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## CONCLUSION PAPER

*RAN FC&S Working Group meeting*

*16-17 May 2023, Rome, Italy*

# Empowering parents to make their children more emotionally resilient

## Key outcomes

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- The Families, Communities and Social Care (FC&S) Working Group brought together 30 practitioners on 16 and 17 May to explore how to empower parents to make their children more emotionally resilient to (among others) extremist influences. This meeting focused on: 1) exploring the role parents can have in making their children more emotionally resilient; 2) exploring how practitioners can empower parents in this regard; 3) discussing the challenges practitioners encounter; and 4) exchanging on inspiring practices in the EU to empower parents. Participants at this meeting were prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) practitioners supporting parents (individually and group-based), such as social and community workers. The key outcomes of this meeting are: practitioners can support parents in a positive way to help their children with difficult emotions and grievances and to play a positive role in their children's lives. It is crucial that support for parents is available long-term.
- For some parents, building emotional resilience can be challenging. They may not be available to do so for a myriad of reasons, may not have the awareness or knowledge about extremism and/or its breeding ground, or experience a high threshold for seeking support when they need it. For practitioners, their challenges relate to finding ways to reach parents who need support, to being aware of the entire family context or working with families in which the parents support extremism themselves.
- Some key recommendations for dealing with these challenges are: work on your own as well as the parent's emotional resilience first, have a positive and outreaching approach towards the parents, and give the parents a positive role to play in your programmes. Additionally, it can be helpful to empower parents by creating networks where parents can meet and connect for peer support.

## Context

### I - Emotional resilience

Emotional resilience can be seen as a combination of emotional *intelligence* and emotional *literacy*. It is helpful to explore how people can learn how to better put words to their emotions (emotional literacy) as well as regulate them (emotional intelligence). Emotional resilience serves as one of the basic protective factors, which is positive for an individual's overall well-being and acts as a buffer against negative influences. Emotional intelligence consists of several components. Examples are recognising emotional reactions, recognising strengths and weaknesses, choosing a behaviour rather than being in an immediate reaction mode, interpreting verbal or non-verbal signs, and the ability to make decisions (when to support, keep silent, confront, etc.). For young people who generally may be dealing with questions surrounding their identity ('who am I?', 'where do I belong?'), this is particularly useful. Their search for identity and meeting expectations in a challenging (post-lockdown) society can go together with all kinds of emotions. During this meeting, practitioners stressed that however "emotional resilience is not only crucial for youth, but for everyone, including parents and practitioners themselves". In the most recent paper of the Youth & Education (Y&E) Working Group (2023), several concepts related to emotional resilience have been clarified further (see box below).

- **"Emotional literacy** is the ability to bring emotions into words. There are 8 basic emotions, like joy or anger, but within there is many more nuance, such as proud, confident or hopeful, or annoyed, jealous and sceptical. The better we formulate how we feel, the better we will be able to regulate these emotions.
- **Emotional contagion** transfers (both positive and negative) emotions to others, and makes people experience the same emotions as those around them. A study showed that also emotions on social media are contagious, which can create a massive (sometimes negative) response.
- **Emotional intelligence** is the ability of a person to recognise his or her own emotions and regulate them. It is also the ability to recognise the emotions of others and positively adapt to them. If one is emotionally intelligent, they will be able to contain their anger." (Y&E, 2023)

#### *Emotional resilience and extremism*

Empowering parents to make their children emotionally resilient before an actual concern about violent extremism arises can be part of the *protective buffer* to actually becoming susceptible to extremist influences, but also many other harmful influences. When there is an actual concern related to violent extremism — no matter the ideology — practitioners can use the focus on emotional resilience to create a positive way to support parents to help their children with difficult emotions and to talk about grievances or other issues.

### II - Parents and building emotional resilience

#### *Challenges for parents*

A role for parents in building resilience in their children's lives may consist of listening and talking to their children. They can listen to challenging topics and grievances of their children and their related emotions, also without having all the answers. Most of the parents are usually interested in the well-being of their child, but for some of them, external factors can put a large amount of pressure on themselves and their families.

