived in Finland. Just when a young person has formed some roots in his environment, formed confidential social relationships and increased their social capital, they suddenly have to move to a completely new place and start again, amidst uncertainty.

Outside of the reception centre: studies and hobbies

Young people construct their social lives outside the housing unit, where societal phenomena are emphasised more, such as the overall attitudes towards immigrants, asylum seekers or foreigners, as well as the formation of the young people's trust towards institutions. The key social spaces for the young people we interviewed were their school and hobbies. Going to school was seen as especially important, not only for meeting new people but especially for learning Finnish, which is the primary subject that they study in school.

According to Finnish legislation, compulsory education only extends to those who are 16 years of age, which was seen as being unfair especially by those who are aged 17. In the end, special arrangements were made to ensure that all of the young people in the housing unit were permitted to study. Did these young people succeed in finding Finnish friends in school?

Not really. I haven't met anyone in school, and our school is kind of remote.
21 *I've only really become acquainted with two teachers.*

Building trust and engaging with other people promote the alleviation uncertainty on both an emotional and conscious level (see Molm, Takahashi and Peterson 2000). The relationships between young asylum seekers and Finnish students often remain fairly shallow. Anne-Mari Souto (2011) has researched the terms of “regular Finnishness” in situations where young Finns and young asylum seekers meet. The “ordinarisation” of young people includes neutralising and obfuscating the individual differences between young people (see Tolonen 2002), making Finnishness the privilege of only a “certain” group. Unaccompanied minor asylum seekers are not able to fulfil these criteria in the eyes of others, and their communication is hampered by their limited Finnish language skills.



Photo: Mostafa Mohammad Ali

The young people that we interviewed primarily reacted positively to Finland and Finns. However, it is difficult to make actual friends if the principles of reciprocity cannot be fulfilled due to a lack of a common language. It is not easy to form friendships in school, and the young asylum seekers that we interviewed said that they do not know how they can make any Finnish friends:

“You can say that Finns are very cold, and I maybe kinda understand that they haven’t seen so many foreigners. Besides, I don’t know any Finnish, and I can’t communicate if I wanted to ask something. If someone asks me about something, I don’t know how to answer.”

The young people have had some opportunities for forming friendships with local volunteers who have arranged different activities in the housing unit, and some of the boys at the housing unit have had Finnish girlfriends. Hobbies are a very important place for meeting people and a context that creates mutual trust. But even with hobbies, our observations show that most social networks are formed with the other young people in the housing unit, although mobile phones and social media do provide young people with the opportunity for staying in touch with a wider social network.

Hobbies are a very important place for meeting people and a context that creates mutual trust.

Many of the young people play football in a Finnish football club, but the contacts between these young people and Finns have remained thin even on the playing fields. This is demonstrated by one housing unit counsellor's answer to the question on whether the young people at the housing unit have gained any Finnish friends on the field:

"Not that I know of, at least I haven't seen any here. One time, I was escorting them to a game in Laru, and there was this one Finn there who played in the same team and rode the same bus, but he clearly didn't want to mingle. Then when we were walking to the field in Laru, and he just went his own way, and I thought that it was kind of odd, since he was supposed to be part of this group. I, I don't really know. And there's the language issue as well, which must be pretty challenging for both parties."

Young asylum seekers and young Finns are not easily able to form deep, confidential friendships. In some cases, the situation is affected by a lack of language skills and polarised societal values. At the same time, Finland has also become more multicultural, which may lower the bar for meeting young asylum seekers, and the materials we collected from these young people did not prominently feature any experiences of racism (see more in the [Youth Barometer, Myllyniemi 2014, 80–82](#)). Even the counsellors noted that these young asylum seekers have been spared from the tense debate on migration that has been going on for the last few years.

Conclusion

The relationship between young asylum seekers and young Finns are still shallow in many ways. During the field work, I also felt that my own experiences and relationships with these young people remained fairly thin, despite positive experiences. The lack of a common language especially highlights the role of the interpreter. When we think about building the trust of young asylum seekers in Finnish society, it is important to assess building the trust of Finns in relation to the young asylum seekers.

The everyday lives of the young people we met are fragile and unsure. They often feel that the uncertainty of their asylum decision, the waiting and the lack of activities form a heavy burden. They are building their future carefully, one day at a time. They mainly have good relations with the other young people and counsellors in the housing unit. On the other hand, they cannot necessarily or do not have the courage to build very deep personal relationships, and can feel that they are alone in a very uncertain situation. The reunification of their families and their connections with close friends are important for the fragile development phase of these young asylum seekers. Do we trust the life stories of these young people or are we positioning them through our different negative perspectives?

Trust is a central element for building positive dependencies. This requires recognition, care and respecting the rights of others. Good experiences with Finnish authorities can have long-lasting effects in the future. When one can trust the authorities and institutions, it has positive effects on future societal attachment, everyday personal relationships and the formation of one's life. Successful meetings and reciprocity with Finns strengthen trust and societal membership.

The everyday lives of the young people we met are fragile and unsure. They often feel that the uncertainty of their asylum decision, the waiting and the lack of activities form a heavy burden.

Trust is a central element for building positive dependencies. This requires recognition, care and respecting the rights of others.

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Author



Karim Maiche
Researcher
University of Tampere



Life at a reception centre: a counsellor's and young person's view

Naser Husseini

A young person arrives in a new country full of hope and expectations. However, living in a reception centre is challenging for young people for various reasons. The centre is the beginning of a new stage in life in which everything is new. Reception centre residents carry with them the entirety of their lives up until this point, including some difficult emotions: they have left behind their home countries and families and taken long, dangerous journeys involving painful experiences. At the reception centre, a young person is suddenly without his or her family, living with dozens of other young people from different backgrounds. Young people come to the centre from various different cultures, countries, life circumstances and families.

Before they arrive at the reception centre, each young person has his or her own thoughts, goals, plans and wishes. Some may have departed for Europe for the wrong reasons or with overly optimistic ideas. Newcomers can experience great disappointment and a sense of failure, if reality does not meet their preconception of Europe. They may have expected to find a place where they can finally be at peace away from everyday problems. Suddenly, they are in a foreign country, in a different culture where they do not speak or understand the language and are forced to wait through the slow process of applying for a residence permit, all the while living at the reception centre, where they have to deal with their own emotions as well as those of others: sorrow, depression, disappointment, aggression – but fortunately, joy and happiness, as well. Living with a large number of different types of people and suddenly arising situations can quickly impact on a young person's mood.

Young people's well-being and ability to cope at the reception centre can depend on their backgrounds. It can be difficult for someone who has grown up in a stable family home, had opportunities to study, and only recently lost their family in war and has been forced to leave their home country to adapt to shared living arrangements. The losses are shocking and fresh in the mind, but they are not something the person has had to endure all their life. Adapting can be easier for someone who has faced severe difficulty in life, for example lost their family as a small child and ended up in forced labour or experienced other forms of exploitation. He or she may have lived on the streets in a war zone, and the reception centre is a big improvement.



Scheduled daily life

Life at the reception centre is carefully controlled: there is a set of ground rules that residents must comply with: young people must go to school, follow a daily routine, clean up, go on various visits, and attend introductory lessons about Finnish culture, equality and the Constitution of Finland. Everyone must be at school on time unless they have a good reason for absence. After school, the young people spend time taking part in personal hobbies such as sports, photography or Finnish language lessons with volunteers and counsellors. Counsellors organise various recreational activities for the young people.

Life at the reception centre is carefully controlled: there is a set of ground rules that residents must comply with: children must go to school, follow a daily routine, clean up, go on various visits, and attend introductory lessons about Finnish culture, equality and the Constitution of Finland.

My experience

I was once a young arrival myself. I lived in various reception centres before I got my residence permit decision, and have since studied and found employment in Finland. I am currently a counsellor working with young people at a reception unit.

I grew up in an ordinary family and was taught to respect my parents and other people. I went to school and learned about my own culture back in my home country before, at the age of twelve, I lost everything that was good in my life because of war. My immediate and extended family were torn apart, I had to get a job and defend our village alongside older men as an under-age soldier.

I had a good childhood, but I did experience discrimination as a member of a minority, and I saw war. When I left my home country, my journey to Finland took eight months, and looking back on it now, it involved some very traumatic experiences. However, I finally made it to Finland and began a new life at the reception centre.

My daily life at the centre

I was taken to the reception centre on a dark November night. The atmosphere reminded me of the bread queue in Paris: people running around, noise, young people playing games and listening to music. Some came to say hello and bade me welcome. My most important memory is of the friendly, cheerful counsellors, who gave me hugs and said, "Welcome to Finland" and seemed happy about me being there.

A young counsellor introduced himself and said he would be my personal counsellor. He showed me around and came to sit and talk with me in my room. I was seventeen, but I had experiences beyond my years and those of my Finnish peers. I had spent a long time without my family, worked and experienced war. During the journey, I had suffered from hunger and cold in the mountains and seen some of my friends die. Not everyone made it through. I had been running around the streets of Europe trying to find something to eat, I had slept on roadsides, in toilets and wherever I could and worn dirty clothes I didn't want to wear. After those experiences, the reception centre was like a noisy hotel to me. I was happy to get something to eat and be able to sleep in a real bed for the first time in months.

I was seventeen, but I had experiences beyond my years and those of my Finnish peers.

My counsellor

The first discussion with my personal counsellor swept away my exhaustion, and I felt that perhaps I would be able to start a new life after all those years.

My counsellor was a skilled professional. He helped me think deeper and sparked my hope for a new life. For the first time in a very long time I felt that I had someone who was almost like family and genuinely wanted to help me move forward.

The centre where I stayed had many different types of counsellors. In my opinion, the best counsellors were those with social intelligence: they were patient, professional, understanding and able to read situations, never lost their temper, and were always in control of themselves. I saw all kinds of situations at the centre, including unprofessional conduct by counsellors: arguments with residents, loss of temper, shouting, and abuse of power.

As a counsellor

As a counsellor I have realised that the reception centre is not an easy place to work at. All of a sudden I became a counsellor to young asylum seekers and a role model of sorts, and I realised that I had to carefully consider every move I made and every word I uttered. I was representing Finnish culture even though I was originally from somewhere else. I had a job that involved a great deal of responsibility, which includes doing our best to build a new life even for the most desperate young people. I realised that as a counsellor I could not just be physically present at work. I have to be able to approach different types of people, be willing to help and give equal attention to dozens of young people simultaneously.

At a reception centre for young asylum seekers, the counsellor has to understand that these people have come from different countries and that they all have experienced some degree of problems in their country of origin and during the journey. Kindness, a careful approach, respect for each person's culture, professional conduct in different situations and the ability to control your personal emotions are prerequisites of counselling. Each counsellor can have his or her own style, but in my experience, our attitude should be that we are "mini" mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters and teachers, who teach by example, behaviour and way of speaking how to build a new life.

I have really enjoyed my work, and I respect my employer Save the Children Finland for the fact that they employ professional counsellors. The counsellors have been well engaged in their work, they have an active approach with young people and they manage to create a happy and positive relationship with the young people. Everyone has strived to be part of one big family and to organise interesting activities for the young people.

For me, the best counsellors were those with social intelligence: they were patient, professional, understanding and able to read situations, never lost their temper, always in control of themselves.

Author



Naser Husseini works as a counsellor at a residential unit for young asylum seekers. He moved to Finland in 2009.



Friendship, social relationships, and the exceptional life circumstances of young asylum seekers

Henri Onodera and Marja Peltola

"In May, a group of us including about twenty young asylum seekers and a few employees went to the Maaailma Kylässä festival in Helsinki. Everyone quickly found something to do: some went dancing to the sounds of Idiotape, a South Korean electro band, others found a spot on the lawn to sit and chat, and a few went looking for Afghan food but couldn't find any. Most of the young people had arrived in the Helsinki metropolitan area in November 2015 and had lived together ever since, but there were also a few new residents. The housing unit in which they had previously lived had been closed down, and they had just arrived in the Helsinki area. Some hung out with their friends, while others sat on the grass waiting to get back 'home' to watch the UEFA Champions League final. Some took selfies, others Skyped with residents, who had stayed at the housing unit. Some wanted to leave, others wanted to stay, but because of our resources they all had to stay together as they couldn't afford a train or bus ticket. To outsiders in the festival setting, they looked like a close group of people who looked after one another, sat on the grass eating, danced and had fun together." (Reminiscence from the fieldwork period)



Our fieldwork period mainly consisted of visits to the housing unit for young asylum seekers as well as a handful of trips that we organised in the Helsinki metropolitan area, including one to the above-mentioned Maaailma Kylässä festival. Even though they were not all interested in the same things, the young asylum seekers' relationships seemed to be based on reciprocity and getting along with one another. The exceptional circumstances and institutionalised living arrangements encouraged groupification. Since the young people only receive a small detention allowance, the price of public transport alone posed challenges to independent travel without counsellors and other residents.

In this article, we examine the everyday social relationships of young asylum seekers. Due to exceptional circumstances – being in the middle of the asylum application process – the young people frequently deal with the authorities, including housing unit employees and immigration officials as well as personal representatives. They also get to know other students and teachers at school. On the other hand, affective relationships – those based on closeness – are usually formed in other areas: with other young asylum seekers as well as family members, relatives and friends in the home country, and

acquaintances in Finland and elsewhere in Europe. These differences are frequently challenged in the young people's everyday lives, especially with regard to their relationships with adults who work with them. In this gamut of social relationships, we explore how friendships are formed and actively created by young people.

The housing unit determines the framework of social relationships

Especially in European contexts, everyday understandings and scientific research about friendships often carry the prevailing ideals of the voluntariness and equality with regard to friendship relations. Friendship is often examined in comparison with family relations and in the context of the ideals of voluntariness, equality and choice. The maxim "You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family" is part of this tradition, which is in many ways problematic. The distinction between friendship and kin relations is not always clear: the assumed boundaries are porous since cousins can be good friends, and a close friend can be like family. On the other hand, even friendship relations are not always voluntary, as they can be determined by where a person lives, goes to school, and factors such as social class and gender. (Allan 1989; Bell & Coleman 1999.)

For young asylum seekers, the possibility of choosing their everyday social relationships is highly limited. At the housing unit we frequented as part of our volunteer and research period, the young people had shared a bus journey from Haparanda, Sweden, to the Helsinki area as well as everyday experiences related to their living arrangements, meals, pastimes and the asylum decision process. Doreen Massey (2005) uses the term "throwntogetherness" to describe the effects of space on the possibilities for social relationships. The shared living arrangements between young people that we observed were based on a decision made by the authorities in November 2015 – a decision which could have been very different. It meant that the young people were physically "thrown together" in a way that affected their opportunities for social relationships. As suggested in the above fieldwork anecdote, considering their circumstances, the young people get along very well with one another. Many employees at the unit pointed out that although there are arguments and even physical quarrels, the situation needs to be put into perspective: if dozens of teenagers, wherever they come from, are made to live together in uncertainty, it would be a miracle if there were no conflicts.

For young asylum seekers, the possibility of choosing their everyday social relationships is especially limited.

Peer company and social activities, but not necessarily comfort or closeness

At the concrete level, the boys' social life at the housing unit is determined by physical arrangements: the shared bedrooms are located in three parallel blocks, and the residents of each block attend common residents' meetings as well as "block meetings" and other gatherings. There are no common rooms other than the yard, cafeteria and areas allocated for volunteering activities and studying. Social interactions were also structured by language, nationality and religious practices, such as Ramadan, which was observed by some but not all of the young people. The third factor was hobbies, which are facilitated to the extent possible according to individual interests but within the framework of relatively scarce financial resources. In practice, young people who played football formed one loose group, while others who were not interested in football seemed to opt for more individual sports, in some cases at local sports clubs.

The housing unit is relatively far from shopping centres and city centres, and most of the young people had no financial means to travel daily. They saw the community at the housing unit as important and mostly described it in positive terms.

Interviewer: And what about the boys who live here, have you become friends?

N: Yes, I'm friends with everyone, we're almost like family. (...) We're always together and we talk, we go from room to room.

Although our interviews with the young people, as well as observations made while volunteering and interviews with employees all showed that the interpersonal relationships were functioning well and in many ways close, the young people also challenged and expanded our understanding of this aspect. The young people were brought into this community by their similar life circumstances. Although many had the same nationality, there were also many differences due to personal backgrounds, language skills and personal interests. It should not be automatically assumed that shared living arrangements alone will create interpersonal relationships that are based on closeness and reciprocity. Even if the social relationship is well-functioning, it does not necessarily lead to aspired friendship relations:

Interviewer: Are there friends, who you could share your thoughts with, do things together with and get support from?

K: He's just friends with everybody, he doesn't have a kind of a real friend who he could talk to about more stuff. It's mostly just saying hello and asking how everyone's doing...

Some of the interviewed young people said they missed having social relationships that could give them comfort and encouragement. Even when close relationships had been formed, some young people had found themselves in roles in which they were not able to find comfort for themselves:

Interviewer: Do the boys talk about it together, considering that they are all in the same situation, do they help one another?

A: Talking definitely helps, and he's got a few friends here who he comforts a lot, but he doesn't have anyone who comforts him.

Interviewer: I see. So he's got a lot of responsibility.

