

RAN FC&S

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CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN Families, Communities & Social Care Working Group meeting

Supporting children growing up in an extremist family context

Key outcomes

On 21 and 22 March 2024, the RAN Families, Communities & Social Care (FC&S) Working Group convened a meeting among practitioners working with children growing up in extremist environments, such as social workers, family support practitioners, teachers, and youth or community workers who support children and their families.

During the meeting, participants discussed the challenging situations that these children find themselves in. For example, children are often brought up with a black-and-white worldview and strong fears, often grow up quite isolated and may face loyalty conflicts as they are confronted with different worldviews in their life. For practitioners who support these children, it is in turn challenging to build a connection with these families (both children and parents), to obtain worrying signals in time, and to find a balance between supporting the child without infringing on the rights of these families to have their beliefs and to raise their children.

Some key recommendations and principles for support that follow from this meeting are, among others:

- Have a victim-centred approach. Do not perceive children as a potential threat, but rather as victims of the situation and as children who need support. Instead of approaching children as security risks, it is crucial to focus on how to effectively support them.
- Offer long-term support with the same group of people and practitioners. Short-term support and unfamiliar faces do not offer the right circumstances to build the necessary trustful relationship in order to effectively work with the children on their resilience and well-being.
- Focus on what is important for everyone at the table: the well-being of the child. Both the parents and the practitioner aim for what is best for the child, which may be an opening to work together.
- Never “use” children to obtain information. Children often struggle with loyalty issues. To foster loyalty, avoid situations where children have to perceive their parents in a negative way or encounter difficulties with their parents because they were forced to share information.
- Make sure you take on a holistic approach and make use of the entire environment of the child to help them. Actors are, among others (but not limited to): parents, grandparents, teachers and social workers.

More details can be found in the subsequent chapters.

This paper outlines the highlights of the discussions during this meeting, followed by key recommendations, relevant practices and suggestions for further reading.

Context and challenges

Impact on children growing up in extremist family contexts

Children around the EU are “increasingly exposed to violent extremism in their families” (1). Growing up in an extremist family can affect a child’s well-being and development in various ways. They are faced with a specific set of potential challenges. They may be exposed to (violent) extremist ideologies and subsequently exposed to, for example, activities, environments, propaganda, media and violent behaviours associated with this ideology. The children growing up in extremist family contexts have been victims of these circumstances, mainly their parents’ decisions, while a safe space to grow up in is essential for children. Protecting the rights of these children (such as children’s freedom of expression, right to education, safety and/or well-being) should therefore be central to the support provided by practitioners.

Practitioners during this meeting stressed the challenging situations children might find themselves in, such as:

- **Growing up with loyalty conflicts due to confrontation with different worldviews.** This becomes apparent, for instance, in the information that is provided to children in schools by their teachers and peers, in contrast to the worldview and information that are taught by their parents.
- **Children in these situations are often brought up with a “black-and-white” worldview.** Black and white here means that children are often brought up with clear ideas on what is good vs evil, truth vs lies, allowed vs forbidden. As a result, there is little room for nuance at home.
- **Children often grow up isolated.** This means that children are in many instances prevented from having contact with people with different worldviews. As a consequence, they often face exclusion and bullying from their peers, schools and the community. In other cases, children are prevented from attending (state) schools, because their parents do not recognise the state anymore.
- **Children are often brought up with strong fears, whether it be of hell, the pharmaceutical industry or other people.** As a consequence, children become very fearful of doing “the wrong thing”.
- **Frequently a (process of) legitimisation of the use of violence exists.** It can be framed as violence against enemies, or as self-defence. As a consequence, children might witness violence from a young age.

The lack of exposure to different worldviews, the lack of alternative relationships and constant exposure to an extremist ideology can have a large impact on the child’s development, norms and values.