Practitioners during the meeting therefore discussed different reasons why parents may not be available for their children and the situations that practitioners see in their work. For example, parents often deal with a lack of time and financial means and may feel fatigue from their own work and problems. Solving issues within the family may take time and money, which parents do not always possess. Also a myriad of reasons can make it difficult to take

on an active parental role and build emotional resilience in their children, such as parents not having authority over their children, parents projecting their own trauma on their children or not being open to talking. Other situations to think of are families where drug abuse or domestic violence is present. However, there are also many situations where the above-mentioned issues are not necessarily present in the family setting.

In addition, there is a group of parents that may not be aware. Some parents are facing difficulties to identify behaviour that can lead to extremism with their children and do not always know how to address problematic behaviour or grievances. In addition, parents may have different views on what is and what is not extreme behaviour (depending also on the position of the parent). Last, there is a lack of knowledge of their children's lives due to the fast-changing world and additionally the age gap between parents and their children that is most apparent in young people's digital presence.

When parents are already worried that their child may engage with extremist ideas or behaviour, the threshold of looking for help is quite high and when they do, often there are limited programmes supporting parents available. Some parents struggle with feelings of shame and guilt to ask for help or have negative experiences with and don't trust institutions for several reasons. These feelings can result in not dealing with issues that occur at all, remaining in denial and not reaching out for help.

### *Challenges for practitioners*

Practitioners aim to support parents in a variety of ways on different levels of prevention, for example through *counselling*, *restorative practices* (focused on restoring the relationship between the parent and the child), *coaching* (helping them set the goals, assessing how things are going and setting new goals), *parents networks* or *training programmes*. When zooming in on the daily practice of professionals supporting parents during this meeting, their challenges mainly relate to the following dilemmas:

- Communicating with parents or caregivers can be challenging when the parent(s) have a different perspective on the issues of their child or have their own issues to deal with.
- Practitioners have to adjust to the social/cultural context of the families they work with. This is needed to build trust and choose a fitting intervention. This can be difficult because the practitioners all bring their own frame of reference when it comes to these issues.
- Practitioners also struggle with a prerequisite for the support of parents: reaching them and getting them involved. This can be due to a myriad of reasons, as outlined in the previous section. For practitioners, this translates into the following challenging situations:
  - o Practitioners often face a lack of trust from parents. Practitioners are sometimes seen as representatives of institutions that some parents do not trust for several reasons. Additionally, practitioners who are representing projects and initiatives against extremism often also create a lack of trust in the first place.
  - o Practitioners reach parents who want help in a late stage. Practitioners often see parents only when problems are already occurring, therefore there is less time to build a trustful relationship.
  - o On the other hand, there are parents who look away and pretend the problems are not there. This can be a result of feelings of shame and guilt, but also simply because parents do not see the problem, because of a variety of reasons outlined in the first part of the paper.

Whereas this part has outlined the challenging issues that occur both for the parents themselves as for the practitioners, the next section will present recommendations and practices by the practitioners. Participants at this meeting stressed the importance of a positive and empowering approach for the parents.

## Working towards positive approaches: recommendations, conclusions and inspiring practices

### General tips for working on emotional resilience

- Don't forget to focus on your own emotional resilience as a practitioner and the emotional resilience of the parent. An emotion is not a bad thing, as it signals something. Try to distance from it (this often takes time) and discuss what is going on. Practical self-help exercises can be helpful if you are in a challenging situation, such as by focusing on your own observations, sensations, thoughts, emotions, actions, needs and solutions.
- Communication methods that can be helpful for practitioners and parents are for example non-violent communication, active listening and motivational interviewing. They enhance acceptance, ownership and a positive future-oriented perspective.

### Insights on an outreaching approach for parents

- Have an outreaching approach. This means taking the practitioners to the parents instead of the other way around.
- Parents are more willing to participate through an appreciative approach: don't just offer a good programme, but also appeal to the resources they already have and how they can positively support their community.
- Show them you listen, don't just sell your programme.
- Also take a positive approach in dialogues with parents. Talk about what they know and already do instead of lecturing them on how to be a parent.
- Focus on strengthening their involvement in their children's lives. This can be carried out with a positive approach, such as motivational interviewing. Example assignments and questions are: *How do you want your children to remember you? What kind of parent do you want to be; what already works?* An example of a concrete assignment is: Set up objectives you would like to reach and make them SMART.