A: Exactly, he's got a lot of friends who tell him about their difficult experiences, and he feels sorry for them and comforts them.

Most of the young people shared the same language, which made us researcher volunteers think about the particularly vulnerable position in terms of friendship opportunities among those in the minority who speak other languages. Although a shared language facilitates communication and, thus, the formation and maintenance of relationships, neither our interviews nor our observations indicated that language was a deciding common factor among the young people. Instead, they had actively developed strategies to overcome language barriers even within the housing unit: "We are now somewhat familiar with each other, so we speak a bit of Farsi, a bit of Finnish and English, and somehow manage to understand one another."

The young people were active users of technology. Smartphones played a central role both in communication among the peers and in their interactions with counsellors and volunteers: they used actively translation apps and the

The young people saw the community at the housing unit as important and mostly described it in positive terms.

The young people were brought into this community by their similar life circumstances. Although many had the same nationality, there were also many differences due to personal backgrounds, language skills and personal interests.

housing unit's wi-fi network so as to listen to music and to watch music videos. Music in general – listening, playing instruments and singing – seemed to be an element that helped many young people overcome language barriers, as it helped them recall positive memories and connect with us Finnish-speaking researcher-volunteers and possibly also with other young people at the unit.

Strong institutionalised, weak affective relationships

In the young asylum seekers' everyday lives, the employees of the housing unit are key adults. Relationships with these adults are structured by their professional nature, the institutional context and the personal counsellor scheme. The personal counsellor scheme means that each counsellor is responsible for 5–8 young people and listens to their needs, views and feelings. On the other hand, every counsellor talks to all residents and advises them as needed.

In the young asylum seekers' everyday lives, the employees of the housing unit are key adults. Relationships with these adults are structured by their professional nature, the institutional context and the personal counsellor scheme.



Photo: Mostafa Mohammad Ali

The employees of the housing unit are an integral part of the community, but in many cases their role was to facilitate the young people's daily routines instead of developing close interpersonal relationships. This is understandable and even necessary for many reasons: although the residents and employees could develop strong relationships over time, the employees must treat everyone equally. Moreover, the employees do not know the details of a given asylum application process nor can they comment on them, and they must look after their own ability to cope by not letting the work affect them too much. However, daily routines and leisure activities are important to the young residents' well-being. "Having something else to think about" came up often in the interviews with the employees and the boys as a way to cope in a difficult life situation:

Interviewer: What kind of support would you like to get from the staff when you miss your family, life feels difficult and you might feel sad?

R: They can only help us by planning everyday activities for us, they can't help in other ways.

Interviewer: So what has helped you when you get homesick?

R: To have something else to think about.

On the other hand, some young people expressed a yearning for comfort from these adults and even to have trusted father or mother figures in their daily lives (See [Husseini](#) in this article collection). The management of intimacy, confidentiality and privacy is part of the everyday lives of young people and employees at the interface between institutionalised and affective relationships.

In some cases, boundaries set by a professional relationship and legislation also determined how employees could help to relieve tensions between the young people. This was seen in practice during the only serious conflict at the housing unit: a fight in which multiple residents were involved. Unlike in (Finnish) child protection facilities, the employees are not permitted to apprehend anyone or physically intervene in conflict situations, and they have to call the police instead. Although the employees understood the reasons for this practice, they felt conflicted when they thought that the young people, whom they knew well, could have been calmed down without police involvement.

Employee: Our security guidelines state that we are not to get involved in fights, obviously, and that we must rather press the alarm button instead. But considering that we've been here, what, close to seven months, and we know these boys, it's not a case of just "two asylum seekers are having a fight, quick, get security," because in this case it was a small [boy] and another boy, so you want to intervene because you think, "our little children are fighting, come on, stop now."

This restriction is part of a wider contradiction between services offered to unaccompanied young asylum seekers and other, statutory services for minors.

Relationships with the counsellors at the housing unit were close and well-functioning – within the boundaries of a professional relationship. In contrast, other relationships with Finnish society and people appeared to be weak, as found by other members of the research team (see [Honkasalo](#) and [Maiche](#) in this article collection). All young asylum seekers, including those who had already turned 17 and were thus over the statutory school age, went to school and some also had other activities where they interacted with Finnish young people. Even then, there was a lack of suitable settings in which to make contact with Finnish young people in a way that could support the formation of close friendships:

Interviewer: Would you like to have more Finnish friends, how do you think you could get to know Finnish people better, and what could we do here in Finland to help you build contacts in a natural way?

S: I'm not sure, but it's good to have contact from the point of view of language, get to know people and learn the language, but I wouldn't know what to do.

Interviewer: And what about your free time, what do you do after school, do you have opportunities to meet Finnish people?

S: We have a lot of free time, but it's not possible.

Interviewer: So if you play football or do sports, are you not together with Finnish people?

S: We just play amongst ourselves with the boys, we don't mix.

Relationships with the counsellors at the housing unit were close and well-functioning – within the boundaries of a professional relationship. Other relationships with Finnish society and people within it appeared weaker.

In light of this interview excerpt, the young people could not necessarily identify a single reason for the lack of social contact, although some referred to the lack of a common language and the reservedness and "coldness" of Finns. They also had few means to overcome these boundaries. There were some gendered exceptions to the lack of contact with Finns, as some of the young people had contacts with Finnish girls, which involved romantic feelings. Although the young people found it challenging to build relationships with their age peers, many valued the input of local (and out-of-town) adult volunteers and their willingness to support them in Finnish studies, leisure activities and local excursions.

Conclusion

Applying for an asylum and the possible additional appeal processes make up a life stage which takes many months, sometimes years. It is a long process for all asylum seekers, but especially so for young asylum seekers who have left behind their families and friends – physically, although not often mentally – and who are approaching adulthood in social settings that are new to them. During the process, relationships with peers at the housing unit offer an important everyday environment but not necessarily the closeness and security they yearn for.

In this article, we aimed to highlight the dynamics of interpersonal relationships between young asylum seekers in Finland, especially from the viewpoint of friendship relations. Our research indicates that young people's everyday social relationships at this stage are strongly shaped by the institutional settings, especially the housing unit, which provides the realm of social relationships with counsellors and other staff members, representatives, volunteers and other residents. The housing unit does not seek to prevent or discourage the formation of affective relationships that are based on closeness – quite the opposite. Even then, in this life stage that is characterised by temporariness and waiting, it can be challenging to make independent efforts to build friendships, particularly so outside of the housing unit.

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Authors



Henri Onodera
PhD, Postdoctoral fellow
University of Helsinki



Marja Peltola
PhD, Postdoctoral fellow
Finnish Youth Research Network



Encounters with unaccompanied refugee minors and the question of social support

Anna-Kaisa Kuusisto-Arponen

Throughout history, children and young people have been forced to leave their homes and travel alone as a result of wars and conflict. In 2015, a record number of nearly 95 000 unaccompanied young people arrived in the European Union. Their distribution across member states has been very uneven. For example, in 2015 over 35 000 unaccompanied children and young people applied for asylum in Sweden, while Germany received 14 400 applications and Finland just over 3000. News of inhumane treatment during journeys to Europe, reports of missing minors, and attacks on reception centres, which house unaccompanied young people, have become commonplace. On the other hand, inadequate resourcing and in some cases sheer negligence in the provision of protection and care have increased at alarming rates in many countries receiving unaccompanied young people.

One current example of this situation is the so-called Jungle refugee camp in Calais, which was shut down and demolished by the French authorities in October-November 2016. Once the camp had been razed to the ground, the last remaining residents were unaccompanied minors. It is clear that the authorities failed to transfer unaccompanied children and young people – and those that had become separated from their families – to reception centres in a responsible manner. There were several reports from volunteers, NGOs working in the area and media outlets on how the last remaining residents of the demolished camp, some 1,500 unaccompanied 10–17-year-olds, were left to fend for themselves living in shipping containers. The basic needs of these young people were not met at any level. There was a lack of food and water, and their living conditions were wholly inadequate. According to media reports, some young people didn't even have shoes or appropriate clothing to cope in cold weather ([England 2016](#)). The case of Calais is not only an example of a shocking human tragedy involving hundreds of underage asylum seekers, but it is also a demonstration of the failure of European migration policy and how the human rights of vulnerable children and young people are trampled upon.

It is clear that EU-level and national migration systems are not flexible enough to cope with these types of situations. As a result of increasingly stringent national and supranational regulation of immigration and family reunification, a generation of unaccompanied young immigrants has been created in Europe, and no-one is taking responsibility for their well-being and care.



For that reason, it is now more important than ever before to find small-scale everyday approaches to help these children and young people. This is attained through in-depth analytical understanding of their experience.

Challenge: recognition of transcultural and translocal belonging

Many of the current data collection and participation systems fail to reach marginalised or vulnerable children and young people and their experiential knowledge. This has also been the case with unaccompanied children and young people. Oversight of this empirical knowledge has led to various misinterpretations in how to provide appropriate housing, how to manage family relations and how to organise social support for unaccompanied minors (Kuusisto-Arponen 2016a and 2016b). In many European countries, care and support mechanisms are based on national – in some cases nationalistic – integration objectives, which do not support the agency of unaccompanied minors or the development of their transcultural identities in a new place.

Oversight of empirical knowledge and lack of compassion from society can lead to serious personal and social difficulties, such as loneliness, marginalisation and mental health problems. In Finland and elsewhere, growing migration has led to a situation where no specific institutional agent has overall responsibility for getting the lives of unaccompanied minors back on track. Instead, the child's best interest is often overridden by public interest, such as border control or the control of total numbers of migrants (Kuusisto-Arponen 2016a, Kaukko & Wernesjö 2016).

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Photo: Mostafa Mohammad Ali

Unaccompanied minors are a vulnerable group. It means that they need protection which, from the point of view of care, often means identifying the child or young person as in need of assistance or even as a victim – not only because of their past but because of their current experience (see [Honkasa-lo](#) and [Maiche](#) in this article collection). However, victimisation blurs the young person's agency and prevents us from identifying everyday negotiation through which minors agency is built and new aspects of their identity

develop and emerge (see also Lalander & Sernhede 2011). For that reason, research related to unaccompanied minors needs to take a conscious departure from rhetoric that victimises young people. Moreover, the many forms of their personal agency should be better highlighted. In order for research to develop an understanding of the lives of unaccompanied children without continuous victimisation, the research process and interaction must be based on encounters and presence (Kuusisto-Arponen 2015, 2016b).

The TRUST key project (2016–2018) is funded by the Academy of Finland and coordinated by the author. TRUST argues that existing systems have failed to recognise and utilise the experiential knowledge of unaccompanied minors. The project seeks to build in-depth understanding of the lives of unaccompanied minors and their inner worlds (see also Kohli 2006, 2014). Only by understanding the transcultural and translocal lives of these young people can their situation in Finland and across Europe be improved. In addition, the project examines how institutions such as schools, housing units and multicultural child and youth work can help to promote sustainable everyday life and the sense of belonging in a new place. Openness and compassion can help in the creation of new ways of identifying and supporting the personal agency of unaccompanied minors and understanding the migrant's experience (Kuusisto-Arponen 2016b).

Stumbling blocks in daily social support for unaccompanied minors arriving in Finland

A child's forceful separation from his or her family is always a human tragedy. Unaccompanied children and young people have experienced hardship, fear and helplessness in their former home countries and during their escape. In Finland, they are subjects of diverse forms of institutional care from group homes, family group homes and schools to healthcare and social services. They have the right to receive this protection, care and attention.

Accommodation arrangements for unaccompanied minors generally works well in Finland. On the other hand, challenges are posed by national and EU-level legislation. Also The Finnish Immigration Services (Migri)'s view on the right of unaccompanied children and young people to have close family relationships is troubling. Migri views children as separate subjects of protection whose closest social relations and families are sometimes even seen as threats in Migri's governing practices. In practice, the more stringent criteria for family reunification, including income requirements, which entered into force in autumn 2016, determine the fate of unaccompanied children and young people: it will be impossible for them to ever live normal family lives with their biological families in Finland. These administrative practices have immense human and societal consequences. Minors who arrive on their own will live their entire youths in institutional care, where their connections and needs in terms of transcultural and translocal belonging are often left unsupported or even completely overlooked.

I fully understand that it is not the task of officials such as Migri's senior inspectors to consider the long-term consequences of a given reunification decision on the young person's later life. It is also beyond the decision-making powers, official responsibility and personal emotional capacity of an official doing his or her job. However, there is a clear need in Finland for the development of cross-sectoral approaches to managing the lives of unaccompanied children and young people. Currently the fragmentation of young people's lives across the competence areas of different authorities is a problem. Broad-

The Finnish Immigration Service (Migri) views children as separate subjects of protection whose closest social relations and families are sometimes even seen as threats in Migri's governing practices. In practice, the more stringent criteria for family reunification, including income requirements, which entered into force in autumn 2016, determine the fate of unaccompanied children and young people: it will be impossible for them to ever live normal family lives with their biological families in Finland.

er discussion is needed to decide whether unaccompanied children should be treated primarily as foreign nationals or as children in decision-making on family reunification.

The situation also requires attention from legislators more widely. In addition, different authorities' views should be consolidated, and discussion between social services, immigration services and healthcare services is needed. I would argue that Migri should play a central role in this type of cooperation and in the development of reception and family reunification processes concerning unaccompanied minors. Development and coordination of such practices would require additional resources, which the immigration service does not currently have, since the prime focus of Migri's work is still on processing the backlog of asylum and residence applications. This is short-sighted resource planning by the central government.

At the practical level of the care chain, in addition to group homes Finland needs to develop permanent structures to facilitate family placement and companion family activities for unaccompanied children. Also the role of possible relatives living in Finland should be considered. Extended family networks should never be seen as obstacles to family reunification, but as normal social networks that can support integration and social well-being. Various forms of family contact would significantly alleviate emotional, social and geographical displacement (Kuusisto-Arponen 2015). In this way unaccompanied minors would become children and young people first and foremost, instead of being viewed as foreigners.

The development of permanent housing solutions between the reception stage and the residence application stage is currently still open. When a young person is granted a residence permit, he or she usually has to relocate from one housing unit to another. This often means a new school and schoolmates and, in the worst case scenario, moving to a different town. These upheavals can cause a great deal of emotional stress and fear and take away whatever social network the child has managed to build in the new society. In some cases, unaccompanied children have been transferred during the reception stage from one housing unit to another due to lack of space, but this has also been done as a "disciplinary measure". This kind of treatment can never be beneficial to the child.

The personnel resourcing of housing units in particular requires attention. In 2015, the number of units for minors increased more than tenfold, and assisted housing units for over 16s and accommodation at folk high schools were put in place. These units can house up to 40 young people, and they must have three staff members per ten residents. Previously, new arrivals were mainly placed in group homes, whose resourcing and qualification requirements are laid down in the Child Welfare Act. Group homes are units housing up to 24 children and young people. The required number of staff is generally seven (in care and upbringing duties) per seven children (Child Welfare Act, section 59). In my earlier research, I found that young people in the transitional phase (ages 16–18) require a lot of social support as they grow up and become independent. In my view, this social support is not delivered satisfactorily by the larger residential units when fewer adults are available (Kuusisto-Arponen 2016a).

In addition to various degrees of social support and, if necessary, psychological support, young people need opportunities to build a new social network with their peers, including Finnish youth and trusted adults. This is a challenge which Finnish integration policy and preparatory education at

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The current TRUST project explores the opportunities for meaningful co-activities and settings for social interaction between Finnish and immigrant youth through for example art projects based in the school environment. These everyday encounters help build a sense of belonging and provide a space for diverse transcultural practices.

schools fail to address. The current TRUST project, explores the opportunities for meaningful co-activities and settings for social interaction between Finnish and immigrant youth through for example art projects based in the school environment. These everyday encounters help build a sense of belonging and provide a space for diverse cross-cultural practices. For example, we have found in fieldwork that opportunities for multilingual interaction are much better in helping all young people build confidence and courage for social interaction than if only Finnish is used. Schools still view multilingual communication too often as an "obstacle" to learning Finnish.

Conclusion

The situation of unaccompanied children and young people is an acute issue in Europe. Their current number is in the tens of thousands in the Nordic countries alone. Proper understanding of the transcultural and translocal lives of these children is a prerequisite for supporting integration. In particular, it is important to recognise that Europe cannot afford to maintain hostile attitudes to the families of these children and their attempts to reunite. By protecting children but leaving them to live without their families and adhering to ever-stricter immigration policies, we are only creating a generation of lone immigrant children and young people. This will lead to poor societal inclusion of these minors, which actually cost society many times more than enabling family reunification for unaccompanied minors would.

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Author



Anna-Kaisa Kuusisto-Arponen
Academy of Finland research fellow
TRUST project leader
University of Tampere
anna-kaisa.kuusisto@uta.fi



Young asylum seekers need diverse forms of integration

Saara Pihlaja

Over the past year there has been a debate on the topic of integration in the media, at ministries and among those who work with the asylum seekers. Formal integration measures are not set in motion until after the asylum process is over. At the moment the asylum process takes approximately one year. As someone who has worked with asylum-seeking children I have seen that, in reality, children begin to ingrate much earlier than the asylum process is over and the resident permit decision is made. In order to stabilise the young person's life situation, integration should be supported and encouraged even though it is difficult to plan the future during the temporary asylum process. Basic skills and knowledge which are seen as essential for integration and inclusion in Finnish society, are, in many cases, useful life skills that are universal and can thus be applied also outside the Finnish society.

