



A Practitioner's Guide to Working with Children in VE-Affiliated Families: Protecting the Rights of the Child

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Counter-Terrorism



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PREPARE Project Report

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List of Abbreviations

ACE	Adverse Childhood Experiences
IHRL	International Human Rights Law
P/CVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
PREPARE	Promoting collaborative policies of inclusion relating to children of far right and Islamist parents in Western Europe
PRR	Prosecution, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
VE	Violent Extremism

Executive Summary

The PREPARE (Promoting collaborative policies of inclusion relating to children of far right and Islamist parents in Western Europe) project aims to identify vulnerabilities and stigmas that children may face when their parents are involved in violent extremist (VE) networks, and how frontline practitioners can best address them through a collaborative approach centred on the needs of the child. It aims to support these children by supporting frontline practitioners working with these children and their families in six European countries (the Netherlands, Spain, France, Sweden, Germany and Kosovo) to develop a state-of-the-art Child Vulnerability and Intervention Tool and training modules for practitioners.

Central to the PREPARE project is ensuring that human rights, the rule of law, and children's rights remain at the forefront throughout the development and implementation of interventions and programmes aimed at supporting children of families with links to VE. This report thus aims to provide guidance for practitioners on how to support these children through a human rights- and rule of law-compliant approach, that centres on children's needs, well-being, and long-term prospects, and helps mitigate the risks of stigmatisation, polarisation, and discrimination.

This report starts by providing an overview of the rights of the child, as defined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), including the four general principles that should inform the implementation of all other rights, as well as any decisions and interventions affecting children, namely the non-discrimination principle, the best interests of the child, the child's inherent right to life, survival and development, and the child's right to express their views freely. It notably aims to inform practitioners on what these rights are, to what extent children raised in families with links to VE might see some of these rights infringed upon, as well as how they should inform their work.

Finally, this report focuses on providing guidance on identified good practices to support children growing in families with links to VE, which include adopting victim-centred, individually-tailored, gender- and age- conscious approach, developing multidisciplinary and multi-actor programmes, and providing adequate training for practitioners. In addition, the report will further address some of the key challenges and practises to avoid in regards to the safeguarding the rights of children in families with links to VE. Practices to avoid notably include security-centred approaches, one-size-fits-all responses, practices causing re-traumatisation, lack of trust between children and implementers, lack of and/or inadequate training, and lack of long-term funding to ensure sustainable support for children having been exposed to VE environments.

Background

Violent extremism (VE) in Europe has been on the rise over the last couple of decades, and remains an acute threat on the continent.¹ Many individuals are engaging with VE behaviour, radicalisation, and (direct or indirect) participation in violence. Extremism has roots in different ideologies, and affects people from diverse backgrounds and personal histories. Further, engagement in (violent) extremist behaviour is often undetected and covert, posing extra challenges to practitioners working to tackle it. Extremist ideology is often spread through family and social networks, thus it is imperative that attention is paid to those networks, in addition to the individual.

As part of this effort, PREPARE seeks to identify the particular vulnerabilities and stigmas children may face when their parents are involved in jihadist or far-right VE networks, and how those can best be addressed by relevant frontline actors in an informed, prepared, and collaborative way that centres on the needs of the child. Children in families with links to VE may be exposed to adverse experiences, and dangerous or harmful environments and situations, which can affect their development and well-being. Working with these children can pose unique challenges for practitioners, especially if they have not previously worked with this particular group and may not be aware of how a child's life may be impacted by such familial links. Further complications can arise when there are overlapping challenges and vulnerabilities that children may be experiencing, which may require multiple frontline practitioners to work together. Social workers, teachers, psychologists and other healthcare professionals, afterschool carers, legal professionals and many others may be some of the individuals working with children of families associated with VE. As many of these actors may have no prior experience working with such a sensitive topic, it is imperative that they themselves are provided with the full range of information and support for their work with this particular vulnerable group.

In this effort, PREPARE aims to provide frontline practitioners with the knowledge on how to best support these children and their families in an informed, prepared, and collaborative way that centres on the needs of the child, specifically in six European countries (the Netherlands, Spain, France, Sweden, Germany and Kosovo). This is done through the development of a state-of-the-art Child Vulnerability and Intervention Tool, as well as training modules for frontline practitioners.² Considerations around upholding human rights and the rule of law, as well as respecting the rights of children, should be observed at all times when interacting with these children. To support this project, this guide aims to identify best practices to support these children through a rule of law and human rights-centred approach, that helps mitigate stigmatisation, polarisation, and discrimination, and where long-term prospects, well-being, safety, and security of these children must remain central.

Following a brief overview of the rights of the child, and how they translate in the context of (support provided to) children growing up in VE-affected family environments, this guide will highlight some of the key challenges with regards to the safeguarding of such rights for children of families with links to VE. These children may face unique stigmas and vulnerabilities, and subsequently experience some of their fundamental rights infringed. This guide will then provide an outline of good practices, and practices to avoid to adequately support these children, by prioritising their well-being, mitigating the risk of stigmatisation, polarisation, and discrimination, and ensuring that their rights are upheld.

¹ Europol, "European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2022 (TE-SAT)", Europol, 13 July 2022. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publication-events/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2022-te-sat#downloads>

² More information on the PREPARE Project available at: <https://prepare-project.eu/about/>

Rights of the Child

Considerations around respecting the rights of the child are central to the design and implementation of programmes and interventions to support children growing up in families with links to jihadist or far-right extremism. It is thus of crucial importance for practitioners interacting with these children to have an understanding of what these rights are, and how they should inform their approaches and interventions when working with children.