### Insights for working with parents

- Trust is relation-based and is built over time. It requires patience and maintenance.
- Be aware of the specific family context of the families you work with. Every family is different, which requires working on a case-by-case basis. For example, the family dynamics and cultural context can be crucial to effectively work with parents. This determines how parents perceive the upbringing of their children and how this should be done. Interventions should be tailored to these different contexts.
  - This is also crucial when it comes to building trust with the family you work with. Taking the time to understand and get to know the family is essential to build trust.
- Keep in mind that the target audience buys into the relationships or the network that is being offered, not just a programme or a concept.
- Do not dictate the objectives of your programme, the target group may be able to define the cause better.
- To be able to make a clear assessment of the situation and guide parents to the right steps and interventions, staying up to date is necessary. Therefore, constant training and knowledge building is needed.

### Insights on networks and spaces for support

- Create spaces for support close to the parents. These are places where parents can connect with each other and find the right support and information.
- Create parent networks for peer support: this way, parents can find and help each other with their struggles. This is also a way for parents to connect and find mutual understanding.

## Recommendations for (local) authorities

- Support **long-term** strategies: long-term funded projects are necessary to ensure a long lasting, sustainable effect. Especially since building trust takes years, it can potentially be harmful when programmes are suddenly not available anymore.
- **Promote citizenship participation.** Create spaces where citizens and institutions can meet to discuss what is important to parents and what their needs are.

## Recommendations in daily practice

*A positive and broad approach focused on raising children*

1. In Denmark, **Baba** works to empower the target group of fathers for bigger involvement in their children's lives. The objective of the work is to counter the emergence and reproduction of social problems — including violent extremism. With their project, Baba has a network of fathers who have the space to discuss what fatherhood means to them and what this looks like. This positive approach strengthens the links between fathers and between practitioners and fathers.
2. The training programme **Parents in the Lead**, developed by Diversae (NL), aims to empower Muslim parents when it comes to helping their adolescent child in a society that places high demands on them. The training programme, consisting of six 3-hour sessions, is aimed at strengthening parents in raising their child in general and protecting their child against harmful influences — such as extremism. Parents have a much broader focus of problems to be aware of, so it works better to support them in a broader way.

*When parents reach out for advice or support*

3. **Parents for Peace** is a public health nonprofit offering a [Confidential Intervention Helpline](#) designed to support intimate bystanders (e.g., parents, friends, spouses) struggling with a loved one who is (getting) involved into extremism. Their interventions are tailored to the needs of intimate bystanders. Their methodology involves: 1) educating intimate bystanders on what extremism is, where it comes from, how to identify grievances and how to spot early warning signs of radicalisation, 2) providing a toolbox of concrete activities, or actions that the intimate bystanders can take to minimize radicalisation and 3) referral and off-ramping support to be guided through difficult times (including referral to additional support resources) via a toolbox of concrete activities, coaching the intimate bystander on how to redirect the individual of concern from the pull toward radicalisation. In addition to confidential intervention helpline, Parents for Peace offers an intimate bystander support group for bystanders to grow a sense of community around themes that are important to them.
4. **Save the Children** (SE) has a National Support Line, which is a low-threshold service that provides professional support and counselling to family members/other care givers and children and young people themselves. Callers can contact the support line with concerns about someone who is expressing hateful, violent or extremist views. 80% of the incoming calls are parents who are worried. The practitioners working on the support line focus on understanding the situation of their child and strengthening the bond between parent and child. They use an assessment template to map the wider needs of the parents and to refer them to further support if needed. With the method of Motivational Interviewing, they guide as well as empower parents in a respectful and curious way. The support line is anonymous and free but callers can by choice break their anonymity in order to access more direct and long term support through the support line.

## Further RAN reading

- RAN Y&E (2023): [Tools for post-lockdown resilience building in youth](#)
- RAN C&N Working Group (2018): [The role of Informal Actors in delivering effective counter- and alternative narratives](#)
- RAN YF&C and H&SC Working Groups (2017): [Working with families and safeguarding children from radicalisation: Step-by-step guidance paper for practitioners and policy-makers](#)
- RAN YF&C Working Group (2016): [Family support: what works? Meeting on the role of family support in preventing and dealing with radicalisation in a family context](#)

## Topics for follow-up

- A focus on the children who are growing up in extremist families and how to effectively support them.