Integration should be supported already at the reception stage

It is clear that integration is vital both to the individual and to wider society. The Ministry of the Interior defines integration from two points of view:

'Kotouttaminen' refers to integration measures delivered by various authorities at the central and local government level. The objective of integration measures is to ensure that immigrants are aware of their societal rights and duties and feel welcome as members of Finnish society.

'Kotoutuminen' refers to integration from the immigrants' point of view: adapting to Finnish society and acquiring new information, skills and approaches that help them become active participants in life in their new home country. Some immigrants integrate very easily, and others need more time and support services – integration measures – in order to adapt. Finnish or Swedish language skills and knowledge about Finnish society are prerequisites for integration.

The definition is aptly explained by a former asylum seeker who arrived in Finland years ago: for him, kotoutuminen means taking control of his life in a foreign country, knowing where to receive help if needed, and being able to deal independently with Kela and other agencies.



Integration measures are the responsibility of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment. In practice, the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and the Ministry of the Environment are strongly involved in practical integration measures. The measures are governed by the 2011 Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration.

I believe that integration and a sense of inclusion help prevent the risk of young asylum seekers' exclusion, exploitation or disappearance during the reception process. The goal should be that young people would be supported to use the time spent at the reception center beneficially. During the asylum process, young people should have opportunities to learn important knowledge and skills for the future as appropriate for their age, regardless of whether they will spend their future in Finland or elsewhere.



Photo: Mostafa Mohammad Ali

In addition to the basic duties related to the asylum process, staff at housing units should ensure that young residents have access to factual information about matters such as a healthy lifestyle and rights and duties. For many young people, it is the first time in their lives when they can access this kind of information from a reliable source. Broad education received during the asylum process on topics such as health, sexual matters, human rights and media literacy, and discussions about the harmfulness of certain cultural traditions can help integration in Finland. Information of the above mentioned topics are also useful life skills for the young people anywhere in the world, as are IT and first aid skills and the ability to plan personal finances. The skills are beneficial to integration from both points of view, that is, to young asylum seekers and wider society. At many reception units, the staff members have diverse backgrounds and specialist skills. Discussions and lessons on important topics can be organised as part of the centre's activities by utilising staff members' competencies. Over the past year, also many external experts have been involved as volunteers or through various projects by teaching important topics and life skills to young people living in housing units.

In addition to the basic duties related to the asylum process, staff at reception centre should ensure that young residents have access to factual information about matters such as a healthy lifestyle and rights and duties.

A young person's integration tends to start from a sense of security: being able to live and be part of a place where there are safe adults, everyday routines, rules and boundaries, caring and respect – after a long, difficult and sometimes traumatic journey. This setting is provided by the reception centre's staff and active volunteers. In order to promote the sense of security, staff should be present and help the young people develop a stable everyday routine and learn life management skills.

It can be difficult to find a balance between caring and helping on one hand and setting boundaries and responsibilities on the other. However, responsibilities and boundaries are essential forms of caring: well-meaning gestures and eager help by adults should not hinder a young person's integration, and his or her personal activity should be encouraged in order to promote engagement.

Opportunities to live a "care-free" young person's life must be provided.

When a young person receives the resident permit decision or turns 18, he or she has to become relatively independent and cope without the daily presence of counsellors. The gap between asylum process and the independent life after the asylum decision can be avoided by giving careful support and guidance during the asylum process in order to help the young person cope with things he or she personally finds difficult: being on time, using and charging a travel card for public transport, saving the detention period allowance for bigger purchases such as clothes or hobbies.

Opportunities to live a "care-free" young person's life must be provided. However instead of allowing young people to become institutionalised during the asylum application process and fail to develop an understanding of how their surrounding society works, efforts should be made to encourage engagement and personal responsibility. It is a long process, but I believe that it is economically beneficial to society in the long term.

Young asylum seekers have gone through various difficult experiences. However, it is important to remember that they are first and foremost ordinary young people, who just happen to have a different story than many of their peers. Perhaps the most important integration measures for these young people are caring, supporting age-appropriate development, and helping them to prepare for independent lives.

Conclusion

It is important that integration measures should begin right at the start of the reception process, as this will benefit both the young person and society on the whole. Integration measures for young people should start from teaching life skills and supporting age-appropriate development as well as engagement. It can be a challenge to find the right balance between the desire to help and setting boundaries and responsibilities. It is important to remember that responsibilities and boundaries are essential forms of caring. They will help prevent institutionalisation and support engagement and integration. After all, young asylum seekers are just ordinary young people.

A young person's integration starts from a sense of security.

Engagement should be supported by caring and giving responsibility.

Author



Saara Pihlaja
Save the Children Finland



Mental health challenges faced by underage asylum seekers

Minna Lähteenmäki

In this article, I will be examining the factors affecting the mental health of unaccompanied minors arriving in Finland as asylum seekers and the challenges in the treatment of their mental problems. Increasing awareness of the factors affecting mental health helps in the identification and treatment of the psychic symptoms of underage asylum seekers in a vulnerable position. Early intervention helps to prevent mental health problems from becoming more common and makes it easier to receive support and treatment. This article is based on my dissertation on underage asylum seekers (Lähteenmäki 2013) and the practical experience I accumulated when working with unaccompanied minors in the Finnish Refugee Council between 2014 and 2015.

“I’m not thinking about myself but about how my family is doing” – Separation from the family has a negative impact on the mental health of unaccompanied minors arriving in Finland as asylum seekers

Separation from parents and other family members or their death are matters that, according to a number of studies (for example, Björklund 2014 and Kohli 2011), cause concern, fear, longing, sadness, anguish and guilt in unaccompanied minors. The story told by Hazim (not his real name) using the storycrafting method (See for example, Karlsson 2003) is a good description of a situation where the longing for the family comes to the surface just before going to bed. Hazim told his story as part of the Tukiverkko (support network) project of the Finnish Refugee Council.

I come here straight from school. I’m about half an hour on the net, then I start missing my family, and time goes slow, you know. Then I decide to go somewhere else. I go to the gym and then go for a swim. Then I come back, spend time on the Internet. Then I’m on Facebook using time to meet friends, which gives me great feelings. And the friends, some are in Sweden, some in Iran. We talk everyday things, like when do you come home from school and what are you doing after school. These are some of the questions I ask them and we talk about these things.

After this I go to my own room, so I lie down in bed and start to think of my family. I’m thinking what my parents are up to, what they’re doing now and are they ok. When I think of this, it makes me sad. After these things, I try to sleep but it takes a long time. It takes an hour and a half or two hours before



I sleep. I am in bed but not asleep. And one more thing - when I think about these things, I'm not thinking of myself but my family, how they're doing. And then I pray. The next day I have to go to school. I try to sleep, but the thoughts spin round in my head. But I still try to sleep.

Hazim, 15 years (storycrafted in Persian)

Many unaccompanied minor asylum seekers worry about their families and for this reason they are continuously following events in their own countries on their mobile phones. It is difficult to get sleep if you have been watching news reports on war events in the areas where you were born or images of refugees that have drowned in the Mediterranean.

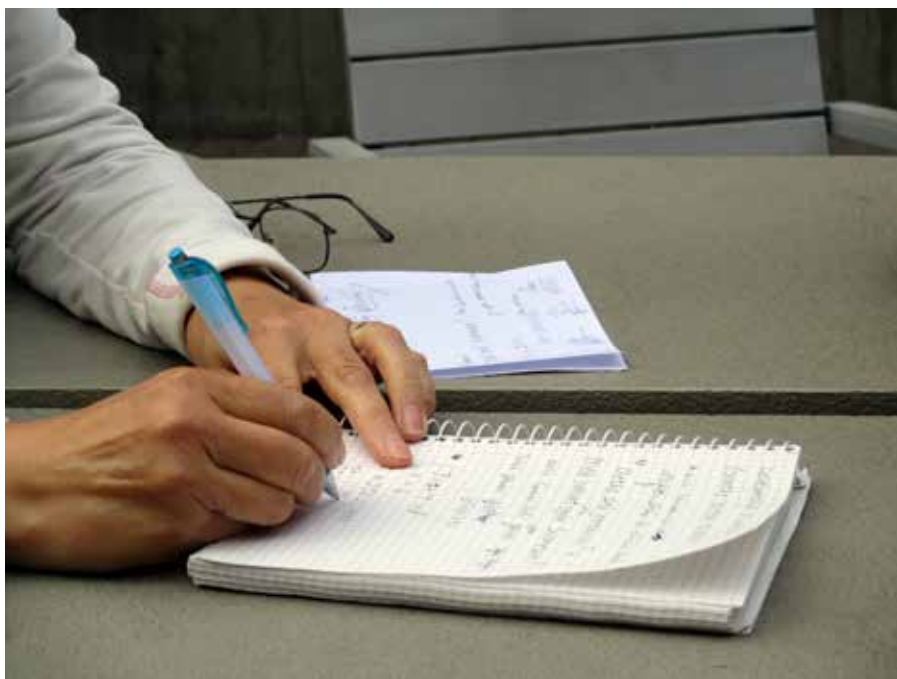


Photo: Mostafa Mohammad Ali

A child or a young person maintaining contacts with their parents may have real or imaginary obligations towards them. The young person in question may feel that it is their obligation to assist the parents financially. This may lead to a situation where the young person no longer wants to get a study place and tries to find work as quickly as possible. The parents are respected, their advice is listened to and their wishes are observed, whenever possible. It is the duty of an elder brother or sister to look after the accompanying younger sibling. In fact, people working with unaccompanied minor asylum seekers should ensure that looking after the younger siblings does not become an excessive burden to the elder brother or sister (Lähteenmäki 2013).

Underage asylum seekers are often anxious to be reunited with their parents and siblings. The awareness that the family reunification process is difficult often adds to the feeling of hopelessness (cf. Förbom 2012). When you are young, it feels particularly unfair if your family members cannot join you in Finland even though you have been granted a residence permit. It is important to influence political decision-makers and authorities so that the practice is changed and that Finland will start observing basic human rights in this respect.

Children and young people that do not have any age-mates speaking the same language in the same group home and especially those who, for one reason or another, no longer maintain contacts with their family members, are in a particularly vulnerable position. They need people with whom they can speak in their own mother tongue. Peer group activities have been used on a small scale in Finland as a form of support for unaccompanied minors

In fact, people working with unaccompanied minor asylum seekers should ensure that looking after the younger siblings does not become an excessive burden to the elder brother or sister.

and they have been found to be a good way of helping young people that worry about their families. The activity was modelled in the *Tukiverkko* (support network) project of the Finnish Refugee Council between 2013 and 2015 (Finnish Refugee Council 2015) and in the project *Lasten kokemusasiantuntijatoiminta osana vastaanottoa* (children's expert-by-experience work as part of reception activities) organised by Save the Children between 2015 and 2016 (Ritari & Piitulainen 2016).

“These thoughts are inside my head but I try to sleep” – Identifying post-traumatic symptoms in children is difficult

According to one peer counsellor, many of the young asylum seekers have experienced more during their short lives than many mainstream Finns by the time they are fifty. Most of the unaccompanied minors arriving in Finland have experienced traumatic war events and suffered at the hands of human smugglers. Many of the children seeking asylum in Finland have suffered hunger in the own countries and during the journey to Europe and lived in the streets because of poverty. Some of them have also served as child soldiers. According to some estimates, the children that have arrived in Finland in recent years are more traumatised than those that arrived before them: They have spent several months on the journey to Europe and a larger proportion of them have also experienced kidnappings and abuse (for example, Mikkonen 2016).

Some of the asylum seekers suffer from post-traumatic stress symptoms, such as nervousness, restlessness, impatience, alertness, irritation, bouts of anger, sleeping problems and problems with concentration. They may also want to live in seclusion and shun other people. (Halla 2007.) Unaccompanied minors arriving in Finland may also be afraid of males, police officers and soldiers. They may have been mistreated or abused by such people in their own countries or during the journey to Finland. In addition to its human cost, mental anguish also slows down the integration process and makes it more difficult to learn Finnish and to establish trust-based friendships and relationships with adults (Lähtenmäki 2013).

The mental health problems affecting asylum seekers are often attributed to the traumatic events that they have experienced in their own countries and during the journey to Europe. At the same time, less consideration has been given to the unpleasant experiences during the reception phase, which are an additional burden to an already fragile mind. (Lähtenmäki 2013; Carswell et al. 2011; Craig et al. 2010.) Unaccompanied young asylum seekers may be traumatised after their arrival in Finland by violations of privacy in connection with age tests and the opening of their mobile phones by the police, deaths of close family members, changes of residence, mental disorders affecting other children and reactions to negative decisions and refusals of entry.

It is often difficult to identify the mental symptoms of individuals seeking asylum in Finland (Halla 2007). It is particularly challenging with children and young people in private accommodation. People from similar cultural backgrounds may try to protect the children from shame and in so doing they also prevent them from receiving treatment. At the same time, family accommodation also has advantages: It often allows the sharing of feelings in one's own language and at its best it provides young people with a secure living environment.

A child can only be helped if it is known what they have been through, how they experience the asylum process and what they think about their future. However, it is often difficult for young people to discuss painful mat-

Many of the children seeking asylum in Finland have suffered hunger in the own countries and during the journey to Europe and lived in the street because of poverty.

ters (Björklund 2014; Lähtenmäki 2013; Vervliet 2013). Fortunately, there are well-proven functional methods that enable even difficult matters to be shared. These include methods and therapies involving music, storytelling, visual arts, physical exercise and photography.

As the number of asylum seekers has grown in recent years, it has also become more difficult for unaccompanied minors to get psychiatric treatment. The purpose of the *Paloma* project managed by the National Institute for Health and Welfare is to determine how well refugees and asylum seekers are able to access mental health services and to develop an operating model for different stages of the services. The aim is also to get an overview of the situation of minors seeking asylum in Finland.

Unaccompanied minor asylum seekers have the same right to health care services as children and young people permanently residing in Finland (for example, Piitulainen 2016). In practice, however, only a small proportion of those in need can be provided with mental health services. There are few experts specialised in mental health problems of refugee children in Finland and because of long distances and the large number of individuals in need of help they can only provide assistance for a small number of people. Other problems include the lack of interpreters specialised in mental health matters, rapid turnover of such interpreters and the fact that psychiatrists and psychologists are not used to working with interpreters.

However, a young person suffering from mental disorders should be provided with assistance even if finding a treatment place was a problem. If the help is provided without delay, the chances of successful rehabilitation are also better. As many of the group homes are located in small municipalities, travelling to the treatment places often takes time. Occasionally, underage asylum seekers must also be prescribed antidepressants or soporifics. These should not be the only form of treatment - in addition to psychiatric medication, there should also be discussion sessions with the children.

"I met my mates in the Facebook and it gives me a good feeling" – Smooth daily life, inclusion and successes help to strengthen mental health

Group homes and other parties supporting unaccompanied minors arriving in Finland as asylum seekers are performing valuable work by ensuring that children and young people can manage their daily routines. Successful management of daily routines is an important stabilising factor, especially for traumatised individuals. Eating, sleeping, going to school, studying, physical exercise and hobbies are central factors in mental health ([Finnish Association for Mental Health 2016](#)).

Security, feeling of inclusion and experiences of success are essential to strengthening the wellbeing of asylum-seeking children. However, the focus is often solely on providing a basis for security and the feeling of inclusion, whereas the provision of participatory opportunities is often forgotten (Kohli 2010).

Study places and leisure facilities provide young asylum seekers with good chances for participation and thus also for experiencing successes. There are, however, few joint activities with mainstream Finns because it is difficult for asylum-seeking children and young people to get acquainted with their Finnish-speaking age-mates ([Honkasalo 2016](#) and [Onodera & Peltola 2016](#) in this article collection). In schools and in other study places, asylum-seeking minors usually spend time with other young people from the same group home even if they were interested in meeting other young people (Lähtenmäki 2013). Familiarity creates security and the threshold for using recently learned Finnish words and sentences is often high. The attitudes in the place of residence, study place or the place where the young people are engaged in

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their hobbies may also prevent attempts to establish friendships with mainstream Finns.

The leisure activities that can be provided for group home residents greatly depend on the location of the facility. Therefore, the location of new group and family group homes and supported living units should be carefully considered before the final decisions are made. Different types of participatory opportunities may be crucial to the rehabilitation of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers suffering from traumas. Furthermore, easy access to treatment places is one reason why the homes of the young asylum seekers should be reasonably close to public transportation. In many small municipalities in Finland, there are plans to convert empty nursing homes and school buildings into family group homes for unaccompanied children seeking asylum in Finland. We can only hope that children's interest is given priority over local government budgetary considerations and that children and young people are not housed in buildings that are not intended for families and that, because of their remote location, may traumatise the young people even more.

At some point, nearly every unaccompanied minor seeking asylum in Finland suffers from symptoms arising from their difficult situation. In such situations, the most important thing is to be near, hold the child in your lap and calm them, in other words provide the child with a sense of security. In fact, empathy, ability to listen and emotional intelligence are skills that should be mastered by all employees and volunteers that work with unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in Finland in group homes, study places, leisure facilities and in all those locations where they spend time.