Children are internationally recognised by the United Nations as persons under the age of 18, and as such are considered particularly vulnerable and in need of special protections. Children are entitled to human rights under International Human Rights Law (IHRL). In addition, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is specifically dedicated to children.³ The Convention is a legally binding, international agreement setting out the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of every child.⁴ Under the UNCRC, the following four general principles support a rights-based approach and the implementation of all other articles, and should inform any policies and practices around children of families with links to VE:

- **The non-discrimination principle** (Article 2) means that governments must ensure that all children are assured of the rights enshrined in the Convention “irrespective of the child’s or his or her parent’s or legal guardian’s race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.” Article 2 moreover specifies that all appropriate measures shall be taken “to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child’s parents, legal guardians, or family members.” When considered in the context of children growing up in families with links to VE, this principle notably implies that “children should thus not be treated differently because of their parents’ ideological beliefs, involvement in terrorist-related activities or, upon return, their possible conviction.”⁵
- **The best interests of the child** shall moreover be the primary consideration in “all actions concerning children whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies” (Article 3). Encompassing three dimensions, the child’s best interests constitutes a substantive right (i.e., “is directly applicable (self-executing) and can be invoked before a court), an interpretative legal principle (i.e., “if a legal provision is open to more than one interpretation, the interpretation which most effectively serves the child’s best interests should be chosen”), and a rule of procedure (i.e., “whenever a decision is to be made that will affect a specific child, an identified group of children or children in general, the decision-making process must include an evaluation of the possible impact (positive or negative) of the decision on the child or children concerned”).⁶ It is moreover

3 United Nations, ‘Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)’, United Nations Treaty, 20 November 1989 https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_PRESS200910web.pdf

4 The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most widely ratified human rights treaty in the world, all UN member states except for the United States having ratified it. Two additional protocols were added in 2000, the first of which was to ensure children under the age of 18 are not forcibly recruited into armed forces. The second calls on States to prohibit child prostitution, child pornography, and the sale of children into slavery. A third optional protocol was added in 2011. This enables children whose rights have been violated to complain directly to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

5 Tanya Mehra, and Matthew Wentworth, “Repatriation of child returnees from Northeast Syria: A child-rights approach to their management, rehabilitation, and reintegration,” Policy Brief, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, December 2022, p.3. <https://icct.nl/publication/child-rights-approach-managing-repatriation-northeast-syria/>

6 Committee of the Rights of the Children’s General comment No. 14 (2013) on the right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration, https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/gc/crc_c_gc_14_eng.pdf

important to note that “the best interests of a child must be assessed individually”⁷ taking into account the specific circumstances and individual characteristics of the child concerned.⁸ A best-interests assessment “consists in evaluating and balancing all the elements necessary to make a decision in a specific situation for a specific individual child or group of children. It is carried out by the decision-maker and his or her staff – if possible a multidisciplinary team –, and requires the participation of the child.”⁹ Failing to effectively conduct this individual assessment, and resorting to generic approaches, can lead to problematic decision-making, which builds on incorrect or incomplete evaluation of the child’s best interests, and risks jeopardising children’s rights. For instance, when considering whether or not to repatriate children from camps in Syria and Iraq, some European governments have sometimes used the argument that it was impossible for security reasons, and in general not beneficial for the children to take them away from their parents, without due consideration being paid to other factors, particularly the need to take the child away from a conflict zone. While additional factors might be considered depending on the unique situation of a child, a best-interest assessment should notably take into account the child’s views and identity, the preservation of the family environment and maintaining relations, the care, protection and safety of the child, the situation of vulnerability, and the child’s right to health and education.¹⁰ While some of these key elements will be discussed more practically in this guide, more detailed guidance on the assessment, determination, and implementation of the principle of best interests of the child is provided by the Committee of the Rights of the Children’s General comment No. 14 (2013) on the right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration.

- **The child’s inherent right to life** shall be recognised, with governments ensuring “to the maximum extent possible the **survival and development** of the child” (Article 6). The inhumane and life-threatening conditions, and insecurity, to which tens of thousands of children held in camps in northeast Syria are exposed put their fundamental rights in jeopardy.¹¹ Although several European countries have accelerated the pace of repatriation in recent years, the failure to repatriate others places these children at imminent risks and violates their rights to life, survival, and development.

- **The child’s right to express their views freely** in all matters affecting them should also be guaranteed, their views being given due weight in accordance with the child’s age and level of maturity (Article 12). The child shall thus have, according to Article 12 of the UNCRC, “the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.” When applied in the context of children living in families with links to VE this principle notably implies that children should “be actively involved in decisions that have an impact on their future such as custody matters, choice of school, rehabilitation programmes and in particular with interventions in the medium term and long term.”¹² It might also imply developing interventions that encourage and allow children of families with links to VE “to develop their own thoughts and ideas free from coercion.”¹³

7 Committee of the Rights of the Children’s General comment No. 14 (2013) on the right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Amnesty International, “Syria: Repatriate at least 27,000 children held in dire conditions in north-east Syria,” 30 November, 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/11/syria-repatriate-at-least-27000-children-held-in-dire-conditions-in-north-east-syria/>

12 Mehra, and Wentworth, “Repatriation of child returnees from Northeast Syria: A child-rights approach to their management, rehabilitation, and reintegration,” pp.3-4.

13 Ibid., p.5.

In addition to these general principles, and while all children's rights are equally important, a number of specific rights are particularly relevant and must be carefully considered in relation to children raised in families with links to VE. These include provisions related to:

• **Parental responsibilities, separation from parents and the preservation of family relations:**

According to the UNCRC, governments must “respect the responsibilities, rights and duties” of parents, families and/or carers to raise their children (Article 5), and ensure that a child is “not separated from his or her parents against their will, except when competent authorities subject to judicial review determine, in accordance with applicable law and procedures, that such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child” (Article 9). Moreover, relevant authorities shall ensure that a child who is separated from his or her parents can still “maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis,” except when it is in the best interests of the child not to have such relations and contacts (Articles 9 and 10). A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment shall furthermore “be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State,” including alternative care, with due regard being paid to “the desirability of continuity in a child’s upbringing and to the child’s ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background” (Article 20). Careful attention should be paid to the above provisions when making decisions about children’s potential separation from their parents affiliated to VE organisations, and examining options for their placement with extended families, foster care, or other institutions.