Growing up with different ideologies

The above-mentioned challenges can be applicable to families from various ideologies. Participants however also reflected on how growing up with specific ideologies can lead to specific situations, challenges or risk factors:

- **The role of discrimination, racism and exclusion.** Children from families affiliated with religiously motivated extremism might face discrimination or stigmatisation by, for example, peers at school. Children growing up in families affiliated with violent right-wing extremism (VRWE) on the other hand may be learning such “us and them” narratives and racist views at home.

(1) <https://prepare-project.eu/about/>

- **Risk of travelling to war zones.** For Islamist extremism, children might have faced the risk that their parents travelled to war zones, such as to Daesh in Syria, and took their children with them.
- **A utopian view of what the world should look like.** When we take a closer look at specifically Islamist extremism and VRWE, there is often a utopian perspective. In contrast, conspiracy theorists are united by their fear of, for example, medicine or the government. These distinct viewpoints might impact children in varying ways. Specifically concerning conspiracy narratives, practitioners frequently observe that parents withhold the necessary healthcare from their children, and isolate themselves and their children more and more.
- **Gender roles.** Within both VRWE and Islamist extremism, men tend to occupy leadership roles and are more associated with their role as a fighter as well as the use of violence. There can be exceptions to this and women do play a significant role in both ideologies, such as in recruitment. Additionally, there is an emphasis on traditional gender roles where the woman stays at home and cares for the children, while the man is responsible for protecting and taking care of his family.
- **Isolation through home-schooling.** Within VRWE and conspiracy narratives, practitioners observe a trend in which some people choose to withdraw their child from school and home-school them. This causes greater isolation for the child since they have more limited contact with their peers with different worldviews.
- **Conception of radicalisation in schools.** While the concerns for VRWE have increasingly gotten focus in the last few years, the general conception of radicalisation has been more focused on Islamist radicalisation. Schools, for example, do not identify the signals of VRWE as much, because some of the views (such as anti-immigrant) have been a part of society for a long time.

Challenges for first-line practitioners

The introductory paragraph has summarised the challenges children face when growing up in an extremist family context. These challenges include isolation, facing exclusion, loyalty issues and fear. Practitioners strive to provide effective support to these children in overcoming (among others) these difficulties. However, they themselves encounter challenges in doing so. While supporting the children in this context, they have to navigate their own obstacles, such as:

- **Obtaining information:** For practitioners, acquiring a comprehensive understanding of the case they are working on can be challenging. Reaching these children is often problematic due to their inherent isolation. Moreover, a strong sense of loyalty frequently leads children to conceal information or even lie on behalf of their parents. Balancing the need to respect this loyalty while fostering genuine and open conversations poses a complex dilemma for practitioners in this context.
- **Trust building:** Children often receive implicit lessons about mistrusting individuals beyond their immediate social circles. This scepticism may extend even more so to practitioners. Establishing a trustful relationship with children as a consequence demands considerable time and effort, particularly when family members feel reluctant to cooperate.
- **Cooperation with family members:** The involvement and support of significant family members are important tools in the support for children in general. However, when children are raised in extremist households, involving the parents can be challenging due to various reasons: these include the fear of stigma, shame, or a general distrust towards the state and its institutions. In some cases, it is unlikely the family will cooperate.
- **Getting in touch:** When family members are reluctant to cooperate, initiating communication with the children is a complex task. A bond with the parents may be built by providing long-term support and working towards the same goal: the well-being of the child. Some practitioners, but not all, may be able to reach the children in their own environment, such as schools or during leisure activities.
- **Rights of the child vs the rights of the parents:** Both children and their parents have a right to their beliefs and parents have the right to decide how to raise their children: respecting freedom of beliefs,

freedom of speech and freedom of religion should always be at the core of any support. As a consequence, it is difficult to decide when it is time to intervene, and how to intervene.

- **Fear of working with families:** Practitioners may feel apprehensive about working with families that are affiliated with violent extremism, because of a lack of knowledge about extremism or fear of (the complexities within) these families.