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Author



Minna Lähteenmäki
Project Planner
Finnish Association for Mental Health



“When there is only the me and the you”: view of the volunteers

Mervi Kaukko, Jennina Lahti and Esko Nummenmaa

In this article, Ahad, Sameer, Navid and Aarif (not their real names), four unaccompanied 17-year-old asylum seekers from Afghanistan, and Jennina and Esko, two class teacher students in the Intercultural Teacher Education programme at the University of Oulu, give their views of the support person project launched in autumn 2015.

*This Shrovetide feels like laughter.
It's bubbling and tickling.
It starts from your toes, spreads to the fingertips and tickles your eyelashes.
You can see it as a smile on your lips,
as rosy cheeks and snowy clothes.
It sounds like a giggle,
like the most beautiful sound of the world. It
is genuine and comes right from your heart.
This Shrovetide feels like laughter and looks like happiness.
(Shrovetide spent together, 2016, Jennina Lahti)*

About 20 unaccompanied minor asylum seekers and 10 educational sciences students met regularly for seven months as part of the support person project (from December 2015 to May 2016). The number of participants varied and new people also joined the project during its existence. There were both planned activities and get-togethers without any planned programme content. Even though, officially, the project did not continue beyond May, the support persons and the young asylum seekers continued to meet during the summer months by holding barbecues, playing games or by doing other things together. The students for the support person project were selected from among educational sciences students at the University of Oulu on the basis of motivational letters. The university and the reception centre involved organised an orientation session for the students and at end of the project, the students were able to enter it as a freely selected course in their study register.

The young asylum seekers were interviewed for this article in October 2016. Even though the interviewer (Jennina) already knew the young Afghans, the interviews provided them with the first opportunity to express their thoughts about the meaning of spending time together in their own language through an interpreter. We have supplemented the thoughts of Jennina and Esko with the thoughts expressed by other students participating in the project. Their views have been taken from the reflection assignments carried out at the start and at the end of the voluntary project.





Photo: Jennina Lahti

“The best thing was when we met you and could talk with you”

The young men taking part in the project had recently arrived in Finland. They were getting used to a new kind of everyday life with new people. Navid remembers the first days with the volunteers:

Navid: When you arrived we had only spent a short time in Finland. We had all kinds of difficulties and you helped us. We had walks, we hiked and made all kinds of things together and it really helped us. When you spent time with us we had a great time, it was fun.

The volunteers were also in a new situation and in a new setting when they entered the daily life of the reception centre. For many of the students, visiting the place where the young Afghans lived and waited was their first taste of the asylum seekers' world. The way in which the young asylum seekers see the volunteers' role is summed up by Aarif and Navid as follows:

Aarif: For most of our time we are surrounded by foreigners and there are few chances of getting Finnish friends. There are only foreigners in the school and in the place where we live and this makes it quite difficult to get to know Finns.

Navid: My first thought was that are there really people doing this work and helping us without any pay. But you helped us. You really wanted to help and spend time with us. I had lots of problems inside me and then I realised that you came even though you didn't have to. You came even though it was cold, it was raining, it was snowing and it was dark. It really gave me a nice feeling when I realised that there are people who really want to do something and help. (...) It was difficult to have contacts with other people and it was difficult for other people to have contacts with us. You spent time with us, we felt good and all this prevented us from becoming depressed.

In the reception centre, time was something concrete. The young asylum seekers spent most of their time waiting. The waiting was characterised by a succession of smaller events: school, interpreted discussions with counsellors and the processing of the asylum applications, such as the asylum interviews conducted by the officials of the Finnish Immigration Service. However, the residents of the reception centre had more than enough time and it was not always possible to use it in a meaningful manner. The atmosphere could be described with the words of Rebecca Rotter (2016, 85): The idea that “nothing happens” when waiting may relate not only to restrictions on the ability to act in spatial terms but also to a sense of suspension of movement in time.

There were moments when you felt as if the time had stopped. The task of the volunteers was to provide content for the waiting, interrupt the everyday routines, and give the young asylum seekers a brief chance to be just like any young people and spend time with other young people. According to Aarif, the volunteers succeeded in this task:

Aarif: We were all in a difficult situation. We had left home for the first time in our lives. We had endured a thrilling and scary journey to Finland and we were missing our families and longed for home. Spending time with you was really fun and we were able to forget all unpleasant things.

The games, plays and other activities planned by the students made the time spent together more meaningful. Even though it is justified to emphasise the importance of the spontaneous participation of the young asylum seekers, meaningful participation in the “interim space” arising from the asylum seeking process is not something that happens by the snap of a finger (see [Honkasalo](#) in this article collection). At the start of the asylum process, participation may be less spontaneous and involve more planning by others. It may be anything that offers small expectations within the overall process of waiting (See also for example, Brighter Futures 2013). The future class teachers managed the planning of the activities and joint doing quite well.

Sameer: The best thing was when you played with us. Everything was fun.

Navid: You had great and complex things and we always had a great time. There were new things each time and we did different things.

Ahad: You had really complex games and that's why we had a great time. It would have been boring if you only had had simple games.

The lack of a common language was compensated by the fact that both the students and the young asylum seekers wanted to understand each other and establish bonds with each other. The complex games would not have been enough if there had not been any feeling of mutuality.

“And you also had a great time”

Navid: You were so natural. When we did things together we felt that you really want to do these things. You didn't do these things simply because you had to but because you genuinely wanted to spend time with us and do all those things with us. And you also had a great time.

In the words of Ravi Kohli (2015): “Fun is a serious commitment.” This became abundantly clear time and again. Natural feelings, the genuine willingness to do things with the young asylum seekers, spend time with them and to establish contacts with them often came up in the interviews. Navid told about two volunteers who spent their time in the reception centre sitting on a sofa and doing nothing. Even though this may have been because the volun-

The task of the volunteers was to provide content for the waiting, interrupt the everyday routines, and give the young asylum seekers a brief chance to be just like any young people and spend time with other young people.

teers were too timid to join the activities, the young asylum seekers viewed the situation differently. According to Navid, they felt that the volunteers did not really want to be in that place that very moment and instead waited to be taken somewhere else. Volunteers and researchers are well aware of the difficulty of “getting to the field” and the occasional thoughts that it would be easier to be anywhere else. On the other hand, people that have worked as volunteers or done research for many years know that you should really plunge into the activity. The commitment emphasised by Kohli means that you sit on the sofa more than once, learn to know each other, invite people for a visit and bring your whole personality into the work. Sometimes, the young asylum seekers must be given enough time to join the activities, while occasionally you can also take the first step. Irrespective of the order, it is important to be genuinely present.

Gradually, you find more words, you are able build trust and loose bonds become stronger. In an uncertain phase of your life, nodding acquaintances, friendly faces and the awareness of being accepted create hope (See e.g. Honkasalo 2011, Kivijärvi 2015; [Maiche](#) in this article collection). This basic feeling of being human can be strengthened by just spending time with other people in an everyday setting: get-togethers, cooking or playing guitar and singing with people with whom you feel at home.

In an uncertain phase of your life, nodding acquaintances, friendly faces and the awareness of being accepted create hope.

Ahad: The best thing was when we met you and could talk with you. We had a great time and the boys were prepared to talk and chat with you. It was also great to learn more about your culture.

Navid: The best thing was when you came, it really had a big impact on my life. On how you manage and do things.

Echoing the words of Navid, one of the other Afghan young people thanked the volunteers in the following words: “Thank you for helping me to become happy again.” The songs sung by the students and the asylum seekers during their get-togethers reflected the fact that the young Afghans were a long way from home and missed their families (“*Maailman toisella puolen*”) but they also reflected the hope for a better future (“*My heart will go on*”, “*Todella kaunis*”). This reminds us of the fact that even though the waiting (something that every asylum seeker must endure) may seem empty and useless, it is also a time of hope. Waiting for something always means that there is hope for something better. This also makes waiting a personal and emotional experience (Brun 2016, 82; Kohli and Kaukko 2017).

As part of the planning of the support person work and the orientation session preceding it, the students and the reception centre employees also tried to determine what the young asylum seekers (to whom the support was intended) might need. However, the support proved a two-way process and there was a degree of flexibility in the roles of the persons giving the support and the persons that were supported. Navid asked Jennina:

Navid: But I would like to ask you what your thoughts were when you came here.

Jennina: At first we were nervous but that feeling disappeared really quickly. It was always really nice to come here and spend time with you. You became really important to us - you're like at least 20 new little brothers. We are really grateful that we met you and the moments that we have spent together have been enormously important to us.

In a family, you do not need a common language or words, it is enough when you are your true self and care about other people. Both the support persons and the young Afghans characterised the group as a family:

Navid: *It was like having new sisters and brothers, that's how we felt.*

When asked about the activities, the other students also remember the initial nervousness, the sisterly feelings and the fact that they were doing something important. Next we will examine the activities from the perspective of the students involved.



Photo: Jennina Lahti

Being a human to a human

*Hi you important and sweet person,
thank you for being there.*

*Thank you for caring
petting and hugging.*

*You don't need to be more than your real self or understand more than what
you understand.*

You only need to walk alongside me, laugh with me and be near me.

That's all you need to do.

(Of the feeling of inadequacy, Jennina's blog 2016)

In our work as volunteers, we noted that our feelings often went from one extreme to another. Our roles evolved as we spent time with the asylum seekers and communicating them was an interactive process. There were all kinds of difficult feelings that we had to face and deal with as we were doing our work. However, happiness, laughter, joy and genuine showing of care were the dominant feelings.

We were fifth-year students when we took part in the course for the support persons. Compared with all other courses on cultural sensitivity, working with other people and educational ethics, this course was more special because of the people we met as part of the course. The course was also important because it provided us with an opportunity to define our roles as teachers and supported the growth of our own self-awareness.

Voluntary work in the reception centre taught us things about ourselves. It showed us what life is like in the reception centre but at the same time we also got an idea of the darkest and brightest sides of life. The work was a two-way process: It involved teaching and learning, staying near and letting people to come close, listening, telling, caring and the feeling of being important. The aim in the project was to provide the young asylum seekers with a pause from the waiting, fear, uncertainty and the unknown, so that during this short period they could be like anybody else. Our own aim was to understand this wait-

ing and the chance of doing something useful. The common aim was to be just like any other young people, make food, laugh, play, do funny things and spend time together as ordinary human beings. We were somewhat confused by the heartfelt thanks for the time spent together expressed by the young asylum seekers. This was because we felt that it was us that should have thanked them and that there are not words grand enough to express our thanks.

However, at times working with the asylum seekers was surprisingly difficult. We were dealing with young people that had to live in extreme uncertainty. Their own families and the waiting of the asylum decision by the Finnish Immigration Service were constantly in the minds of these young people. The trust-based relationship between the support persons and the young asylum seekers strengthened over the months and the young people started sharing their thoughts. Instead of hearing stories, we began to encounter feelings. There are no courses or study books preparing you for that. However, the process of encountering feelings was made easier by the orientation provided before the project, in which fieldwork professionals told about the situations that we might face. We also discussed our own feelings and encountered feelings in a joint session. Enough time and resources should be allocated to this when similar activities are planned.

In addition to difficult feelings, we also became familiar with many other challenges that you face when working with other human beings. The feelings of inadequacy were highlighted in the reflection assignments of the students. At the same time, the uncertainty experienced by the young asylum seekers was also projected on the volunteers' own emotions. The volunteers commented on these emotions as follows:

At times, we are also emotionally exhausted as you never know what is going on and how these young people are doing. It's difficult not to take responsibility for the problems of these young people and somehow accept that there are so many things that you can't do anything about.

There have been situations where you have to come to terms with your own inadequacy. In many ways, it's an incredibly agonising and painful feeling. You want to be there and do so much more but you can't do everything. There is also the feeling that you can't offer those people all that they need as individuals. In a way, you have to forgive yourself and accept that there is a limit to what you can do.

Their own families and the waiting of the asylum decision by the Finnish Immigration Service were constantly in the minds of these young people.



Photo: Jennina Lahti

The ordinary moments were the best ones. The moments of joint doing, learning and training where the simple act of caring brings tears in your eyes. Every time you feel amazed when you realise how much space there is for overwhelming warmth and goodness in a single room. It is also important to know and see that what you are doing really matters.

However, the most important moment comes when the context and the whole setting fade away, when only the essential is left. When the university, the university course, the reception centre and the waiting for the asylum decision, the past dangers and the uncertain future no longer matter. When there is only “me” and “you”. That moment matters most because that’s when one individual meets another individual. That moment you are totally present: It is no longer a question of pity or a feeling of superiority. It is simply a matter of being a human to a human. The whole meaning of the support person work is in that moment.

*How would I say this to another person
thank you for being you
thank you for being there
thank you for giving the chance to meet you
spend time with you, sing and hug.
I'm so happy that our paths crossed,
you gave me something invaluable for the rest of my life.
Thank you for giving the chance to meet you
and for meeting me.
You are wonderful, a unique drawing made by a master artist.
How could I express this
take care
make your hopes come true and live your dreams
live, experience and be bold
laugh?
How could I put this in words
don't allow anybody to take your inner self, that what you are,
because you are great, in fact you are absolutely fantastic when you are you.
How would I wish
love, happiness, joy
good moments for you in your life?
How should I bid you farewell, give you a tight hug and ask you to stay in
touch?
(Jennina Lahti)*

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Authors



Mervi Kaukko (Doctor of Education, researcher) served as the responsible teacher during the pilot stage of the support person course. Mervi worked as a volunteer in the reception centre, especially before the start of the support person activities.



Jennina Lahti (Master of Education, class teacher) was one of the most active support persons in the group. She conducted the interviews with the young asylum seekers for this article.



Esko Nummenmaa is a volunteer and a class teacher student. He has played a key role in the planning and implementation of the work and in ensuring its continuity.



Children first and foremost?

Hanna Laari and Sanna Rummakko

In an ideal situation, child asylum seekers unaccompanied by guardians would be treated as children first and foremost, and the realisation of the child's best interests would be individually evaluated at all stages of the process as required by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Finland's national legislation. In reality, asylum-seeking children are more likely to be targets for administrative procedures facing the same legal protection risks and fears as adult asylum seekers. This is particularly noteworthy as Finland's asylum policy has been made consistently stricter since 2015.

Many asylum-seeking children who have arrived in Finland during this and the previous year might have been forced to wait for an order on representation and an asylum interview for a long time and move from one reception centre to another, sometimes a number of times. The child's representative might have lacked experience in the task and been replaced by another before the completion of the process. Children have not always been provided with the assistance of an attorney even though they would have needed it during the process. In 2016, there were restrictions to receiving legal help, and assistance at the initial phase has been moved nearly completely from actors specialised in refugee law to public legal aid offices.

New policies on the country of departure and changes in the Aliens Act (elimination of the category of humanitarian protection) have also resulted in dozens of denied applications for minors from Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia. This is unlike how the issue used to be handled in Finland. Even if a child received a favourable decision, many children are shocked upon learning that their family members will never get to reside in Finland. The latest restrictions in the legislation on family reunification make bringing family members to Finland practically impossible, as the income requirements also apply to minors. Right now, the accumulation of all the restrictions and related effects are visible in the lives of the children and young people who have arrived in the country as unaccompanied minor asylum seekers.

Constant legislative changes

At the end of 2016, we are still living through the exceptional period of time that began in the autumn of 2015, when the number of asylum seekers grew tenfold in Finland. This exceptional situation has stirred up the field of the reception of asylum seekers, decision-making, legal aid and also civic society



in general. Similarly to the number of all asylum seekers, also the number of unaccompanied minors entering the country grew to record numbers in 2015. Until then, Finland had received on average 200 unaccompanied minor asylum seekers per year during the 2010s; however, in 2015, over 3 000 of them entered the country.

The exceptional situation led to changes in several laws and practices in a short period of time. In the December of 2015, Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's Government published its action plan on asylum policy, aiming at several restrictions. Measures were taken to implement the plan within a strict timetable. Similar measures were taken in the neighbouring countries struggling with even larger numbers of asylum seekers. A "race to the bottom", i.e. competition over which country treats its asylum seekers the worst, turned from a figure of speech into reality also in the Nordic countries where standards used to be high for the treatment of asylum seekers. The accumulation of the implemented restrictions within a short period of time has increased risks related to legal protection among all asylum seekers.