• **Safety and protection of the child:** Under the UNCRC, governments shall take all appropriate measures “to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child” (Article 19). Article 19 of the Convention specifies that such measures may notably include “effective procedures for the establishment of social programmes to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child, as well as for other forms of prevention and for identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up of instances of child maltreatment and, as appropriate, for judicial involvement.” Importantly, the Convention stipulates that governments “shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration must take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child” (Article 39).

• **Health, education and well-being of the child:** Children have the rights “to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health” (Article 24), “to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development” (Article 27), “to education” (Article 28), as well as “to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts” (Article 31). Moreover, governments should respect “the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion” (Article 14). Programmes to support children raised in family environments with links to VE should be developed and implemented in ways that ensure children’s ability to fully enjoy and exercise the aforementioned rights.

• **Children’s identity:** According to Article 8 of the UNCRC, children have the right “to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name, and family relations.”¹⁴ Children’s right to identity thus includes the right to nationality, which represents a pre-requisite to the fulfilment of many other rights and notably conditions children’s access to education and other public

¹⁴ United Nations, ‘Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)’, United Nations Treaty, 20 November 1989

services, as well as the right to a name and to retain family ties. In addition to these three components, other provisions in the UNCRC mention other aspects of children's identity, such as cultural and religious identity. As previously, when considering alternative care for children deprived of their family environment, "due regard shall be paid to the desirability of continuity in a child's upbringing and to the child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background", according to Article 20 of the UNCRC.¹⁵ Article 9 moreover states that, in the case of a separation resulting from "the detention, imprisonment, exile, deportation or death (including death arising from any cause while the person is in the custody of the State) of one or both parents," there should be an opportunity for the child to be provided, upon request, "with the essential information concerning the whereabouts of the absent member(s) of the family unless the provision of the information would be detrimental to the well-being of the child."¹⁶ When considered in relation to children growing up in families with links to VE, this might for instance raise questions about "how and when the child will be informed about their (true) identity, their place of birth and the role and motivations of their parents to travel to Syria or Iraq,"¹⁷ or to join a domestic VE group. Families might also need support to express their personal and family histories in ways that do not inflict additional trauma to themselves and children. In the case of children born in conflict-affected areas, it might moreover raise the issue of "whether the place of birth should be changed to shield the child from stigmatisation, but also to protect the child from media scrutiny upon arrival and to respect their anonymity."¹⁸

Key Challenges

While all children are entitled to the rights enshrined in the UNCRC, children in families with links to VE, be they Islamist or far-right extremists, may, in some cases, see some of their fundamental rights challenged in different ways. Some of these challenges are unique to children in such families, however many may overlap with experiences of children in other vulnerable positions, for examples children linked to gangs, cults, exposed to conflict and so forth.

Challenges linked to parents' affiliations with VE

First, infringements on children's rights may be directly linked to or influenced by their parents' involvement in VE networks. For instance, children's right to education is clearly outlined in Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC for all children. Education should moreover meet some minimum standards defined in Article 29, and shall notably be directed to "the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential," "the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms," as well as "the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin."¹⁹ Yet, research shows that parents affiliated with VE may choose or provide alternative education for their children to follow, which can include summer schools, home-schooling, religious education, special classes and so forth, and can vary significantly from government-approved curriculum.²⁰ While the legal framework regulating education and

¹⁵ UN, Convention on the Right of the Child, Article 20, para 3.

¹⁶ UN, Convention on the Right of the Child, Article 9, para 4.

¹⁷ Mehra, and Wentworth, "Repatriation of child returnees from Northeast Syria: A child-rights approach to their management, rehabilitation, and reintegration," p.5.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ UN, Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 29.

²⁰ Layla van Wieringen, Daan Weggemans, Katharina Krusselmann, Marieke Liem, "Van Ouder op Kind", Institute of Security and Global Affairs, Leiden University. 2021. <https://www.medewerkers.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/>

home-schooling differs from country to country, such alternative curriculums might infringe on children's rights to education when not meeting the aforementioned minimum standards, and denying children the knowledge they need to participate in a democratic society.

More broadly, children growing up in a VE family environment may be at increased risk of exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).²¹ Extensive research²² from the field of psychology has identified that exposure to ACEs can leave significant damage to the development and well-being of children, with lasting effects throughout adulthood. For example, as a result of their parents' involvement in VE, children may be directly exposed to violent behaviour, physical and/or emotional abuse, warfare, dire living conditions in dangerous camps such as al-Hol where their basic security and needs are not fulfilled,²³ or experience the departure of a parent from the family environment (e.g., due to imprisonment or death in a conflict zone). Living in such an environment can impede some of the most fundamental rights of the child, including the right to access health (Article 24), standard of living adequate to child's development (Article 27), and among others the right to rest and leisure (Article 31), and can cause significant emotional trauma, have prolonged developmental, physical, and psychological consequences for children.

Challenges arising from (inadequate) interventions and policies

Children's rights might moreover be further impacted by the types of policies and interventions directed towards children of families with links to VE, especially if support is not (adequately) provided. It should first be noted that the exercise of some rights contained in the UNCRC are subjected to certain restrictions, as prescribed by the law and notably when necessary to protect national security. Indeed, Articles 10, 13 and 15 all contain an exemption clause, with for instance, Article 10, paragraph 2, stating that "the right to leave any country shall be subject only to such restrictions as are prescribed by law and which are necessary to protect the national security, public order (ordre public), public health or morals or the rights and freedoms of others and are consistent with the other rights recognized in the present Convention."²⁴ These arguments have been used by several governments to try to justify their inaction with regards to the repatriation of their nationals from camps in Syria and Iraq.