Principles and recommendations

It is essential to effectively support children growing up in extremist families while taking their rights into account. The above points show the challenges for children in extremist families as well as for practitioners. But what can practitioners do to help children overcome these challenges? The box below outlines some common principles for support.

Principles for support

- 1. Have a victim-centred approach.** Do not perceive children as a potential threat, but rather as victims of the situation who need support. Instead of approaching children as security risks, it is crucial to focus on how you can effectively support them.
- 2. Implement a tailor-made approach and avoid a one-size-fits-all strategy, recognising that each situation, family and child is unique.** Consider questions such as: what are the unique and individual risk factors and protective factors in this case? Additionally, be mindful that people from different ideologies may have distinct approaches to raising their children.
- 3. Offer long-term support, with the same group of people and practitioners.** Short-term support does not offer sufficient time to build trust and to effectively work with the children on their resilience and well-being.
- 4. Focus on what is important for everyone at the table: the well-being of the child.** Both the parents and the practitioner want what is best for the child.
- 5. Never "use" children to obtain information.** Children often struggle with loyalty issues. To foster loyalty, avoid situations where children have to perceive their parents in a negative way or encounter difficulties with their parents because they were forced to share information.
- 6. Make sure you take on a holistic approach and make use of the entire environment of the child to help them.** Actors are, among others: parents, grandparents, teachers, social workers.
- 7. Involve the parents as much as possible.** Parents have a freedom to parent and to raise their children. Parents can also be a protective factor, whilst being a risk factor. Parents are often children's confidant and caregiver and are thus necessary for effective interventions. Children and parents need to be aware that they do not have to agree to love each other. Therefore, involve them in discussions regarding the child, empower parents to be good parents. A different approach is of course required when parents are a threat for the child's well-being and abuse is involved.

8. **Make sure you use gender- and age-conscious practices.** Again, a tailor-made approach is needed. Gender plays a big role in many ideologies (more traditional gender roles); therefore it is important to focus on the different experiences among people of different genders.
9. **Take into account the online environment of the child.** A big part of children's lives takes place online. Take this into account when you use interventions.
10. **Everyone needs acceptance and compliments; make sure that you focus on building resilience and the confidence of the children.** Do not merely focus on problems of the child and security issues.

Practical approaches

When considering effective ways to provide support for children growing up in an extremist family context, it is important to take the rights of the different stakeholders in a child's life into account. Stakeholders often are the parents, the environment around the child (school, peers, family and community), and the child him- or herself.



Relevant stakeholders to support children in extremist families ⁽²⁾

Involving parents

In the section above, it was stressed that children are often victims of the worldview and decisions of their parents. Growing up in an extremist family context creates numerous challenges and risk factors for children. However, it is important to involve parents in the support of their child since they can serve as a crucial protective factor. They are often the primary caregivers of their children. The well-being of their child is most of the time the most important thing to the parents as well, which can be a window of opportunity to work together. The following points help to achieve this:

- **Search for opportunities to increase the resilience of the parents, particularly when one of the parents is not radicalised.** By working on their resilience and their needs, you can work together on building the resilience of their children ⁽³⁾.
- **If necessary, provide concrete and practical help.** Finding a job or housing may provide more stability for the children, helps to build a trustful relationship with the parents and enhances their resilience.

⁽²⁾ The graphics are taken from the presentation by Kim Lisa Becker (IZRD E.v.).

⁽³⁾ check out the related RAN FC&S conclusion paper: [Empowering parents to make their children more emotionally resilient](#)

- **If relatives (siblings, or parents and child) are separated (for example, because of a divorce), work on bringing them back together.**
- **Be confrontational.** Sometimes parents have to be confronted with their parenting style and the effect it has on their children’s well-being.

When parents are not willing to work with the practitioner and form a direct threat to their child’s safety, the practitioners must focus on bringing the child to a safe environment.