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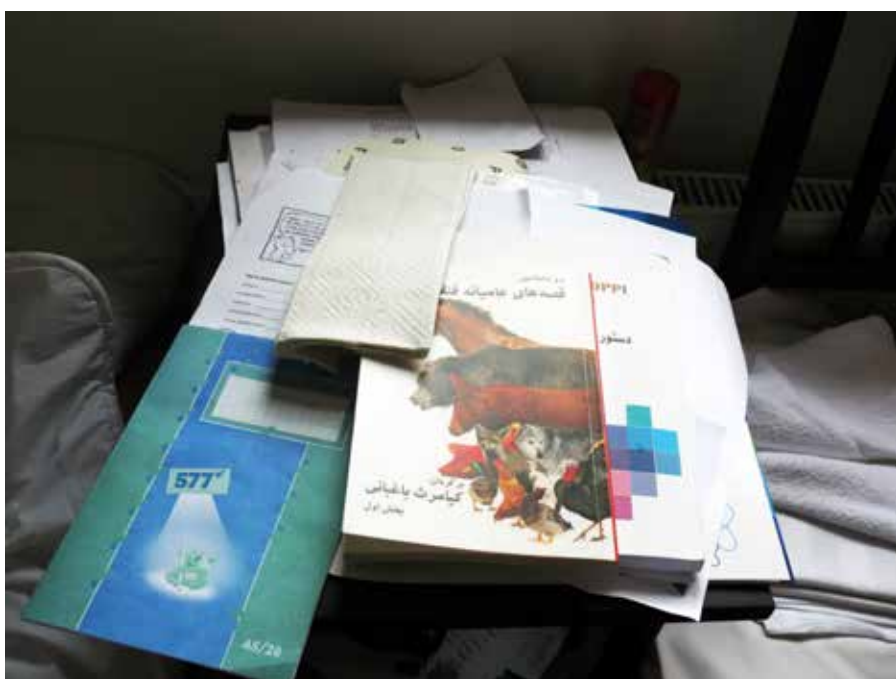


Photo: Mostafa Mohammad Ali

The majority of statutes concerned with the status of asylum seekers are included in the Aliens Act of Finland. The level of international protection was decreased in Finland in early 2016 as the section on humanitarian protection was completely eliminated from the Act. As a result, residence permits may no longer be granted on the basis of the poor security situation in the home country. Previously, humanitarian protection has only been granted to minors infrequently, but those issued with a residence permit on this basis are faced with a problem due to this change as the temporary first-year permit expires. This is due to the fact that a continued permit may not be issued on the same basis as the legal provision no longer exists. The basis for the residence permit must now be different. Previously, it was practically ensured that a permit on the basis of protection would be continued.

The criteria for issuing international protection have been made notably tighter, particularly as part of changes to policies on countries of origin. The security situation of the country has only been deemed reason enough for protection for those coming from Syria. Asylum seekers from other countries have been required to present more grounds related to them in person than previously. Criteria regarding the most common countries of origin, Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia, have been tightened to the extent that an increasingly

small number of applicants are ever issued with protection. Among minors, the applications of those with contact to their family members in their home country were denied. Such decisions were hardly ever made before. As Finland tightens its policies, Sweden for instance has re-evaluated its assessment of Iraq as the actual safety situation has become increasingly poor. The UN Refugee Agency UNHCR also calls for abstaining from involuntary removal to several areas in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Family reunification had already been made increasingly difficult during the two previous government terms, which clearly decreased the number of applications based on family ties. In 2016, as the requirements of the Aliens Act for having secure means of support were also extended (with certain restrictions) to refugees and sponsors under secondary protection, including minors, family reunification had become practically impossible for unaccompanied minors. The new Act has only been in effect since 1 July 2016 and there is little information available on the application procedure of the Finnish Immigration Service regarding whether minors are required to have the means to support their family members. As a matter of fact, the Aliens Act also provides an opportunity for more flexible interpretation in the case of minor applicants.

Legal aid provided to asylum seekers was reformed in 2016, for the second time within only a few years. Unaccompanied minors continue to be provided with an assistant to accompany them in the interview when necessary paid for as public legal aid, but the fixed case-specific fee criteria introduced in 2016 restrict the possibility of all applicants to be provided with sufficient legal aid. A fixed rate, only covering a restricted amount of work by an attorney, is paid for the legal aid. In many situations, the rate will not be enough to compensate for all the legal assistance required on the case, which means that the attorney will complete the assignment *pro bono* or, in the worst-case scenario, will not finish the required work. Nevertheless, the legal status of unaccompanied minors is now generally poorer than before.

The changes to practices and policies on the country of departure may prove to be even more significant than the legislative changes. The Finnish Immigration service, which is under pressure to be more efficient and is affected by the above restrictions, aims to squeeze the asylum interviews into less than four hours, which is often not enough to thoroughly investigate the basis for asylum. Applicants may be called in for further interviews for a number of times. For minors, prolonging the interview phase may be stressful on its own. They are also often scared and have to recount traumatic events.

An asylum-seeking child also needs stability

A representative is appointed to each unaccompanied minor asylum seeker. The representative has the duty to use the guardian's right to speak on matters concerned with the child and to ensure that the child's best interests are met. In Finland, there are no requirements concerning the background or education of the representative. In some European countries, the representatives are hired professionals from the social sector. The fact that many people acting as representatives are committed and apt owing to their personal interest can be considered a positive feature of the Finnish representation system. On the other hand, the system is also vulnerable, as there have not always been enough representatives as the number of applicants has risen, it has not been possible to provide them with sufficient training, and participating in the training is not mandatory. Indeed, more effort should be put into the regular training of representatives.

The practices of reception services could be developed to better accommodate minors. As one of the signatory countries of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Finland has the duty to pursue this. The Convention contains provisions on non-discrimination, consideration on the best interests of the child, right to life and development, as well as respect for the child's viewpoints. In its recommendations, the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR emphasises that the decision-making processes concerned with children should be timely and, in the case of children granted residence permits on the basis of protection, aim at long-term arrangements and solutions.

Many unaccompanied young people must move to a new town during their asylum application process and, at the latest, after they have received a positive residence permit. There are also no guarantees on the continuation of the residence permit as legislation and practices are made constantly stricter. There is thus no end to fear and uncertainty. In the case of unaccompanied minors, changes in representatives and moves from one reception centre to the next should be avoided as far as possible so that the child's environment in Finland would be as stable as possible, at least in this respect.

Medical age determination should not be applied automatically as is currently often the case with teenage asylum seekers. This method has been widely criticised and it is not used, for example in Sweden. The presently used method based on the degree of dental development and bone age assessment results in nothing more than an estimate of the person's age with a two-year variation range. For a child, the result of the age test may cause an identity crisis and an uncertain result may lead to the child losing his or her entitlement to the services aimed at and required by children in the reception system.

The unaccompanied children seeking asylum in Finland have nearly always endured traumatic experiences in the past, both in their home country as well as on their way to Finland, and there is therefore a lot of demand for psychological treatment. Especially in situations where numerous, brand new reception units have been established and the hired staff is inexperienced, the reception system is faced by the challenge of recognising those in need of special support. There is also variation in access to treatment in different parts of Finland, and this should, indeed, be harmonised so that those residing in different parts of the country would be on equal footing.

In Finland, a young person in foster care or subject to child welfare measures is entitled to so-called "after-care" measures which aim to support the young person in transitioning to independent life. Under Section 26 of the Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers, the municipality will arrange for after-care measures and services of child protection also for unaccompanied minors issued with a residence permit. An unaccompanied young person who has just reached majority faces a tough society where he or she should be able to cope and make important choices on his or her life without the support of family. After-care can be, for instance, supported living and other activities that support life management and it can be produced by both municipalities as well as the third sector.

The exceptional asylum seeker situation of 2015 has also brought along some positive phenomena. Volunteers all over the country have become active in supporting the reception of asylum seekers, organising different activities and creating contacts with the main population. This is a major change in Finland and is sure to advance the integration of many in a difficult situation.

Sources and further information

[Aliens Act 301/2004](#)

[Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers 1386/2010.](#)

[UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

[Lastensuojelun käsikirja / Turvapaikanhakijat lastensuojelun asiakkaina.](#)

[UNHCR Safe and Sound: What states can do to ensure respect for the best interest of unaccompanied and separated children in Europe.](#)

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Authors



Hanna Laari,
Attorney
The Finnish Refugee Advice Centre,
Helsinki



Sanna Rummakko
Information and Media Officer
The Finnish Refugee Advice Centre,
Helsinki



Challenges related to hearing minor asylum seekers – from a legal psychology perspective

Julia Korkman

Like the criminal procedure, the asylum application process has been created for adults. Its goal is to produce objective information, which can be used as a basis for judicial decisions, which often will have an impact on the rest of the person's life. Both of these processes may justly be criticised for not taking into account how the human mind works. This is not true only for minors, but also for adults. These processes in many ways neglect what we know about how people reason, remember things, and act in stressful situations. In addition, both processes deal with to-be-remembered events with extreme psychological strain, requiring knowledge about the effects of stress and traumatic experiences on memory.

Hearing a child in the asylum application process is in many ways comparable to a situation where a child is heard within investigations of a suspected crime.¹ In both situations, the child is required to give a detailed account on personal and often difficult experiences in a fairly short amount of time, to an official with whom he or she is unfamiliar. These accounts are then used as the basis for making decisions that will often be crucial for the child's future. In both situations, interviewing the child requires sensitivity, an ability to encounter the child under difficult circumstances as well as the capability to pay attention to the limitations set by the child's development and human memory in the interview situation.

It could therefore be argued that there is a lot to learn about how to interview minor asylum seekers based on what we know about children as witnesses in criminal procedures. While there is fairly little research evidence available on hearing minor asylum seekers, a lot of research has focused on interviewing children when investigating suspicions of crimes.

Increasing attention is paid to these themes in developing procedures related to investigating crimes. Indeed, investigative interviewing with children in Finland has received a commendable amount of attention, including both national guidelines based on research findings as well as intense and long-term training for investigative child interviewers. Finland is likely to be the only country where, under the Criminal Procedure Act, investigators conducting child investigative interviews should be particularly trained in this function². In Finland, children in particularly vulnerable situations (e.g. due to young age or developmental issues) are heard by experts upon the request of the police. It would be desirable to carry over a similar approach to minor asylum seekers³.



The impact of human memory on the asylum application process and interview

An interview is a situation in which a person is heard in relation to events he or she has personally experienced. In this case, we are dealing with the so-called *episodic memory*. However, the memory process is complicated and differs from how we generally perceive “remembering things”. Memories are sensitive to distortion and prone to changes produced by information outside the recalled events. For example, avoiding thinking about unpleasant events may weaken the memories of these events, and conversations with other people may distort them.

A child’s ability to form memories of events is strongly tied to his or her ability to speak, and his or her social environment, for instance, how parents and other members of the social environment discuss matters with the child. Already at the age of two years, a child often knows how to refer to experienced events, although generally not in a way that an adult unaware of the topic would be able to understand. However, the memory of a child below school age is particularly vulnerable to memory distortions and misinterpretations, as, among other things, children will often make incorrect connections between their actual memory content and later recollections and reinterpretations of an event.



Photo: Mostafa Mohammad Ali

Episodic memory develops until young adulthood. During the last decade, it has been noted that significant changes in brain anatomy and functions occur for a much longer time during adolescence than previously estimated. Understanding the motivations and perspectives of other people, grasping causal relationships, being able to evaluate potential risks and benefits of different behaviours, and regulating emotions, self-control and logical inference develop late. Importantly, however, people also tend to overestimate the ability of pubescent children in certain situations.

This is made yet more problematic by the long-known fact that children are particularly susceptible to being led by the interviewer. They may, for instance, change their story when faced with negative feedback from the interviewer (see e.g. Richardson, Gudjonson & Kelly 1995; Redlich & Goodman 2003). A situation where the investigator is sceptical to the child’s account

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and perhaps openly doubts it might thus result in the child changing his or her story. In turn, changing one's story is often perceived as a sign of being unreliable.

Possible erroneous sources related to the evaluation of memories

The ability to structure experiences in relation to other events or around certain themes develops late and in a highly unique, in other words, varying manner. This ability is affected by both personal as well as socio-cultural developmental conditions. For example, different cultures have diverse means to determine the course of time and the temporal dimension of events. Cultures and societies also differ vastly in terms of how central the role of the self and the group is: while the way people experience things appears to be marked by individualism in Western countries, many other cultures rather perceive experiences at the group level (See e.g. Nelson 2003).

From the perspective of memory, it is important to divide memories of unique versus repeated events. So-called *script memories*, i.e. recollections of how something “typically” occurred, are often created of reoccurring events. Paradoxically, such script memories may be less detailed than the recollections of unique experiences. Therefore, when assessing an account given by a person on long-term insecurity or numerous acts of violence, the story may even seem surprisingly simplified and lack presumed “indicators of credibility”.⁴

Remembering traumatic events includes characteristics that are prone to lead astray an assessor unfamiliar with traumatised. The way people remember extremely stressful or traumatic (threatening, frightening) situations differs from the way they remember more regular situations. In general, people typically memorise the essential features of experiences while forgetting insignificant details, and this tendency might be accentuated in a threatening situation, for instance by focusing attention on the threatening element while not memorising all other details as well.⁵ People also often avoid thinking about unpleasant or distressing experiences, which might in itself dilute the memory of the event, even if the distressing experience might still have significant effects on the person's well-being. In such cases, what the interviewee says in the asylum interview may appear fairly undetailed and confusing and might be thus interpreted as less reliable.

Long-term stress experienced in childhood is prone to weaken a person's memory. A child growing up in a chaotic environment will struggle to form coherent memories of his or her experiences, as the environment lacks predictability and often also parental support in interpreting events to form an understanding of them.

Assessment of the “credibility” of accounts

When interpreting an account given by an asylum seeker, regardless of whether the interviewee is a child or an adult, the point of departure should not solely be to assess the credibility of the story based on the person's responses. Instead, the credibility of what has been said should be evaluated based on the shared output of the interviewer and the interviewee. The questions used by the interviewer are key when assessing the reliability of an account.⁶

It is known that people tend to seek information confirming their assumptions (see for example Kahneman 2011). For example, if researchers strongly assume that a child has been the victim of a crime, they will only seek information confirming this and ignore any information that could indicate other explanations to the assumption. In an interview, this is often very concretely ap-

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parent and may be seen in the way questions are formulated (i.e., to strengthen the interviewer's viewpoint) or in the way the interviewer reacts to the child's responses (depending on how well they fit the interviewer's perception of the course of events). The less real knowledge we have of phenomena, the more we are guided by our own intuitions and assumptions – often erroneously.

In 2014, the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR prepared a report on hearing children applying for asylum (UNHCR 2014). The practices of four different countries (the Netherlands, Italy, Austria and Sweden) are analysed in the report. The report includes numerous examples of child interviews where the children are assumed to have knowledge that they are unable to produce and where they are then provided with negative feedback by the interviewer.

Interviewers have often been noted to be under the assumption that children should show negative emotions when recounting unpleasant experiences. This is unsurprising as the so-called *emotional victim effect* is a well-known phenomenon in (legal) psychology literature. The phenomenon refers to crime victims being perceived as more credible if they show emotions when reporting the incident (Ask & Landström 2010). The interviewer might be confused if the interviewee tells about horrific experiences without any visible emotional expression, and the account might be intuitively assessed as unreliable. However, intuition might lead assessors astray in this situation: people react differently to traumatic experiences depending on a number of different factors. Especially in cases where there have been numerous traumatic events or where the situation causing strain to the person's psyche has lasted a long time and the person has talked about the experiences with many different people at different points, it may be that the person shows no visible reaction when describing these experiences.

The UNHCR report describes situations where the child's story is deemed unreliable due to the fact that it does not contain enough emotional expression. For instance, a 14-year-old boy was told: *“What you tell me is not credible. You continue to describe your reasons for fleeing in such a superficial way that I can only believe that you haven't actually experienced this.”* Similarly, it was remarked to a 17-year-old girl: *“You told me your story without showing any emotion whatsoever. The determining authority considers this also an indicator of a fictitious story.”*

However, the authorities should be aware of the fact that, for instance, depression and long-term stress experienced during childhood often affect memory negatively by resulting in more generalised memories, which tend to be poor in details. When details are considered a sign of the credibility of a story, it is likely that the situation of those asylum seekers in a poor mental state will get worse.

Contradictions or lack thereof is also often a focus of the assessment of interviewees' narratives. In general, rethinking and re-perceiving mental images is related to remembering, and people might remember matters related to peripheral details differently in diverse situations, whereas the way people remember essential details is often more consistent. Nevertheless, there is evidence of a higher frequency of contradictions related to traumatic memories, particularly over time (Herlihy, Scragg & Turner 2002). We cannot thus assess a person's story based on their emotional reactions or even always use the abundance of details or lack of contradictions as a basis for credibility assessments.

Interviews may aim to get the child to talk about matters related to his or her place of former residence. The UNHCR report highlights both successful as well as less effective attempts to find out about such matters. For instance, a boy who was 11 years old when he fled Afghanistan was asked:

Interviewer: Was there a 'holy place' in your area?

Child: Not that I can remember, there was only a mosque ...

Interviewer: Where was the bank?

Child: There was no bank. I have not seen any bank.

Interviewer: If I came to your village, what would you show me?

Child: Nothing. It has been four-and-a-half years since I was there.

A girl who was just 13 at the time of interview and who had left her country years earlier was asked:

Interviewer: What was the currency in Somalia?

Child: I have forgotten. I only remember Ethiopian and Sudanese.

Interviewer: But don't you remember what currency you had when you were there?

Child: I have never held any currency in my hand. I was little.

By contrast, when interviewing a young boy, an interviewer was able to adapt to the child's experiences and find significant knowledge related to it:

Interviewer: Did you watch sports in Syria, as you did in the waiting room ...?