Another key consideration is that children of convicted extremists may be subject to stigmatisation and discrimination, which can result in isolation, marginalisation, and difficulties in accessing education and other services.²⁵ Families with individuals involved in VE are frequently profiled and reduced to common stereotypes. In particular, families of individuals having travelled to,

assets/governance-and-global-affairs/isga/wodc-van-ouder-op-kind_definitief.pdf

21 Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, describe the experiences of children in their home environments, particularly relating to toxic stress and physical and emotional abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. ACEs have further been linked to reduced quality of life in adulthood, as well as health problems, educational difficulties, and social relationships. For more on the basics of ACEs, see: "What are ACEs? And how do they related to toxic stress?" Harvard University, <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/aces-and-toxic-stress-frequently-asked-questions/>

22 Charles A Nelson, Richard David Scott, Zulfiqar A Bhutta, Nadine Burke Harris, Andrea Danese, Muthanna Samara, "Adversity in childhood is linked to mental and physical health throughout life," *BMJ*, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m3048>; Carol Westby, "Adverse Childhood Experiences: What Speech-Language Pathologists Need to Know," *Word of Mouth*, Vol 30, Issue 1 (2018). Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1048395018796520>

23 Tanya Mehra, Matthew Wentworth, and Abigail Thorley, "The European Court of Human Rights Sitting on the Fence?: Its Ruling and Impact on the Repatriation of European Children from North-East Syria," *Perspective*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 16 September, 2022. <https://www.icct.nl/publication/european-court-human-rights-sitting-fence-its-ruling-and-impact-repatriation-european>

24 UN, Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 10, para 2.

25 European Committee on Crime Problems, Council of Europe Handbook for Prison and Probation Services Regarding Radicalisation and Violent Extremism, p.7, <https://rm.coe.int/16806f9aa9>

or born in conflict zones, and families of other individuals involved in jihadist extremism, are particularly at risk of being framed as security threats. This type of profiling can be used by media, social services, or police to single out, discriminate and stigmatise certain people and/or their children. This can result in a breach of the right to a private life,²⁶ and can cause (re-)traumatisation. It is important that children's right to privacy is maintained by all actors. While there might sometimes be concerns that a child may present risks, particularly if not adequately supported, it is vital that children are not securitised, or labelled as 'ticking time bombs' including by the professionals that work with them. Similarly, children of families with radicalised right-wing extremist views are also at danger of stigmatisation from peers, case workers, teachers, and other practitioners.²⁷ Irrespective of the ideology that children are exposed to in their family environments, they should be treated with respect and care. Discrimination, stigmatisation, and securitisation can compromise children's rights and have a significant negative impact on a child, including on their long-term development. Creating hierarchies of victimisation by distributing funding unequally, focusing programming, or providing more rehabilitation initiatives to some children based on perceived threat of ideology should be avoided. Support should be provided to all children in families with links to VE, irrespective of the ideology behind.

Challenges for practitioners

Practitioners might face a number of challenges when working with children of families with links to VE. Firstly, it might be difficult for professionals working with children to understand if or how a child may be exposed to VE in his or her home environment, and the implications this exposure to VE may have. Many children whose parents are affiliated with VE are not taking part in 'normal life', making it therefore difficult to identify whether they are at risk of radicalisation or harmed in other ways by their upbringing. Moreover, parents may hide or instruct their children to not share information about their home or families,²⁸ making awareness of the impacts of exposure to different aspects of VE environments difficult to identify. Even when detected, practitioners should keep in mind that children themselves have a right to freedom of thoughts, conscience and religion, and parents have the right to raise their children according to their beliefs. As specified under Article 14 of the UNCRC, such rights may however be subject to "limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others."²⁹

Similarly, practitioners may struggle to work with children of families with links to VE, including child returnees, if they lack previous experience in this type of work. Such challenges can cause practitioners to misinterpret behaviour, or to be unsure of how to approach their work with certain children. It may also mean that practitioners will not know the full extent of what a child has been exposed to by virtue of this familial involvement, or how it has impacted them, especially if children are instructed not to speak about this. Another key challenge that practitioners may face is establishing trust with children exposed to VE in their home environments. Children in families linked to VE may be particularly reluctant or prevented by their parents to engage with practitioners, as they may have grown with narratives to mistrust those outside their immediate circles.³⁰ Further, children may have experienced trauma that leaves them unable to trust others.

26 UN, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 16.

27 Andreas Hechler, *Funktionalisierte Kinder: Kindeswohlgefährdung in Neonazifamilien - eine Hilfestellung für Fachkräfte in den Bereichen Recht und (Sozial-) Pädagogik* [Functionalised Children: Child Welfare Risks in Neo-Nazi Families - A Guide for Professionals in the Fields of Law and (Social) Education], LidiceHaus GmbH and Fachstelle Rechtsextremismus und Familie, 2021. <https://www.vielfalt-mediathek.de/material/rechtsextremismus/funktionalisierte-kinder-kindewohlgefaehrdung-in-neonazifamilien-eine-hilfestellung-fuer-fachkraefte-in-den-bereichen-recht-und-sozial-paedagogik>

28 Ibid.

29 UN, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 14, para 3.

30 Thomas Meysen & Leon A. Brandt, "Orientierungshilfe für Jugendämter Kindeswohl bei Aufwachsen in

Approaches and programmes directed at children of parents linked to VE should focus on supporting them, prioritising their best interests, well-being and development, and ensuring that their fundamental rights (which might have already been impacted by their exposure to VE) are not further infringed upon due to inadequate interventions. Recognising the sensitivities involved in their work, below are outlined some good practices and practices to avoid that could inform practitioners in their work with these children.

