

10/11/2021

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN digital small-scale expert meeting on 'Training for practitioners on dealing with returning children'

30 September 2021 9-12.30 CET, online

Training for practitioners on dealing with returning children

Key outcomes

The small-scale expert meeting on the training of practitioners who are dealing with returning children took place on 30 September 2021. The overall goal of the meeting was to explore the main needs and current gaps in building capacities of European practitioners in dealing with returning children. The outcomes of the meeting are relevant for practitioners who deal with returning children from different sectors. They include mental health workers, community workers, youth workers and family workers, teachers and police. The main outcomes of the meeting are presented below.

- The overall institutional architecture dealing with children is multi-agency and should, to the extent possible, involve existing institutions and skills.
- The approach has to be individualised to meet the unique needs of each child, and should focus on normalisation. It is not necessary to put a label on the children early on. Special treatments and therapy should be decided on a case-by-case basis.
- Topics proposed for training include: awareness raising on returning children, resilience building, communication strategies, specialised training on particular topics such as the mental health of a returning child and on carrying out supervision and mentoring.
- When designing trainings, it is important to include a number of aspects: interactive methods; empirical data on existing experiences with child returnees and concrete cases; the voices and perspectives of the children; self-reflexivity; specialisation of the content depending on the target audience.

This paper will elaborate on the main themes discussed during the meeting and will subsequently select a number of recommendations concerning the training of practitioners dealing with returning children. The paper also presents three relevant practices. It concludes with an outlook on future meetings dealing with related topics.

Highlights of the discussion

During the meeting it was important to set the scene in order to understand the factual background and institutional setup of this area of work.

With regard to the **factual background**, while a number of Member States have already repatriated children from Northern Syrian camps, the majority of children from the EU are still there. This means that significantly more resources will have to be mobilised in the eventuality of their return. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), a child is any human being below the age of 18. Nevertheless, there are delineations by age, which can reflect different types of experiences and degrees (or the existence) of indoctrination. These differences have an impact on the type of approaches and corresponding trainings. For instance, adolescent interventions are only possible if a child has reached a certain cognitive level. At the same time, it is important to remember that children's involvement in violence is not necessarily accompanied by an ability to consent nor the capacity to fully understand the consequences of this involvement. Overall, despite some similarities, working with children is fundamentally different than working with adults. A particular aspect should be considered and which affects children more than adults is multiple and ongoing trauma.

Concerning the **institutional setup**, the macro-structures managing returnees should be multi-agency in nature, whereas the approach should be individualised. It should be based on a plan, balancing security and social concerns, individual situations and needs. While child protection services and schools are the main actors in ensuring the safe reintegration of child returnees, these need to function in the context of a multi-agency approach. This means that additional actors are also involved, such as social care services, psychologists and healthcare actors, local authorities, schools, prison and probation related services (e.g. when parents are in prison), employment services, sports and leisure organisations, religious and charity organisations, intelligence, police and so on. Ideally, all actors should receive basic training in dealing with child returnees. More specific trainings should be provided depending on needs and the target group.

With regard to the **concrete work with child returnees** and its implications for trainings, a number of insights were communicated during the meeting. The children's family is often also in focus since they also need support from psychologists or other organisations involved in the multi-agency structure. This is the case with children who spent a long time in camps and which usually involve somatic traumas (which require long-term follow-up).

One of the most important issues to solve during any case refers to the **individual narrative**. In this case, one of the challenges is to address what happened to the parents. The majority of experts have underlined that separation from mothers can represent an additional trauma. For training purposes, this involves including or liaising with professionals who work with the mothers. Some of the challenges posed by working with child returnees, and which need to be considered in trainings are: information sharing; the impact of cases on practitioners; cultural gaps and the need to learn about the cultural values of the target group; the fact that trauma might only externalise after a few years. What's more, several innovative practices were mentioned, such as a radio programmes to inform parents on topics related to trauma, home visits (a practice that allows more flexibility) and various entertainment activities (allow the monitoring of the children's health and development).

Recommendations

This section presents key recommendations to improve the training content and format, as noted during the meeting.

- The overall planning of trainings should aim for a general model and tailor-made approaches depending on the local context. It should include assessment and evaluation.
- Trainings should be structured into basic and specialized trainings (depending on the area of work and the target groups). **Basic awareness training should cover:**
 - information about the situation in Syria / Iraq which these children witnesses and experienced;
 - basic trauma awareness and response exercises when a child returnee shows particular behaviour;
 - how to report signs of concern and where to request additional support.
- **Specialised trainings** should be developed depending on the target groups: e.g. staff who work directly *with* children (first-line practitioners, teachers, social workers, psychologists) vs. coordinating staff or multipliers who are working *for* children (state education authorities, ministerial administration).
- To improve case management processes, multipliers and practitioners should be offered trainings about **how to structure and prepare supervision and mentoring**.
- Conceptualise trainings for professionals in **existing structures** rather than creating new ones. At the same time, consider including trainings for professionals who do not work directly with the children, but with the families, for example.
- The specific content of the training should be designed depending on needs analyses. For example, psychologists will need a general introductory course on radicalisation and foreign fighting while exit workers who had thus far worked with adults will need a course on the specificities of child psychology.
- Given the high prevalence of traumatic experiences among child returnees, **trauma awareness** should be included in all types of training, regardless if it is a general or a specialised training. Trauma therapy should be carried out by specialised staff, who should also benefit from a general training on returnees.
- Another constant of all trainings should be **cooperation and information exchange** among stakeholders.
- An aspect to include in trainings of professionals working with families is how to cope with **stigmatisation**.
- Another aspect to include is information about **support systems and networks** in each country.
- Specific skills can also be included in specialised trainings such as: anti-violence training or non-violent communication, trust-building in case management, anti-bias training, etc.
- Include practical aspects related to the change of environment, such as malnutrition or various health problems.
- The main approach for children is reintegration, in particular normalisation in society and at school. This means normalising the day-to-day lives of the children and socialising them into an appropriate social network as soon as possible following their arrival. **Reintegration and normalisation** should therefore be umbrella concepts for all types of training.

Relevant practices

The following practices address some of the challenges of dealing with child returnees, starting with a systemic outlook and continuing with two concrete approaches.

1. The returnee coordinator in Germany connects relevant actors involved in the work with child returnees, informs them and is the node that facilitates information exchange relating to a certain case. Coordinators hold trainings, briefings and presentations, as well as roundtable meetings, bilateral talks and case conferences.
2. The Division for Prevention and Reintegration of Radicalized Persons in Kosovo has created and implemented a structured process for the rehabilitation and reintegration of child returnees. It includes psychiatric evaluations and services, as well as leisure and educational activities. The practitioners involved are trained accordingly.

Follow up

Explore national and regional differences as regards policies, curricula and expertise concerning existing trainings.

Further reading

RAN Conclusion paper [Dealing with returning children and their mothers from Daesh: taking stock and going forward](#), online meeting 19-20 May 2021.

RAN Conclusion paper [Challenges and solutions when working with families of foreign terrorist fighters](#), online meeting 29-30 June 2020.

RAN Ex post paper [Study visit: Returned women and children – studying an ongoing experience on the ground](#), 10-11 December 2019.

RAN Ex post paper Radicalisation Awareness Network [High-level conference on child returnees and released prisoners](#), 2018.

RAN Ex post paper [Building resilience among young children raised in extremist environments – specifically child returnees](#), RAN policy and practice event, Warsaw, 4 July 2018.