Child: Yes, in Syria I watched sports on the Al-Jazeera Sport Channel.

Interviewer: Can you tell me some Syrian teams?

Child: There are 14. We call it the Premier League.

Interviewer: Can you tell me the most famous teams?

Child: Al Itad, Al Kamara, Al Wakada, Jabla, Afrain, Nawair.

Interviewer: Who is a well-known player?

Child: The goalie Misib Balhoes; the best three players: Jihad Husayn; Atif Dginyat; Firas Al Kathib. All four are players of the Syrian team.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a Kurdish player in Syria?

Child: There is someone called Jihan. I don't know his last name. He is a defender. Kazzafi Uzmat is a good Kurdish player. He plays for Jihad. It is the team of the Al-Hassaka province.

When it comes to fact-checking, then, it should be ensured that the words chosen are understandable to the child interviewees and that the context in question is relevant for them. When assessing "what the child should know" about his or her region of origin, it must be noted that we actually know fairly little about the kinds of things people of different ages growing up in different cultures generally know about their home regions. This problem can partly be solved by presenting open questions ("tell me more about...") stemming from the child's world of experience and use this to search for facts that can be checked, for instance.

When assessing what is told by a child, the assessor may also encounter other cognitive biases. For example, a minor asylum seeker may appear to differ significantly from the assessor's perception of how a child "normally" is. In Western countries, childhood is typically associated with innocence and spontaneity. A minor asylum seeker might have a very different profile to this and he or she might be independent and able to take care of himself or herself. At the same time, the cognitive abilities of the minor asylum seeker might be delayed as he or she might have had limited opportunity to attend education and might have grown up in chaotic and unpredictable circumstances. In fact, it has been suggested that the often atypical development might result in

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assessors overestimating the child's age or development stage, and this view might lead to unrealistic expectations related to the child's ability to explain about his or her experiences (UNHCR 2014).

Conclusion

The context of children interviewed within the asylum application process is in many ways comparable with child interviewing in the context of the criminal procedure: the child is expected to provide detailed information about issues that might be difficult to talk about for a number of reasons, and which the child might struggle to remember. In Finland, nation-wide recommendations are broadly available for interviewing a child in a criminal procedure and the authorities involved in the investigative interviewing of children are provided with training specialising in the task. Similar specialisation would be required in the hearing of a minor asylum seeker. There are also further challenges connected to the task due to cultural differences and the fact that the interviews are conducted via an interpreter.⁷ The interviewee has often gone through stressful and traumatic experiences, and the impacts of these on the ability to remember and relate things should be taken into account appropriately.

Considering the crucial significance of the asylum interview for the rest of the interviewee's life, it is unacceptable that the authorities conducting the interviews are not trained appropriately. There is plenty of research evidence available indicating that, without significant investment in training and supervision of interviewers, the quality of the interviews will often be poor and might be more likely to represent the assumptions of the hearing authority rather than the personal experiences of the interviewee.

Notes

1. In this article, a child refers to all minors, i.e. anyone under 18 years of age.
2. Under Chapter 4, Section 7(2) of the Criminal Investigation Act, to the extent possible, investigation measures directed at persons under the age of 18 years shall be assigned to investigators particularly trained in this function.
3. Nevertheless, recommendations on hearing unaccompanied children that were quite good in many ways were already published in Finland in 2002 and included, among other things, details on the desirable manner of asking questions. By contrast, there is probably no comprehensive training available for those interviewing minor asylum seekers.
4. However, it must be noted that the common beliefs related to the indicators of "credibility" often conflict with scientific knowledge and are occasionally based on misunderstandings based on a person's observations and memories. In the legal context, this is discussed, e.g. in an article by Väisänen & Korkman, 2014.
5. The concept of "weapon focus effect" has been known for long in forensic psychology literature. If a person is threatened with a weapon, he or she diverts his or her attention to the weapon at the expense of attention for other details, which makes it harder for the person to remember other details later. In other words, the person's focus is narrowed down. At the concrete level, this also means that the person might remember fewer details of the entire situation.
6. There is strong consensus in favour of using open questions instead of closed or leading ones regardless of the situation. See e.g. Vrij & Granhag 2012, and in the context of children, e.g. the Finnish Current Care Guidelines on investigating sexual abuse (Duodecim 2013).
7. Interviewing through an interpreter complicates the situation in itself as well as from the viewpoint of building contact, the length of the interview as well as verification of the questions asked.

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Author



Julia Korkman

Title of docent in legal psychology (University of Helsinki)

PI (principal investigator) in a research project related to eyewitness accounts funded by the Academy of Finland, Department of Psychology, Åbo Akademi
Psychologist, HUS; Forensic Psychology Center for Children and Adolescents



Small and large age difference: the controversial age determination in the lives of young asylum seekers

Leena Suurpää

“Children are taken good care of in Finland.” This was said by a young asylum seeker in a housing unit where we conducted field work in the spring and summer of 2016. The grateful statement is connected to an irregular life course marked by yearned-for childhood and youth. Alongside disruptions in life history, the prolonged waiting period in Finland affects the youth experiences and preparation to adulthood of minor asylum seekers. At this stage of life, steeped in uncertainties, age becomes a particularly crucial factor, not only at the personal level, but also from the points of view of the asylum application process, realisation of rights as well as plans for the future.

A culture of doubts over ages characterises the everyday lives of young asylum seekers

In this article, I shall present controversial meanings related to age in the lives of young asylum seekers. I am advocating for critical evaluation of unambiguous age limits, particularly in the context of young asylum seekers, whose lives include an unusually large number of disruptions and overlapping transitions.

At the housing unit, we got to hear many stories by both the young people and the employees of the unit regarding discussions, doubts and examinations related to age. Determining the age of an asylum seeker is an important part of the asylum investigation, which is essential for the realisation of the rights and the decision on asylum of the young person. Age determination is a unique personal experience. Young asylum seekers may not have official personal identification when entering Finland or they might come from a country where it has been impossible to obtain identity documents. Some do not know their age, others are afraid to say it. This culture of doubts related to age is unique in the context of young asylum seekers, as it is essentially linked to the question of legal status, disruptions in life course and vulnerable position in Finnish society. Reaching the age of majority must also be perceived as part of this irregular life path.

The applied methods of age determination (imaging of the skeleton and teeth) have been criticised due to their supposed accuracy. It has been suggested that these should be replaced by a more diverse psychological assessment that would take the young person's experiences and overall situation into account more sensitively (Räsänen 2016). The demanding life experiences of the young people are apparent in their bodies in numerous ways.



This culture of doubts related to age is unique in the context of young asylum seekers, as it is essentially linked to the question of legal status, disruptions in life course and vulnerable position in Finnish society.

“War leaves a mark” was an expression frequently used in the past in Finland, and must not be forgotten in determining the ages of young asylum seekers. [Johanna Hiitola and Riikka Korkiamäki \(2016\)](#) note that age determination can be perceived as a human rights issue, as it is used as basis for deciding on the young person’s right to live and grow in the appropriate age group.

The question of the age of young asylum seekers can be characterised as paradoxical. For many, their childhood has been violently interrupted and they have been forced to take on responsibility for their own lives at a very young age. Some have been forced to learn a profession and work at a young age, and some are illiterate when arriving to Finland. In Finland, young asylum seekers encounter a new kind of age categorisation where their biological age, whether it be proven, assumed or imagined, becomes a factor determining their lives and rights. There should be more considered discussions on the historic and culturally-bound aspects of age determination as well as the effect of this on the lives of individual asylum seekers than presently.



Photo: Mostafa Mohammad Ali

The pitfalls of reaching the age of majority are real for young asylum seekers

In Finland, the age of 18 is the milestone that provides young people with access to the rights of adults. The setting is very different for young asylum seekers. At the housing unit of young asylum seekers, reaching the age of 18 was not only celebrated, but also feared. Many young people who came to Finland in November 2015 turned 18 while waiting for the progress of their asylum procedure and the asylum interviews in the summer of 2016, which significantly affected their possibilities for being issued with a positive decision on asylum. The long waiting period in Finland, due to reasons not related to young people, may thus be crucial for the decision on asylum for the young person and thus also their entire future (see [Honkasalo](#), [Maiche](#) and [Pihlaja](#) in this article series).

The age of majority also signifies having to move away from the housing unit intended for young asylum seekers into a reception centre for adults,

In Finland, the age of 18 is the milestone that provides young people with access to the rights of adults. The setting is very different for young asylum seekers.

which the interviewed young people considered a frightening transition perceived as unfair. The Kotouttaminen.fi website of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment highlights the importance of the stability of the environment in which the young people who enter Finland as asylum seekers grow up: “It would be important that minor asylum seekers did not have to move to another municipality after receiving a residence permit but that they could stay in the same growth environment or the town where they applied for asylum” ([The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2016](#)). If this important basis for taking stable social networks of young people into account applies to those issued with a residence permit, it is difficult to find grounds for making young asylum seekers above the age of 18 leave their local community and move to another town.

In Finland, the provision of welfare services for children and young people is largely based on biological age. This contributes decisively to the person's rights to receive institutional support: who has the right to special protection, who has the right to participate in basic education or child welfare services, who has access to the recreational activities aimed at young people? However, for a long time now, youth studies have verified that biological age is insufficient in determining the life situation or experiences of a young person or his or her need for support. There is need for comprehensive assessment on how age limits could be interpreted more broadly than presently to allow taking into account the multi-layered life courses of the young people in the services and support measures aimed at young people in a way that makes sense to the young person and his or her life situation (see. [Husseini](#) and [Kuusisto-Arponen](#) in this article series).

Young asylum seekers are particularly dramatically struck by biological age limits. Their situation provides irrefutable evidence on the failure of the dichotomous division of people into children and adults. International discussion on child welfare and children's rights has also been argued to fare poorly in recognising the complex life stage of youth and overlapping transitions to adulthood where social, cultural, mental and economic constraints are intertwined with biological and legal factors (Skivenes 2015).

Youth studies indicate that particularly many overlapping uncertainties, including economic as well as social and mental ones, are related to the life situation of young adults. The Youth Barometer has repeatedly indicated a drop in a number of well-being indicators among young adults, which makes young asylum seekers who have turned 18 a particularly vulnerable group, also from this point of view. A concrete example of this is the fact that young people who have arrived in Finland as unaccompanied minors are entitled to receive after-care, but under the Child Welfare Act, this duty to provide after-care to young adults over 18 years of age terminates when the young person concerned becomes 21 years of age.

Youth studies indicate that this age limit to after-care should be raised from 21 years of age. Tuula Vainio of Save the Children Finland, the director of the supported housing unit for minors, also emphasises this need. Vainio notes that the need for raising the age limit for after-care is particularly noticeable in the case of young asylum seekers. “The requirement for being able to act in Finnish society without special support after becoming 21 years of age is particularly unreasonable in the context of young asylum seekers who have arrived in Finland”, Vainio estimates. If a young asylum seeker has reported his or her age as over 18 upon arrival in the country or if his or her age has been determined as such that the young person has been over 18 when entering the country, he or she is not entitled to receive after-care services even if he

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or she has not yet turned 21. It is thus particularly difficult for young asylum seekers to gain access to Finnish after-care services, even though they are in particularly dire need of them.

Alongside other legislation, in Finland, the Aliens Act (301/2004) imposes obligations on paying special attention to the best interest of the child and to circumstances related to the child's development and health in any decisions issued that concern a child under eighteen years of age (see Alanko & Marttinen & Mustonen 2011 and Parsons 2010). International guidelines (e.g. UNHCR) also emphasise evaluating the experiences of minor asylum seekers from the perspective of a child. Based on any humane evaluation, the primary importance of the controversial "best interest of the child" cannot end with the determination of a person who has arrived unaccompanied in Finland as having reached the age of majority.

Bringing asylum seekers and young people without legal citizen status to the focus of youth policy

Maria Pisani, who has studied the European refugee policy and situation from the perspective of young people, draws attention to the invisibility of young people without legal rights in the political debate around Europe in a compelling manner (see also Hiitola ja Korkiamäki 2016). Pisani uses the concept of "citizenship assumption" to highlight the fact that the public debate in the EU and its member states seldom stops to evaluate the meaning of reaching the age of majority for the young people with no official citizen status or residence permit. Even though the number of undocumented young people is constantly increasing in Europe, the general assumption continues to be that reaching the age of majority automatically means the increasing and strengthening of one's rights. While this is the case for the citizens of EU member states and, to an extent, those issued with a positive residence permit, the assumption cannot be considered to universally apply to everyone in the current global situation.

Reaching adulthood is thus unequally divided and experienced, also from the viewpoint of civil rights. For a young person without citizenship of or a residence permit in an EU member state, reaching the age of majority may signify new uncertainties as the person either lacks or has uncertain legal status for the course of the residence application and appeal process lasting up to several years. This is not solely the concern related to immigration or national security, as which the phenomenon of asylum seeking and undocumented immigration has been largely processed in Europe. Age must be perceived as an essential part of the question of the realisation of human rights – or lack thereof. The question is also a concern of youth policy, and the actors in youth policy as well as practical youth work, as they are responsible for processing it thoroughly. At the current age of global migration, civil rights arising from the age of majority cannot be taken for granted but should rather be perceived as privileges obtained, also in youth policy discussion. For young people without a residence permit, reaching the age of majority increases uncertainly in an already fragile life situations.

The question of how a young person without a residence permit or legal citizen status can get his or her voice and experiences heard is quite obviously a concern of youth policy – and also topical. On one hand, the number of young adults residing in Finland whose asylum application has been refused will presumably increase, while on the other, the Youth Act entering into force on 1 January 2017 puts more emphasis than its predecessor on the

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responsibility of the state, municipalities and organisations for safeguarding the rights of young people and the equality of everyone under 29 years of age.

The objectives of the new Youth Act (Section 2 of the Youth Act) are to: 1) promote youth involvement and possibilities to exert influence as well as their ability and prerequisites for acting in society, 2) support young people's growth, independence and acquiring related knowledge and skills, 3) support young people's leisure activities and actions in civic society, 4) promote equality and gender equality as well as the realisation of rights among young people, 5) improve the conditions where young people grow up and live in.

In the youth sector, there is need for thorough discussion on under what conditions will the important objectives of the new Youth Act also apply to asylum seekers, young people who have recently received a residence permit as well as undocumented adolescents and young adults. The young people personally or as individual actors may not be left to bear the burden alone.

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Author



Leena Suurpää
Research Director
Finnish Youth Research Network
from 1. January 2017 Director of the Youth
Shelters in the Finnish Red Cross



Cooperation of students and asylum seekers as fulfilling the third task of universities

Mervi Kaukko, Jennina Lahti and Esko Nummenmaa

In this article, we reflect on the support person work of the students of the Faculty of Education, University of Oulu at the Oulu reception centre from the perspective of the organisers. In the article, we will present ten questions which organisers should ask when planning similar activities. The questions are concerned with two themes: motivation for and long-term commitment to the activities. Joining the forces of educational institutions and reception centres may generate access to versatile resources for meeting shared aims, but the activities must be carefully considered, controlled and persistent. The activities must also be based on the personal needs of the young asylum seekers instead of, for instance, a researcher's research interest. The cooperation will be sustainable if the actors' creativity and enthusiasm are fostered with encouragement and necessary resources. If the activities are planned to be as self-directed as possible, the amount of resources required is not extensive.



From help under emergency conditions to support person work

The cooperation between the Faculty of Education of the University of Oulu and the unit for minor asylum seekers of the Oulu reception centre gained new momentum in the autumn of 2015 as a record number of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers arrived in the reception centre. The acute need for additional help at the reception centre met the resources of the Faculty of Education, University of Oulu as students and personnel started to compile food packages, blanket sacks and other necessary things amidst the worst chaos. The volunteers worked in three shifts for around three weeks. The change in the social situation, the students' enthusiasm and the smoothness of the cooperation led to extending the services from emergency help to support person work for young asylum seekers as part of the optional education studies at the University of Oulu.

The support person work involves ten education students working regularly, persistently and systematically with around twenty unaccompanied minor asylum seekers for approximately six months. The students were selected based on their motivational letters and all of the chosen students were familiarised with their task in orientation provided by the university and the reception centre. The activities served as a pilot for the currently ongoing, expanded course, *Volunteer field work at a reception center*.

Work with young people requires sensitivity, engagement and trust

The most important remark made on the experience of our activities may seem obvious, but it is worth pointing out: the activities must be based on the best interest of the children and young people. The main goal for building cooperation may not be, for example, saving resources in hope of additional helpers, gathering new experiences or obtaining study attainments.

The aim may also not be a purely research-oriented. At the start of the activities, the asylum seeker situation was prominently featured in the media. The students mentioned the media attention and the interesting societal situation as important reasons for applying for the work (Kinnunen & Pirhonen 2016). The media attention also influenced students to write topical theses on the matter. In turn, this might lead to the motivation for a thesis emerging from factors completely outside of legitimate research interests. Correspondingly, a study with poor preparation or started under false pretences conducted among young asylum seekers may present their voices in a manner that distorts or exoticizes them or emphasises their “misery”. For example, a well-meaning but poorly-prepared student might approach asylum seekers for research purposes and explain to them that the information collected from them is confidential and photographs (or, even worse, videos) will only be used for research purposes. If trust has not been built before this encounter or if the asylum seeking young person does not fully understand the research practices or aim, the promises of anonymity and confidentiality will mean nothing.