Good Practices

Taking a victim-centred approach

Engagement with children whose parents are affiliated with VE organisations should not be based on the assumption children themselves pose an imminent security threat or that they present a higher risk of radicalising towards VE. Not only are these narratives not supported by evidence, but they might also have adverse outcomes by creating “a ‘climate of fear’ where distrust towards the mainstream community further alienates these children, which in turn acts as an obstacle to the successful reintegration of them back to the community.”³¹ Rather, these children need to be considered and supported through a victim-centred approach that focuses on upholding their rights and addresses their needs.³²

Children growing up in families with links to VE – especially, but not exclusively, children who were taken to a war zone – may have been exposed and/or subjected to various forms of physical, emotional, and sexual violence at an early age. For example, they may have been exposed to direct armed conflict, they may have (forcibly) taken part in trainings, or experienced sexual violence as a direct result of their family involvement in VE. They may have suffered severe forms of trauma and stress and should thus be provided with tailored support and an adequate environment to heal from trauma. Even in instances where children might have been recruited or exploited by VE armed groups, these children should be treated first and foremost as victims of violations of international law, which prohibits the recruitment and use in hostilities of children by armed groups.³³ This notably means that “no child recruitment process can be regarded as truly voluntary, because of the cognitive abilities of the child, and the different forms of coercion or influence associated with recruitment methods.”³⁴

Regarding children primarily as victims “does not preclude investigation and prosecution of a child above the age of criminal responsibility, in line with international juvenile justice and fair

islamistisch oder salafistisch geprägten Familien” Niedersächsisches Ministerium für Soziales & Gesundheit und Gleichstellung, 2021. https://www.cultures-interactive.de/files/publikationen/Flyer%20Broschueren%20Dokumentationen/Orientierungshilfe%20Jugendaemter_Kindeswohl%20islamistische%20salafistische%20Familien.pdf

31 Honnavalli, V., Neo, L. S., Gan, R., Tee, S. H., Khader, M., & Chin, J. (2019). Understanding violent extremism and child abuse: A psychological analysis. In I. Bryce, Y. Robinson, & W. Petherick (Eds.), *Child abuse and neglect: Forensic issues in evidence, impact, and management* (pp. 79–94). Elsevier Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-815344-4.00005-2>

32 Julie Coleman, and Méryl Demuyne, “Rule-of-law and human rights-based approaches towards children of violent extremist parents,” June 2022, <https://prepare-project.eu/rule-of-law-and-human-rights-based-approaches-towards-children-of-violent-extremist-parents/>

33 UN Security Council Resolution 2427, S/Res/2427, July 9, 2018. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/crc-conflict.pdf>

34 UNODC, *Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System*, 2017, p.76. https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Child-Victims/Handbook_on_Children_Recruited_and_Exploited_by_Terrorist_and_Violent_Extremist_Groups_the_Role_of_the_Justice_System.E.pdf

trial standards.”³⁵ Yet, it should first be noted that, according to the Paris Principles, children should not be prosecuted solely for their association with armed forces or armed groups.³⁶ Moreover, it is crucial to underline that, when children are suspected from involvement in criminal offences, “prosecution should always be regarded as a measure of last resort”³⁷ and alternatives to prosecution should be prioritised, whenever possible.³⁸ If judicial proceedings take place, alternatives to children’s placement in institutions “such as care, guidance and supervision orders; counselling; probation; foster care; education and vocational training programmes [...] shall be available to ensure that children are dealt with in a manner appropriate to their well-being and proportionate both to their circumstances and the offence.”³⁹ This means that “the arrest, detention or imprisonment of a child shall be in conformity with the law and shall be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time.”⁴⁰

The best interests of the child should furthermore apply whatever the situation might be, irrespective of the types of measures and programmes implemented, and throughout the whole prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration (PRR) continuum. The focus on rehabilitation and reintegration must furthermore hold, even in cases where there may be a concern that a child may pose a security risk if not adequately supported.⁴¹ Frontline practitioners should be aware that they are not primarily responsible for the investigation of suspected involvement in VE activities. Social workers and frontline practitioners are responsible for supporting the rehabilitation and reintegration of both children exposed to, and in some cases actively involved, in VE activities, and should therefore primarily focus on the rehabilitative aim of their interventions.

Designing and implementing individually-tailored, multidisciplinary interventions

Children raised in violent right-wing extremist and Islamist families may have experienced a variety of ACEs. These challenges may be similar to those of children from other backgrounds, but uniquely shaped by the ideology their family member(s) adheres to. Some may have been brought to or have been born in war zones, or may be consistently exposed to violence linked with these groups (e.g., rallies, gatherings, meetings, etc.). Whether at home or in conflict-affected areas, some of these children may have suffered from neglect, abuses, and been subjected to diverse forms of emotional and physical violence, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Some may have witnessed violence inflicted to others, might have been exposed to violent propaganda and/or training, and in some instances forced to take part in acts of violence themselves. Some may have been exposed to dire living conditions, and might have experienced the death and/or incarceration of, or separation from, their parents. As a result, these children “may experience varying levels of emotional distress, anxiety, depression, trauma, anger, or grief.”⁴²

35 UNCCT, Handbook on children affected by the foreign-fighter phenomenon: Ensuring a child rights-based approach, p.11.

36 The Paris Principles, Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, February 2007, para 8.7, <https://www.unicef.org/mali/media/1561/file/ParisPrinciples.pdf>

37 UNODC, Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System, p.77.

38 UN, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 40, Mehra, and Wentworth, “Repatriation of child returnees from Northeast Syria: A child-rights approach to their management, rehabilitation, and reintegration,” pp.3-4.