Supporting children

When supporting children, it is important to focus on strengthening their resilience and protective factors. This entails strengthening their identity by focusing on characteristics and personality traits such as fostering friendliness and kindness, and coping strategies for anxiety and balance. In addition, it entails discussing attitudes, beliefs and convictions.

Practitioners can support this resilience in various ways. One of them is by working with the children through the “I have, I am, I can” method ⁽⁴⁾.

I have	I am	I can
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trusting relationships • Structure and rules at home • Role models • Encouragement to be autonomous • Access to health, education and care services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worthy of love • Proud of myself • Compassionate • Autonomous and responsible • Full of hope and convinced that everything will work out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate • Solve problems • Control my emotions and impulses • Assess my own temperament and that of others • Build trusting relationships

Practical ways that help to achieve the above can be:

- **First of all, invest time in building trust with the child.** Children often feel apprehensive towards social workers or government institutions. Create trust by, for example, sharing some things about yourself or letting them choose where to meet, so they are comfortable.
- **Create healthy routines and clear structures in children’s everyday lives.** Examples are school and sports.
- **Teach them how to dream.** Children need to have a sense of self-worth and dreams for the future. Teaching them how to dream, even if they are unreachable dreams, can build resilience. If relevant consider engaging with the topic of religion when you support the child. What does religion mean to them and how can it be a part of their resilience?
- **Focus on emotional education.** This involves talking with the children about what their emotions are and how to deal with them. Emotions are motors and activators in life. They can provide a safe space and ring the alarm bell, or prompt students to seek help.

⁽⁴⁾ Based on theory by Edith Grotberg in: *Handbüch Resilienz-Förderung* (2011).

- **Educate children about critical thinking and media literacy.** Children are free to their own opinions and worldviews. Creating knowledge about this gives them the ability to critically assess what they think.

Strengthening external protective factors

Last, the environment of the child serves as a pillar to strengthen the protective factors for the child. This includes the involvement of the schools, family and the community in supporting the children, and also making sure children have positive and stable relationships with peers or role models to look up to. This makes them more resilient and exposes them to different worldviews.

The following ideas have been raised:

- **Ensure the child has social skills and is able make connections.** Being lonely can be one of the biggest risk factors for all kinds of negative outcomes. Make sure children have connections with their peers but also other family members. Being with like-minded people and feeling understood is important for children to grow up less isolated. This can be achieved through school but also by participating in sports.
- **Use role models or make existing ones stronger.** This gives a child someone to look up to and someone to talk to. This can, for example, be a close family member or a teacher, dependent on the context.

Relevant practices

- The **PREPARE project (EU)** is aimed at enhancing the resilience of children exposed to violent extremist environments. PREPARE seeks to identify the unique stigmas, vulnerabilities and resilience factors children may develop in family environments where they are exposed to violent extremism. Deliverables of the project include a Train-the-Trainer programme for first-line practitioners, a Child Vulnerability and Intervention tool, and a Practitioners Guide.
- The Interdisciplinary Centre for Radicalisation Prevention and Democracy Promotion (IZRD) advises both individuals in distancing processes as well as their relatives who observe radicalisation processes among family members. IZRD also developed a **methodological textbook** for environmental, distancing and exit counselling in the context of religiously based extremism. Also, the IZRD is offering training courses for professionals in elementary school and child and youth welfare services (youth welfare offices) on the connection between child protection, radicalisation and the prevention of extremism.

Further reading

- RAN in the Western Balkans Study Visit (2023). [Managing the Needs of Child Returnees](#)
- Study Visit to Helsinki (2021). [The management of child returnees](#)
- RAN YF&C Academy (2019). [Children growing up in extremist families](#)
- RAN YF&C (2018). [Vulnerable children who are brought up in an extremist environment](#)
- Cook, J. (2023). [Distinguishing Children from ISIS-Affiliated Families in Iraq and Their Unique Barriers for Rehabilitation and Reintegration](#)
- Cook, J. & Schneider, L. (2024). [The life of children in families affiliated with terrorism: an ecological systems theory approach](#)