From the point of view of a young asylum seeker, disclosing any kind of information to a stranger might appear risky (Dona 2007; Kohli 2006). Therefore, discretion must be exercised when collecting data, particularly at the initial stage of the young person’s residence in Finland. If a decision is made to collect data, the chosen method is significant. For example, it is worth considering whether it is necessary to record an interview or would making notes suffice as better means for making the “voices” of the young people heard (Kuusisto-Arponen 2016). There is a lot of literature available on research ethical principles concerned with asylum seeking children and young people (see e.g. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 2016 and its special issue *Unaccompanied Minors*; Kaukko, Dunwoodie & Riggs 2017), and familiarisation with it is recommended. Nevertheless, making situation-specific, ethical and informed decisions on the best choices in a given moment and with a particular group is most important.

Students whose sole aim was getting to collect data for their master’s thesis dropped out of the support person work. The work was planned to not violate the privacy and sense of security of the young asylum seekers. Confidentiality was strengthened by the long-term commitment to the work. Information was gathered to develop activities in the young people’s own terms, with consideration and only after trust had been built.

The purpose of this remark is not to underestimate the research conducted among asylum seeking children and young people. There is a need for research knowledge from the viewpoint of the young people and those working with them. However, our work acted as a reminder of the fact that good intentions and enthusiasm do not suffice as the basis for work or research. Research must be based on confidentiality, and confidentiality requires time, engagement, and child- and youth-oriented activities. The knowledge constructed of the activities consists of multiple voices and levels and is bound by space and time: it cannot be obtained through individual interviews or short

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observations. Ensuring a child- or youth-oriented approach requires time and appropriate arrangements, but, in the end, is fairly simple to accomplish. As indicated by many articles in this collection, it is possible to act ethically and sensibly with and stand by asylum seeking young people in many ways (e.g. Maiche and Husseini in this article collection).

Joy, enthusiasm and autonomy as saving of resources and supporting continuity

Our second observation is connected to how to establish activities and sustain them after the initial enthusiasm has waned. Our work began at a time when the asylum seeker situation at the reception centre was exceptional. At the time, volunteers were accepted to the reception centre with careful consideration amid a hectic situation, as familiarising new people with the activities requires using the resources of the reception centre. It was possible to launch the support person work because, in this case, the orientation primarily took place outside the reception centre and as the goals and implementation of the activities were agreed on before starting the work. The work was successful because it could rely nearly fully on volunteers after the orientation. The volunteers independently coordinated and developed their operations. For example, when there was a desire to expand activities, the volunteers applied for external funding, collected donations and organised bake sales.



Photo: Mostafa Mohammad Ali

Owing to the good orientation and commitment of the volunteers, little other resources were needed for the activities. Believing in the necessity of the course both at the faculty as well as the reception centre and finding the place and competent teachers for the course was also crucial. Nevertheless, the most important was the fact that the volunteers themselves perceived the activities positively and with enthusiasm. Numerous other projects sprouted out of the work, involving young asylum seekers, future classroom teachers, reception centre staff and researchers working together for the dissemination of information or development of good practices. An example of these activities is a lecture series on immigration and the asylum situation by the university, the

reception centre, the authorities, and experts from the third sector (see e.g. Lecture by Esa Holappa). A development project for information management methods at the reception centre aiming to utilise and transfer the tacit knowledge of professionals also originated from this cooperation. Smoothly transferring knowledge and good practices to successors is an essential part of developing volunteer work. (see also Kaukko et al. in this article collection).

Well-thought-out cooperation between students of human work and young asylum seekers is combining theory with practice at its best. It is also a form of fulfilling the so-called third task of universities, i.e. part of the university's input in developing the society (Chapter 1, Section 2 of the Universities Act 2009). The field of operations of the activities described in this article is a reception centre, but similar joint activities could as well be built with other actors.

Well-thought-out cooperation between students of human work and asylum seekers is combining theory with practice at its best. It is also a form of fulfilling the so-called third task of universities, i.e. part of the university's input in developing society.

Ten questions

The articles published in this collection have let us examine the lives of young people through many voices. We also need practical knowledge of how to be involved in the lives of young asylum seekers in a way that serves the needs of the young asylum seekers. In order to be invited to reception centres, a pre-existing relationship or the support of an organisation, such as a university, is often required. The activities require careful consideration of the guiding principles and committed actors, but there is also a lot to be gained from them. Through the volunteer work, the volunteers got to see how little activities may grow big and how one's small actions may have a big importance to someone else. Facts on immigration, cultural sensitivity or a child or youth-oriented approach learned from books are no match to long-term encounters or tacit, practical knowledge, but, together, these form a fairly good orientation for working with an asylum seeking child or young person. Based on our experience, students have the enthusiasm and ability to be involved in the lives of young asylum seekers and the young asylum seekers miss having contacts with other young people (see e.g. Peltola and Onodera in this article collection).

Despite the fact that every cooperation project is unique and the aims and limitations must be separately considered for each project, we present below ten questions which may be helpful in planning cooperation with a reception centre.

1. *Whose needs are the starting point: the students', the education institution's, the reception centre's or the asylum seekers'?*
2. *What kinds of practical matters (e.g. insurances, orientation, logistics, responsibility, obligation of secrecy) must be arranged for?*
3. *Is there a permanent staff member in each of the parties in cooperation who can act as a responsible person?*
4. *How is the commitment of volunteers and staff in the activities supported?*
5. *How is the autonomy of volunteering activities supported and the use of resources minimised?*
6. *How are volunteers supported in dealing with difficult experiences?*
7. *How are the activities developed after their launch?*
8. *How can we record and utilise the knowledge generated through the activities?*

9. *If data is also collected from children/young people, how can we ensure research ethics?*
10. *How is the sustainability of and long-term commitment to the activities ensured?*

The list we propose is non-exhaustive and is not applicable to every situation, but, based on the experiences gathered in the cooperation project described in this article, it might help overcoming some stumbling blocks encountered in similar projects.

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Authors



Mervi Kaukko (Researcher and teacher) served as the responsible teacher during the pilot stage of the support person course. Mervi worked as a volunteer in the reception centre, especially before the start of the support person activities.



Jennina Lahti (Master of Education, class teacher) was one of the most active support persons in the group. She conducted the interviews with the young asylum seekers for this article.



Esko Nummenmaa is a volunteer and a class teacher student. He has played a key role in the planning and implementation of the work and in ensuring its continuity.



The diversity of waiting in the everyday lives of young asylum seekers

Henri Onodera

The public debate on asylum seekers often relies on geographical and especially Eurocentric perspectives. On the one hand, the media and political statements focus on the countries of departure, such as the security situation in them, while on the other, on the countries receiving refugees as well as the migratory paths of refugees in Europe. In this context, it is seldom acknowledged that the neighbouring countries of the conflict areas, such as Turkey, Lebanon, Iran or Pakistan, bear most of the responsibility of the global refugee volume by an overwhelming amount. As the discussions remain limited to places, the statements taking into account the course of time are primarily connected to the authorities' administrative concerns over prolonged asylum application processes and their capacity and lack of resources.

The notion of time and experience of temporality have received fairly little attention, especially in the context of young asylum seekers. Particularly from the viewpoint of minors, future is a factor that determines their existence – in many ways, their lives are largely yet to begin.

In this article collection, several authors draw attention to the uncertainties that overshadow the young asylum seekers' everyday lives and existence. These uncertainties are directly connected to the different stages of the asylum process and to the constant worries about whether or not they will be granted a residence permit in the end (Honkasalo 2016 and Onodera & Peltola 2016 in this article collection). Indeed, generally speaking, it can be said that being an asylum seeker largely consists of waiting and managing related uncertainties. But how does this interim space of expectations appear specifically to unaccompanied minor asylum seekers? In this article, I examine the experience of waiting from the perspectives of the asylum process and the young people's life courses.

“Once you get a residence permit, then it is the time to think about the future”: waithood in displacement, prolonged adolescence

As emphasised by Veronika Honkasalo, waiting is a comprehensive and cross-cutting issue in the lives of young asylum seekers and the related uncertainties are directly connected to their participation in both the housing unit as well as more widely in society (see Honkasalo in this article collection). Research focused on youth and waiting has recently emerged at the global scale. An-



thropologist Alcinda Honwana (2012) has presented the notion of waithood experienced by young people as a societal phenomenon that currently tends to be the rule rather than the exception. In the African countries that she studied (South Africa, Mozambique, Senegal and Tunisia), young people's transitions to adulthood have been prolonged in this century. A growing proportion of young people, particularly young men in the global south, cannot find work that corresponds with their education and training, if any work at all. Thus they are prevented from settling down and gaining entrance to the things life has to offer. An increasing number of young people find it impossible to make the accustomed transitions from school to work and, later on, to an economically feasible marriage with a family of one's own. For youth in waithood, unlike their more affluent peers, prolonged adolescence is not as much a result of personal lifestyle choice as it is a matter of constraint due to several impediments and economic hardship.



Photo: Mostafa Mohammad Ali

Although waithood is related to the multifaceted phenomenon of prolonged youth, it is important to note that it only indirectly affects the exceptional life situation of the young asylum seekers we met. They have arrived from war-torn, fragile states, and plans of settling down and starting a family are still far ahead of them. Nonetheless, the notion of waithood is useful in examining their life courses, or the related stagnation. It shifts the focus to the question of transitions to adulthood and the conditions where building, or even thinking about, a future of one's own is possible. Indeed, many of the young people explained in interviews that the most important thing for them is not to think too much, or to "divert their thoughts" elsewhere. 16-year-old "A" explains in a group interview:

A: "Everyone is thinking about the residence permit and is waiting for the decision and once they get the residence permit, they'll think about the future."

At the concrete level of everyday life, the young people's waiting periods are directly connected to the asylum process. The different stages of the process, from interviews to decision-making and a possible appeal process are looming on the horizon of waiting, and the young people are unsure of when any of this will happen. 17-year-old "K" explains that the issue of asylum dominates their everyday life and waiting for it to make progress seems difficult:

K: *“Everything I’d do, I still cannot shake the thoughts off my mind even if I’d be playing or spending time with the others.”*

Indeed, over our volunteering and research period, we in the research group discussed the vulnerability and contradiction in the everyday lives of the young asylum seekers. On one hand, around forty boys form a community that primarily co-exists in peace: studies, hobbies and hanging out with others set the pace for their everyday life. The housing unit is surrounded by a wooded area, the dwellings are far removed from the noise of shopping centres and urban centres. The closely located volleyball and football fields and the yard are frequently used if the weather permits, especially in the summer. At the same time, there seems to be a contradiction between the regularity, safety and natural quiet of the everyday life and the sad and distressing events experienced by the young people before arriving in Finland. Many have been through a journey and past that involved traumatic experiences, intense and even dangerous situations and occasionally prolonged displacement. Some had already grown up in displacement, while for others, the journey to Finland had taken up to two years.

“I’d like to focus on what I have here”: stagnation of the present

Even though this topic may not come up frequently in the everyday lives of young people we met, all of them are noticeably aware of the fact that the present is temporary and their journey will still continue, either to Finland, somewhere else or back to their home country. This journey will also continue in time, and from the viewpoint of their life courses, it is only beginning. At the same time, some find it difficult to think about the past, families left behind and traumatic events during the journey, as it complicates their efforts to focus on the present and the future:

T: *“Personally, I’ve left all my friends, all my brothers and my family there and I only contact my parents once a month and I wouldn’t like to have any more contact because more problems will arise and I’d like to focus on what I have here.”*

In addition to Finnish, “T” would like to also study physics and chemistry, but in light of the uncertain future and life course, the present seems stagnated in many ways. For him, as well as other young people at the housing unit, days go by one after another and nothing really seems to happen to the asylum issue.

Griffiths, Rogers and Anderson (2013) use the concept of stasis to refer to this experience of temporality in the lives of the asylum seekers: while the rest of the world keeps moving on, the young asylum seekers’ life seems to be on hold. Against this background, there is an apparent major contrast between the peaceful everyday life at the housing unit and fast-paced and intense periods of time, which the young people rarely encounter at the reception stage. On the other hand, they have often experienced several crucial and formative events that have changed their lives in a quick and unpredictable way during their journey. On the one hand, the memories of these sudden life changes, such as violence or sudden loss of a family member, are related to the asylum seekers’ home country. On the other hand, other memories, such as human smuggling in a car booth or across a body of water by boat, are related to travel and displacement. In addition to the uncertainty related to the reception stage, the emotional pressure connected with waiting combined with trau-

While the rest of the world keeps moving on, the young asylum seekers’ life seem to be on hold.

matic experiences has resulted in psychosomatic symptoms in some asylum seekers, including sleeping difficulties and depression (see also [Lähteenmäki](#) in this article collection).

Even though the environment supporting communality, safe everyday life and regularity is the outcome of determined activities by the young people and the adults who work with them, it does not exclude the fact that each one of the young people face their exceptional life situation and uncertain future alone. The near future is characterised by knowledge that, in the asylum application process, all of them will be handled as separate individuals who must expose their identity, life history and future for the authorities to evaluate and decide. At the end of our research and volunteering period, the young people had spent eight months in Finland, and only a handful of them had gone through the first stage of the process, the asylum interview.

“I would like to be a mechanic” – From the permit issue to expanding one’s abilities

Even though it is difficult to reflect on the future at the heart of uncertainties and the asylum application process, many young people have their personal dreams and pre-existing know-how that they would like to expand already at the reception phase (see also Husseini 2016).

A: “Of course, we are thinking about the future, what will we become and think about success in the future.”

For A, personal success in the future primarily means learning Finnish but also good school performance after this as well as opportunities to work as a mechanic in the future. When asked about what they would like to do in the future, many of the young people have dream jobs. One would like to become a doctor, another a nurse and a third dreams of becoming a train operator. Some have hobbies and interests which could lead them to find related work. One of the young people is a gifted football player and has been accepted into the local team, while another is an opinionated rap artist rapping about the state of his homeland.

In the context of Great Britain, Rebecca Rotter (2015) has pointed out that the interim stage of waiting related to prolonged asylum application processes does not need to mean passivity and narrowing down of perspectives. During the asylum application process, it is also possible to turn the institutionally forced idleness into one’s advantage, provided that asylum seekers get the opportunity to increase their social capital and skills, which will carry them ahead later in life – if not in Finland, then somewhere else. However, the resources for such “extra activities” are very limited in reception centres, although volunteer activities can mend the situation somewhat.

From the viewpoint of the young people we met, the Finnish language, which they were studying at school and with volunteers, understandably appeared to be an essential precondition to building a life and expanding one’s realm of experience in Finland. The majority of the young people we encountered were motivated to study and meet Finns, for example with the help of mobile phones and dictionary applications. However, the uncertainties related to receiving a residence permit had an impact on the young people’s enthusiasm for study. Those who managed to keep the faith in being granted asylum were generally more motivated to study Finnish than those who were about to lose hope in the advancement of the process. Despite their young age, the young people included professionals who had gathered work experience, for instance, as tailors and car mechanics, but maintaining and developing the vocational skills in Finland is challenging. Even if they learned Finnish

Each one of the young people face their exceptional life stage and uncertain future alone.

All of them will be handled as separate individuals who must expose their identity, life history and future for the authorities to evaluate and decide.

The majority of the young people we encountered were motivated to study and meet Finns, for example with the help of mobile phones and dictionary applications. However, the uncertainties related to receiving a residence permit had an impact on the young people’s enthusiasm for study.

quickly, they still lack the formal qualifications, in other words a certificate of their training which would open up job and internship opportunities in the future. For instance, one of the employees at the housing unit presented that apprenticeship training would provide an excellent way to maintain and enhance the know-how of the young people and produce meaningful activities for the young people themselves. At the same time, it would provide a good way to make use of the waiting period and institutionally forced idleness.

Conclusion

As they arrive in Finland, young asylum seekers often have a long, exhausting and eventful journey behind them. In a certain sense, they have arrived in their destination, a country and a housing unit where the everyday routines supporting communality produce safety and regularity in life. Arriving in the capital area has signified stagnation for them, but at the same time represents a significant interim stage of “waithood” and interruption for their life courses.

Waiting is often tough and draining, and it is directly connected to the asylum application process whose outcome – whether negative or positive – will be crucial for the rest of the person’s life. In the everyday life of the young people, the past unfolds as a heavy background for the present and the apparently peaceful everyday life; however, at the same time, it is difficult to think about the future as literally everything depends on whether or not the person will be granted a residence permit.

Nevertheless, one should not overly generalise the experiences of waiting. In light of our research material, young people’s horizons of expectation regarding their future vary vastly. Some have more complete dreams and even plans for their future than others, similar to young people everywhere. Personally believing in getting a residence permit appears to define their enthusiasm particularly in learning Finnish as the first step to a life in Finland. At the same time, many have diverse interests, know-how and even work experience in spite of their young age. However, it is challenging to maintain or increase these skills amid uncertainties, and there might not even be resources for this.

Thus, the interim stage of waithood is not only related to the concrete asylum application process but also to the life chances later on, including education, employment, housing and starting a family. These issues intertwine in a significant way and they will bring along yet new periods of waiting in the future.