39 UNCRC, article 40.

40 UNCRC, article 37.

41 UNCCT, Handbook on children affected by the foreign-fighter phenomenon: Ensuring a child rights-based approach, p.11. <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/handbook-children-affected-foreign-fighter-phenomenon-ensuring-child-rights-based-approach>

42 Anna-Maria Andreeva, and Méryl Demuyneck, “Multi-disciplinary approaches to support children growing up in violent extremist environments,” August 2022, <https://prepare-project.eu/multi-disciplinary-approaches-to-support->

A one-size-fits-all approach to rehabilitation and reintegration efforts, which assumes that all children have the same needs, and applies the same interventions to all children, fails to consider the unique circumstances and experiences of each child. This can lead to the overgeneralisation and stereotyping of these children, who may notably be wrongly assumed to be at risk of radicalisation and involvement in VE, and in turn result in further stigmatisation and inadequate interventions.⁴³ In dealing with the children of families with links to VE, it is thus of paramount importance to adopt an individualised approach. This is premised on the recognition that each child's situation is unique and requires bespoke interventions that account for their personal circumstances, whilst also being sensitive to cultural and religious contexts. For example, children who were born or have travelled to Syria and/or Iraq may have unique needs related to the experiences they have faced while living in IS-controlled territories, in camps, or when travelling back to Europe, which may significantly vary from the needs and vulnerabilities of children of domestic violent extremists. Similarly, research has shown that children raised in right-wing extremist communities are likely to have encountered a wide variety of ACEs.⁴⁴

Additionally, children growing up in families linked to VE may “present a varied range of needs that a single intervention is unlikely to be able to address alone.”⁴⁵ Rather, effectively supporting these children might be better achieved by “developing an individualised program that speaks simultaneously to multiple goals, including addressing the cause of the problem, providing the child with an opportunity to make reparation, providing the child with the skills needed to re-enter education or the workplace, and building the relationships (and relationship tools) needed to support healthy community reintegration.”⁴⁶ In other words, each child will likely require a combination of multidisciplinary interventions, ranging from “mental health and psychosocial support (e.g. trauma-focused therapy, educational care, vocational training, and mentoring), as well as recreational and cultural interventions, such as arts and games therapy.”⁴⁷ Research on children in other vulnerable positions, including refugee children, has similarly underscored the need for and effectiveness of multidisciplinary interventions in supporting children exposed to potentially traumatic and distressing PTSD-inducing scenes and environments.⁴⁸ As previously mentioned, this set of interventions should be tailored to individual needs and vulnerabilities, age, level of development, and gender.⁴⁹ It should also be noted that interventions may not be required for children in all cases, and it is possible for children to be affected in minimal or limited ways.

Adopting a gender- and age-conscious approach

Although many of the best practices in working with vulnerable children are similar to those for

children-growing-up-in-violent-extremist-environments/

43 IOM, and ICCT, Roundtables on Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration, 2022.

44 Lynn Schneider, “The threat of far-right extremism in Germany: A matter of child protection,” *International Centre for Counter Terrorism*, December 2022. <https://icct.nl/publication/far-right-extremism-germany-child-protection/>

45 Ibid.

46 Office of the SRSG on Violence against Children, “Solutions for Children Previously Affiliated With Extremist Groups: An Evidence Base to Inform Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration,” 2020, p.17. https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/2020/reports_extremism/un_hq_osrsg_solutions_for_children_previously_affiliated_with_extremist_groups_20-01153_lo-res.pdf

47 Andreeva, and Demuyneck, “Multi-disciplinary approaches to support children growing up in violent extremist environments.”

48 See for instance: Stammel, Nadine et al. “Multidisciplinary treatment for traumatized refugees in a naturalistic setting: symptom courses and predictors.” *European journal of psychotraumatology* vol. 8, sup2 1377552. 10 Oct. 2017, doi:10.1080/20008198.2017.1377552; Bruhn, M., Laugesen, H., Kromann-Larsen, M. et al. The effect of an integrated care intervention of multidisciplinary mental health treatment and employment services for trauma-affected refugees: study protocol for a randomised controlled trial. *Trials* 23, 859 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13063-022-06774-z>

49 Stammel, Nadine et al.

vulnerable adults, children are a particularly at risk group. It is thus important that practitioners remain cognisant of specific age and gender considerations and needs throughout their work with children.⁵⁰ Assessment should be tailored to the age of the child, should abide by the Do No Harm principle, and should consider that children's mental and physical development is different to adults. Further, when working with this population, practitioners should be mindful of their approach in communicating with children of different ages, especially avoid causing repeated trauma. Children of different ages experience and comprehend reality in different ways, therefore the language and tools used to help children heal through trauma should consider this.

Moreover, VE ideologies often have strict notions of gender divisions and roles. It is possible that boys and girls who have grown up in the same environment may have very different experiences of exposure to radicalisation and VE,⁵¹ including being subjected to different dangers, training,⁵² prescribed roles and expectations.⁵³ Children may have also faced difficulties in adhering or adapting to gender divisions, and may be experiencing multiple forms of trauma and identity crises as a result.⁵⁴

Interventions from practitioners should be diverse and tailored to the specific needs of girls and boys who have experienced sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). SGBV training, which highlights the sensitivities of working with this vulnerable group should be provided to practitioners. This will ensure that the needs of children are considered, avoiding repeated traumatisation.⁵⁵ It may also be appropriate that, in certain instances, female practitioners work with girls who have experienced SGBV, or males with boys who have experienced SGBV.

Taking a multi-actor, coordinated approach

Exposure to VE family environments can have repercussions for children in many different aspects of their lives, including on their mental health and development, social life, physical well-being, level of education, legal status and so on.⁵⁶ As outlined above, there is no 'one size fits all' approach that will be sufficient to help children navigate through these challenges. Rather, interventions should rely on a compounded effort to try different programming, and involve various actors, including:

- **Social workers** are often the primary actor dealing with a child's specific case and have the most robust overview of that child's situation. They can help determine the risk and resilience factors present in a child's life, and help guide and coordinate interventions and care plans around children.

