

Children on the move

A guide to working with unaccompanied children in Europe



Marjan Schippers

CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

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Colophon

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Preface

It is a sobering thought that there are probably more displaced persons and refugees currently than at any other time in history. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates a total figure in the region of eighty million displaced people worldwide and further estimate that approximately forty percent of this figure are children.

These children are likely to have experienced hardship during their journey to Europe. Considerable numbers will have experienced abuse and will also have struggled to continue the route full of risks and dangers, fears and threats. They then arrive in a strange country where systems, language and culture can be overwhelmingly different. They have to navigate a complex, lengthy and often changing system with very stressful procedures in order to regularize their stay in Europe.

Upon arrival in Europe unaccompanied children face a triple jeopardy – as children, who have age related vulnerabilities and may experience rights violations; as migrants who face discrimination, stigma, marginalization and suffer from limited access to services and opportunities; and as they are unaccompanied they lack the impact of a nurturing adult who can guide and support them and both act in, and promote, their best interests.

However, these children are also resilient young people: they succeeded in reaching Europe and are full of hope and belief that they can make it here. Although they often went through a lot of terrible experiences, they are not losers but winners. The best way to help them, still children, on their path to adulthood is by providing them with safety and trust and, by showing an interest and commitment to them, to guide them towards a realistic future perspective. They should be engaged with respect and in a manner which will stimulate their resilience, agency and autonomy in a culture and trauma-sensitive way.

The publication of this guide is thus both relevant and timely. Based on nearly 50 years of direct experience gained by Nidos and experiences of the other members and partners of the European Guardian Network (EGN), it sets out the context and the challenges of working with this group of children. The guide offers insights into why unaccompanied children behave and react to events in different ways compared to children who have not experienced exile. It seeks to offer advice to those who work with unaccompanied children to address these challenges with the aim of equipping professionals to respond more appropriately to their needs, and in doing so it is envisaged

that standards of care and support will improve so that, ultimately, children will have better outcomes. Childhood is a short season and perhaps more so for unaccompanied children. It is hoped that this guide will contribute to making the season a little brighter and longer.

This guide was written by Marjan Schippers to whom I give a very special thank you. Sadly Marjan passed away in August 2021. We know that without her we would not have been able to produce this guide. I am also grateful for the invaluable input from the members and partners of EGN and the project manager of EGN, Terry Smith.

Tanno Klijn
Chairman of the board of EGN

Introduction

The large number of refugees who travelled by foot, in crowded boats or hidden in trucks to Europe in 2015 and 2016, and the portrayal of the miserable conditions in overcrowded refugee camps on the Greek islands since that time, made and still make an impact on the consciousness of many people. Across all sections of society, professionally or otherwise, people have come into contact with refugees for the first time. This has led to questions, discomfort and challenges, as well as feelings of powerlessness and concern.

Among the refugees is a particularly vulnerable group: unaccompanied children. They left their country of origin without their parents. Sometimes they are accompanied by a family member, for example, a grandmother or an adult brother, but they do not have an adult with them who has parental authority. In other words, no one is legally responsible for them during their flight and subsequent stay in Europe. Unaccompanied minor is the legal term for this kind of child refugee, as stated in various European Union (EU) legislative documents. This heterogeneous group of children includes unaccompanied children from war zones, but also children from so-called 'safe countries of origin', such as Albania, and from countries in North Africa, such as Morocco and Algeria. It is highly unlikely that any of them will get residence permits in the EU. Whether they are eligible for reception or a work permit differs from country to country. Furthermore, some unaccompanied children are in Europe involuntarily, as victims of human trafficking.

Regardless of their background and origin, many unaccompanied children find themselves in similar circumstances. They are alone and underage, have left their home country and are seeking protection and shelter. But even though these children have a lot in common, they should always be seen as individuals.

This guide has been written for all those involved in the guidance and support of unaccompanied children. But also for anyone who is simply interested in how children deal with the enormous task of finding their way in an unknown country after going through war, poverty, flight, traumatic experiences, loss, uncertainty and uprooting. The content is based on the knowledge and years of experience of the many participating partners who now form the European Guardianship Network (EGN). Working with these children has given them all valuable insights into who the children are and what they need. The guide is therefore useful for guardians, social workers, mentors, teachers, professionals in the child protection system, and all others who may encounter this vulnerable group of children.

All children should be regarded as unique individuals, so there is no 'one size fits all' approach for this vulnerable and diverse group. The guide aims to offer the reader a better understanding of the children's strengths, needs and emotional baggage. Knowledge of their background, cultural differences, guidance needs, health issues and safety risks is indispensable. By combining the insights from different European countries, with their different perspectives, practical experience, knowledge and literature, this comprehensive guide provides the skills and insights that will help all professionals help the children. To ensure that each child is given the guidance and support, education, accommodation and treatment they need, so that by the age of 18 they are sufficiently resilient and independent to live life as an adult.

Methodology

This guide has been written to provide the basic knowledge and skills required for working with unaccompanied children. It is based on the book *Children, fled and alone* by Marjan Schippers (2017). Marjan was a child-psychologist at Nidos, the Dutch guardianship agency appointed by the government in 2002 to provide guardianship services for unaccompanied asylum seeking and refugee children. Marjan passed away in 2021.

Years of experience of working with this heterogeneous and ever-changing group of children has provided a wealth of information from coaches and mentors, guardians, behavioural scientists, teachers and other professionals. Their input originates from observations, encountering a variety of issues and, most importantly, many conversations with the children themselves. Certain phenomena are empirically supported by experiences, and therefore given as general statements. Examples of this are that children are often hungry and tired and find it difficult to trust others. Many of the stories and examples are given using pseudonyms but are based on cases encountered in the field that show many similarities.

All European countries have different working methods, so EGN members and partners provided valuable feedback and contributions to this guide, including examples and supporting literature. Additionally, European and international policy documents and academic publications have been used to substantiate the theoretical framework.

Reading guide

Chapter 1 describes why children leave their home country without their parents and what they experience during their flight to Europe. In Chapters 2 and 3, the child's main needs in the initial phase of their stay in Europe are considered. Chapter 4 deals with the physical health and, especially, the mental health of unaccompanied children. Chapter 5 examines the behaviour of unaccompanied children in the context of culture, experiences during their flight and the fact that they are cut off from their family.

Resilience and how it can be strengthened is also discussed. The children's future prospects, from return to integration, are discussed in Chapter 6, as well as the needs of young adults in this regard when they reach the age of majority. The final chapter focuses on the pedagogical guidance of unaccompanied children from an intercultural perspective. Guidance perspectives described in the previous chapters are presented in a structured and coherent way, and cultural sensitivity and intercultural communication are addressed too.