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Author



Henri Onodera
PhD, Postdoctoral fellow
University of Helsinki

Epilogue: Proposed measures to make daily life safe for young asylum seekers

Herttaliisa Tuure

The idea of collaboration with the Finnish Youth Research Network was born in late autumn 2015. At that time, the number of asylum seekers in Finland was increasing significantly. There was a lot of public discussion about asylum seekers who were minors or young people and their safety and the outlook for their future.

The “*Young people in reception centres*” article series started as a research and voluntary project. The series of articles would not have been written without the outstanding researchers Veronika Honkasalo, Karim Maiche, Henri Onodera, Marja Peltola and Leena Suurpää. Thanks to all of you! Thanks also to Save the Children Finland for the access to one of their housing units for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in the Helsinki Metropolitan area, where the researchers got to know the daily activities and, above all, the young residents. The research was carried out between January and July 2016. The role of the State Youth Council (previously known as the Advisory Council for Youth Affairs) in the project was to provide support through financing the fees of interpreters as well as commissioning the translation of the articles in this collection into English.

The State Youth Council and the Finnish Youth Research Network organised a workshop based on the series of articles in January 2017. The intention is to present the suggestions for development that arose from the articles in this collection to the government and the responsible ministries. Researchers, civil servants and experts working with young asylum seekers took part in the workshop.

The workshop participants considered, analysed and worked on the challenges, examined in this article collection, that the young people come across in their daily lives. Lots of themes arose and they were grouped under four main headings: 1) education, 2) implementing children’s rights, legal protection and the whole system 3) services, mental health and after-care 4) integration and inclusion while waiting and after the decision. The proposed measures that were drawn up on the basis of the working group’s efforts and which the State Youth Council will present to the government in April 2017 are included in this compilation as an appendix.

The State Youth Council used the workshop as a base to compile an action plan to present to the government. In its presentation, the State Youth Council emphasised that the government needs to launch measures to ensure the availability of adequate mental health services as well as to establish sanctions



for municipalities that do not observe the provisions of the Child Welfare Act. A condition for the successful integration of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers is that their daily lives run as smoothly as possible and that children and young people have the opportunity to do things they enjoy. The State Youth Council also considers it of primary importance that the systems for representing, interviewing and questioning minor asylum seekers be developed with the child's interests in mind.

The State Youth Council considers that the opening of a EUR 7 000 000 call for proposals to integrate asylum seekers and immigrants by the Ministry of Education and Culture is a positive sign. Grants will be awarded to projects that promote the integration of asylum seekers and immigrants into Finnish society. The State Youth Council hopes that the basis of approving projects will focus on measures that would improve collaboration between the public and third sectors and create new operating models.

The objective of the State Youth Council is that young immigrants too will experience being included in Finnish society, will have a confident attitude towards the future and will believe in their dreams. Young people have an amazing potential, they have a desire to learn and to work. Structures cannot be allowed to be a hindrance when young people want to develop and get on in life.

Appendix: The life of young asylum seekers at the reception stage – some proposed measures

THE STATE YOUTH COUNCIL'S VISION 2020: *Finland is a country where there is equality among all young people and where all young people have a good daily life: friends and safe adults, the opportunity to study and work as well as for self-realisation during their free-time. Young people's experience of inclusion in Finnish society is increasing. It will be rare that a young person experiences loneliness, exclusion or discrimination. More and more young people will have found suitable ways to exert influence. Young people relate to the future with confidence and dare to dream. Finland has the world's most active youth who are involved and have an influence.*



Today's global migration between countries and continents has a particular impact on children and young people, whether the issue is one of voluntary migration or migration related to forced asylum seeking. According to the Finnish Immigration Service, of the 32,476 asylum seekers that came to Finland in 2015, over 80 per cent were under 35 years old. About 10 per cent (3,024) of those arriving were unaccompanied minors.

When considered from the perspective of youth policy, there are often very broad questions about young people's pattern of life related to migration and immigration. What has to be tackled are the challenges of young people's transition, fairness between the generations and the rights of young people. Children and young people seeking asylum in Finland have a right to a home, safety, dignity as well as the experience of belonging and inclusion.

The State Youth Council (previously known as the Advisory Council for Youth Affairs), together with Finnish Youth Research Network and Save the Children Finland, carried out a research and volunteer project "Young people in reception centres". One of the outputs of the project was the "Young people in reception centres" series of articles which highlighted the experiences of the first few months in Finland of young asylum seekers and those that work with them. In the articles, researchers and writers shed light on not just the official position of young asylum seekers, but also on building their day to day life which features new social relations, learning new lifestyles, adapting to a new culture and society, waiting and an uncertain future. The articles can be read at the following address:

<http://www.nuorisotutkimusseura.fi/nuoret-vastaanottokeskuksissa-kirjoitussarja>

In January 2017, a workshop was organised on the basis of the articles where the researchers involved in the project, civil servants and experts working in the field of young asylum seekers, considered, analysed and worked on

The State Youth Council presents the following measures to ensure a better day to day life for young asylum seekers

ARRIVAL STAGE IN AN IMMIGRATION AND RECEPTION CENTRE	WAITING STAGE FOR THE ASYLUM DECISION AND AFTER THE DECISION HAS BEEN RECEIVED	INCLUSION WHILE WAITING AND AFTER THE ASYLUM DECISION
PROPOSED MEASURES		
Implementing the rights of the child; legal protection and child impact analysis	Implementing the Child Welfare Act; After-care and availability of adequate mental health care services	Promoting opportunities for inclusion of young asylum seekers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transfer the coordination of reception services from the Finnish Immigration Service to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. (MSAH) • Develop and evaluate the system for interviewing and questioning minors so that the child’s interests and rights are observed in interviews. Interviews and questioning are carried out only by experts with the appropriate expertise which requires specialist training. (MI) • When making decisions, a child impact analysis is carried out and the child’s interests are promoted. Stop all unnecessary transfers of minors from one reception centre and municipality to another. Children’s rights should be observed over the long-term from the reception stage to after-care throughout the system. (MSAH) • Integration with regard to young people should be redefined and measures to ensure integration should be started at the beginning of the asylum stage. Ensure that there are sufficient personnel to guide and support active citizenship in young people’s day to day life and to prevent a year’s wait and institutionalisation. (MSAH, MEC) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Child Welfare Act should be assessed from the perspective of the Reception Act and Integration Act and a clearer system to implement the Child Welfare Act should be created. Cases relating to minors should be dealt with as a matter of priority, and an asylum seeker who is a minor when entering the system should be treated as a minor throughout the process. The municipalities should be obliged to implement the Child Welfare Act and the age limit for after-care should be raised to cover 29 year-olds. (MSAH) • The “one-stop shop” approach to the provision of multi-disciplinary after-care should be safeguarded as well as the availability of adequate mental health care services in reception centres and in all stages involving transfers. Ensure the availability of specialist services for traumatised minors. (MSAH) • Evaluate and develop the system of representatives so that representation becomes an official duty in the same manner as guardianship. A legislative amendment should be made to the provisions of the Reception Act and the government decree regarding compensation practices. It should be ensured that children are given information about the asylum process in a language that they understand. (Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Justice) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A national development project should be implemented to promote opportunities for inclusion of young asylum seekers. (Ministry of Education and Culture, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health) • Cultural interpretation: Young asylum seekers are provided with support, guidance and understanding of the opportunities for inclusion. Ensure that they know what kinds of inclusion opportunities exist, what is expected of them and how recreational activities function. Visit the reception centres to explain about the opportunities for inclusion and offer support so that young people have an opportunity to participate. • Development of seamless collaboration between the State, municipalities and associations: Support and promote opportunities for young asylum seekers to participate in activities they enjoy during the time they spend in reception centres. Provide the current actors (youth, cultural, sport and other leisure activities) with adequate resources so they are able to organise education and training and develop new kinds of collaboration between the different actors. Ensure reinforcing the inclusion of girls and making it easy for them to travel independently.
	Ensuring preparation for school; language lessons and developing teachers’ skills	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support young people’s language skills, preparation for study and working life as well as implementing equality. Adequate resources are to be directed to providing further training for teachers of Finnish as a second language as well as to support recreational activities that strengthen language skills and multilingualism. (Ministry of Education and Culture and National Board of Education) • Further training should be provided for learning coaches, vocational training teachers and social workers. Those working with young immigrants should be required to specialise so that they have the professional competence to deal with the special needs of young asylum seekers and to support young people in accessing further education and preparation for working life. (Ministry of Education and Culture and National Board of Education) • Develop vocational training education and ensure that there is regional equality of teaching provision. (Ministry of Education and Culture and National Board of Education) • Change the student support system so it answers to current needs. (Ministry of Education and Culture) 	

the challenges uncovered in the series of articles. Many of the issues raised were mundane things that the young people face in their day to day lives. This collection of several concrete proposals was put together on the basis of the conclusions produced in the workshop. The “Young people in reception centres” research and volunteer project, as well as the participants in the workshop, hope that the government will launch preparations for putting the proposed measures into action urgently.

The experiences of young asylum seekers who have come to Finland of fleeing their countries, applying for asylum and building a new kind of life, must no longer be left on the margins of political and governmental discussions.

The State Youth Council regards it as important that the government launches measures without delay to ensure the availability of adequate mental health services as well as to establish sanctions for municipalities that do not observe the provisions of the Child Welfare Act. A condition for the successful integration of asylum seekers who are minors is that their daily life runs as smoothly as possible, and that children and young people have the opportunity to do things they enjoy. The State Youth Council thus considers it of primary importance that the systems for representing, interviewing and questioning minors be developed with the child’s interests in mind.

The State Youth Council considers that the opening of a EUR 7,000,000 call for proposals to integrate asylum seekers and immigrants by the Ministry of Education and Culture is a positive sign. Grants will be awarded to projects that promote the integration of asylum seekers and immigrants into Finnish society. The State Youth Council hopes that the basis of approving projects will focus on measures that would improve collaboration between the public and third sectors and create new operating models.

In 2016, 1,455 minors sought asylum in Finland and in the same year 2,962 asylum seekers who were minors were granted residence permits. Of these, 744 were female and 2,218 were male. In 2016, a total of 1,136 people who had been given asylum applied to reunite their families. A young person arrives in a new country full of hope and expectations. How an expert and professional employee receives a young person in a reception centre, and in what manner the representative of a young person looks after that person’s affairs is not an unimportant issue. At present in Finland, a representative of an asylum seeker who is a minor is not required to have any special background or training. However, it is important that the confidence of young asylum seekers in people and societal institutions is built up quickly and through positive experiences.

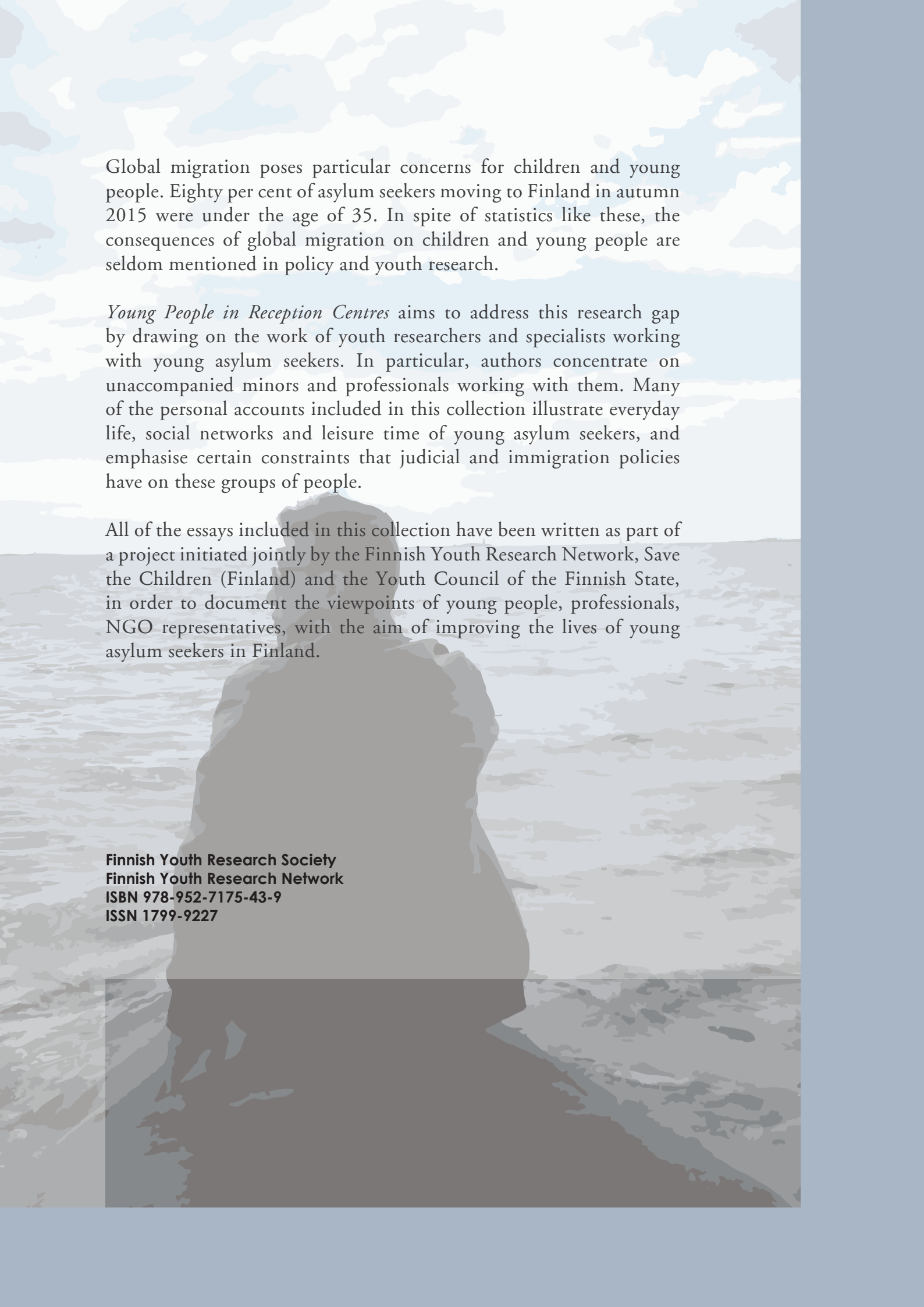
In building up confidence, it is also critical that the young people can participate in activities and feel themselves as belonging somewhere where learning and interaction among other people is possible. Young people must have the right to participate in activities organised for them, but equally must have the right to withdraw and be left in peace. The current situation is that many factors limit the opportunities young people have to get involved: lack of information about the opportunity to take part in activities, the difficulty of taking advantage of opportunities for activities because of the expense or difficulty of travelling, a lack of human resources as well as cultural differences which make it difficult to understand both that the activities are possible as well as getting involved. On the services side, the picture of the current situ-

ation is firstly one of lack of resources, secondly the need for providing better information about issues and thirdly, the lack of collaboration between the different operators.

During the reception stage, young people should have opportunities to learn important knowledge and skills for the future as appropriate for their age, regardless of whether they will spend their future in Finland or elsewhere. The system should be created without cracks for people to fall through, and it should ensure that there is a body which has overall responsibility for getting the lives of minors who arrive alone onto the right track. The development of collaboration across sectoral boundaries is of paramount importance, and there must be discussions between the different authorities and bringing together different views into order to make this happen. The staff at reception units must have the professional capabilities to identify young people who need special support. All professional groups who are working in the field dealing with asylum issues must be provided with specialist training for their roles.

There is also a need for thorough discussion on under what conditions will the important objectives of the new Youth Act also apply to asylum seekers, young people who have recently received a residence permit as well as undocumented adolescents and young adults. The situation in Europe of children and young people arriving in a country alone, must be at least as topical and hot an issue as it is in Finland and the other Nordic countries. In both Finland and elsewhere in Europe, we cannot afford to react in a hostile or derogatory manner to the attempts of children and young people to move forward and start a new life. Nor must immigration policy be tightened up so as to make reuniting families difficult.

The objective of the State Youth Council is that young immigrants too will experience being included in Finnish society, will have a confident attitude towards the future and will believe in their dreams.

A person in a dark coat is seen from behind, looking out at the ocean under a cloudy sky. The person is standing on a dark, rocky shore. The water is calm with some ripples. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

Global migration poses particular concerns for children and young people. Eighty per cent of asylum seekers moving to Finland in autumn 2015 were under the age of 35. In spite of statistics like these, the consequences of global migration on children and young people are seldom mentioned in policy and youth research.

Young People in Reception Centres aims to address this research gap by drawing on the work of youth researchers and specialists working with young asylum seekers. In particular, authors concentrate on unaccompanied minors and professionals working with them. Many of the personal accounts included in this collection illustrate everyday life, social networks and leisure time of young asylum seekers, and emphasise certain constraints that judicial and immigration policies have on these groups of people.

All of the essays included in this collection have been written as part of a project initiated jointly by the Finnish Youth Research Network, Save the Children (Finland) and the Youth Council of the Finnish State, in order to document the viewpoints of young people, professionals, NGO representatives, with the aim of improving the lives of young asylum seekers in Finland.

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