50 J Kizilhan, "Providing Psychosocial Care to Child Soldiers Living in Post-IS Iraq", International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, May 2019.

51 Sofia Koller, Gina Vale, and Teuta Avdimetaj. "Themenpapier: Frauen und Minderjährige in der Tertiärprävention von islamistischem Extremismus," InFoEx Workshop, 21. & 22. April 2021. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-77215-2>

52 Simone Rafael, Die nächste Generation Hass [The Next Generation of Hate], Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 2016. <https://www.bpb.de/themen/rechtsextremismus/dossier-rechtsextremismus/223904/die-naechste-generation-hass/>

53 United Nations, Fionnula Ní Aoláin: Position of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism on the human rights of adolescents/juveniles being detained in North-East Syria May 2021. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Terrorism/SR/UNSRCT_Position_human-rights-of-boys-adolescents-2021_final.pdf

54 Meysen, and Brandt, "Orientierungshilfe für Jugendämter Kindeswohl bei Aufwachsen in islamistisch oder salafistisch geprägten Familien."

55 IOM, and ICCT, Roundtables on Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration, 2022 <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2022/04/PRR-Roundtables-Report-IOM-ICCT.pdf>

56 Ibid.

- **Doctors and medical professionals** are best suited to assess whether children have been exposed to any physical (domestic) violence, and whether they present any other development and health issues that may result from their exposure to dire living conditions and/or lack of access to basic services, and provide relevant treatment. For returnee children in particular, doctors are often one of the first practitioners to assess children’s needs for support and treatment.
- **Psychiatrists, psychologists, and other mental health professionals** will likely also work with children of families with links to VE, perhaps throughout different stages of a child’s development. It may be that some children even require mental health support throughout adulthood, recognising that trauma is often long-lasting and may be transgenerational.⁵⁷
- **Teachers and educational support staff** in schools are best placed to assess a child’s ability in the educational system. They are most available to offer continuous assistance to children throughout their days, as they spend very formative time together. Schools assume an important role in facilitating children’s social inclusion, by providing them with “a safe and structured environment which are essential for the wellbeing and development of a child,”⁵⁸ and therefore play a significant role in children’s rehabilitation.
- **Lawyers** and individuals working in each country’s legal system also have a duty to ensure that when children are a part of their cases, they apply age- and gender-sensitive approaches to their work, with children’s best interests as their primary consideration.
- **Police** may be involved when the child is at risk, or when the children themselves may be involved in perceived problematic behaviours.

Work with children is not limited to these professionals, and may further include other child protection services, civil society organisations, coaches, mentors, community leaders, and extended family members. While different actors can bring their respective expertise and knowledge, and play vital roles in helping children have enriching lives, it is equally important to ensure that these practitioners are able to work together and collaborate for the best interests of the child. Efforts should thus be deployed to overcome challenges surrounding inter-agency cooperation and information-sharing. In addition to legal barriers to information-sharing between agencies, especially with regards to classified and/or particularly sensitive information on individual cases, institutions’ distinct mandates and objectives, lack of mutual trust, human resources and time constraints, and/or the lack of adequate platforms to exchange information are among the challenges that may impede inter-institutional cooperation.

While such issues are far from being confined to the field of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), there might be additional challenges with regards to individuals affiliated with VE and their families. For instance, the return of families from Syria and Iraq in some European countries may have to be organised in secrecy due to media attention, security concerns, and political sensitivities involved. As a result, practitioners working with child returnees sometimes have very limited information about them prior to their repatriation, which may hinder the design of tailored responses and programmes ahead of their return. Practitioners might moreover have limited access to parents’ personal history, to the history of parent-child relations and/or to information about the child and his or her personal experiences. Accessing and exchanging information, including experiences and best practices, wherever possible will enhance child

57 Kizilhan, Jan Ilhan, and Michael Noll-Hussong. “Individual, Collective and Transgenerational Traumatization in the Yazidi.” *BMC Medicine* 15, no. 198 (2017)

58 Mehra, and Wentworth, “Repatriation of child returnees from Northeast Syria: A child-rights approach to their management, rehabilitation, and reintegration,” p.11.

services, social workers and other professionals' ability to make sound assessment of a child's needs, to provide adequate and timely support, and to ensure different actors' interventions are provided in a coherent and coordinated way.⁵⁹

It should also be noted that having a multiplicity of actors involved might raise certain challenges in terms of trust-building with children that should be mitigated. Being exposed to a multitude of actors might be confusing for children, particularly if it translates into undergoing multiple assessments, and potentially reliving traumatising experiences. Sufficient time should thus be secured to explain to the child who the different professionals are, what their distinct roles are, and where they all fit in the overall process.

Providing adequate training for practitioners

Adequate training for practitioners is crucial to the effective treatment and respect of the rights of children of families with links to VE.⁶⁰ All practitioners should remain aware that although they may have worked with children previously, they may still encounter challenges that are specific to children of parents with links to VE. Individuals and practitioners working in close contact with children of families with links to VE – who research found are sometimes worried about these children's potential involvement in VE and fear for their own security – should thus be accompanied, supported, and adequately trained to reduce their potential anxiety and address their concerns when interacting with these children.⁶¹ A focus on both the understanding of the unique needs and vulnerabilities faced by these children, as well as the sometimes unique and changing cultural and religious contexts in which they are situated, is thus crucial to the successful training of practitioners.

Practitioners in contact with these children should as “a minimum requirement” received a basic training providing them with information on the experiences that children exposed to VE might have been through, and their potential impact on children's well-being and development, “basic trauma awareness and response exercises” in instances where children demonstrate particular behaviours, as well as on “how to report signs of concern and where to request additional support.”⁶² This basic training may be complemented with more in-depth training for practitioners who are more directly involved in supporting children of families with links to VE, such as social workers, child protection services, psychiatrists and psychologists.⁶³ This might notably include training to develop “specific skills such as anti-violence training, anti-bias training and trust building,”⁶⁴ which may prove particularly relevant to facilitate the work conducted with these children. Furthermore, training courses for practitioners should aim to “provide guidance on how

59 GCTF, Good Practices on Addressing the Challenge of Returning Families of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) <https://www.cvereferenceguide.org/sites/default/files/resources/Good%20Practices%20on%20Addressing%20the%20Challenge%20of%20Returning%20Families%20of%20Foreign%20Terrorist%20Fighters%20FTFs%29%20.pdf>; see also: OSCE, Non-custodial Rehabilitation and Reintegration in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism A Guidebook for Policymakers and Practitioners in South-Eastern Europe, January 2020. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/7/444838.pdf>

60 Agnel Nidhi Shiji, “Trainings for first-line practitioners working in the field of violent extremism: An overview of good practices,” PREPARE Project. <https://prepare-project.eu/trainings-for-first-line-practitioners-working-in-the-space-of-violent-extremism-overview-of-good-practices/>

61 Kinder und Jugendliche in islamistisch und salafistisch geprägten Familien [Children and Teenagers in Islamist and Salafist Families], Türkische Gemeinde in Schleswig-Holstein e.V. Fachstelle Liberi, November 2020, <https://provention.tgsh.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Ergebnisbericht-Kinder-und-Jugendliche-in-islamistisch-und-salafistisch-gepraegten-Familien.pdf>

62 Radicalisation Awareness Network, RAN Manual - *Responses to returnees: Foreign Terrorist Fighters and their Families*, July 2017, 5. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files_en?file=2020-09/ran_br_a4_m10_en.pdf

63 RAN, RAN Manual - *Responses to returnees: Foreign Terrorist Fighters and their Families*, July 2017, 5

64 Nidhi Shiji, “Trainings for first-line practitioners working in the field of violent extremism: An overview of good practices.”

to detect, approach and help vulnerable individuals; provide and enhance first line workers with the tools and instruments they need to respond appropriately; facilitate multi-agency partnerships; develop and strengthen practical skills e.g., improving communication skills or reporting skills.”⁶⁵

Setting up strategic communication campaigns

It should be noted that “supporting these children might also require interventions to be targeted, not only at children themselves, but also at their family and the broader community.”⁶⁶ Such interventions include, for example, support for parents, extended and/or foster family members, social workers, educators, and others with regular contact with these children, which may notably take the form of trauma sensitisation and training in therapeutic parenting.⁶⁷ They also include strategic communication campaigns to raise awareness amongst broader societies that “these children are victims of their circumstances rather than ‘willing participants’ to the conflict.”⁶⁸ For instance, such awareness-raising and communication efforts might take the form of outreach programmes and community forums with frontline practitioners and members of the receiving communities. This is particularly crucial in preparing communities where individuals formerly associated with VE organisations and their families will reintegrate.

In many regards, local communities play a crucial role in either facilitating or hampering the successful reintegration of individuals and families with perceived affiliations with VE. For instance, community perceptions, stigma and reluctance from community members to accept returnees and their families back can represent major challenges to effective reintegration processes. In addition to mitigating risks of stigmatisation, strategic communication campaigns can effectively serve to educate and provide targeted information to communities where children of VE families might live. Breaking down perceived notions regarding risks of VE, effective communication can facilitate children’s access to support in their broader environments. Clearly communicating about rehabilitation and reintegration programmes available in the community, their objectives and benefits, is likely to also increase trust and buy-in among (often sceptical) receiving communities who may perceive such programmes “as too ‘soft’ for dealing with terrorism”.⁶⁹

Additionally, media and news outlets may be unprepared to deal with the sensitivities required when reporting on vulnerable children, and might require sensitisation training on what and how to cover these issues. While media attention might contribute to raising awareness on the challenges faced by children from families with links to VE, and “encouraging empathy and reducing stigma in communities,”⁷⁰ it should be “conducted in accordance with the principle of ‘Do No Harm’” to avoid any negative impact on rehabilitation and reintegration efforts.⁷¹

65 Ibid.; Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism - Approaches and Practises*, 2019, 21. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-05/ran_collection-approaches_and_practises_en.pdf

66 Andreeva, and Demuyneck, “Multi-disciplinary approaches to support children growing up in violent extremist environments,”

67 Ibid.

68 Honnavalli, Neo, Gan, Tee, Khader, Chin. (2019). Understanding violent extremism and child abuse: A psychological analysis, pp. 79–94.

69 OSCE, *Non-custodial Rehabilitation and Reintegration in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism A Guidebook for Policymakers and Practitioners in South-Eastern Europe*, January 2020, p.52.

70 OSCE, *Non-custodial Rehabilitation and Reintegration in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism A Guidebook for Policymakers and Practitioners in South-Eastern Europe*, January 2020, p.54.

71 Ibid.

Practices to Avoid

- **Security-focused approaches:** not only are approaches regarding children of families linked to VE as risks (or ‘ticking time bombs’) not grounded in evidence, but they might have serious adverse effects, furthering the risk of stigmatisation and discrimination, and potentially hampering children’s rights. It is crucial not to use “potential links of children or their parents to the foreign fighter phenomenon [or VE more generally] as grounds for denying the protection afforded to the child under international human rights, humanitarian and refugee law.”⁷² Such a view also limits further assessment of other harms a child may face in such scenarios. Support provided to children raised in VE environments should focus on addressing their needs and vulnerabilities, and approach them “through a lens of socialisation and education”⁷³ rather than based on the assumption that they are more vulnerable to radicalisation to violence. Importantly, programmes “must avoid engaging problematic techniques that include attempts to brainwash people and impose different levels of physical and verbal harm.”⁷⁴
- **One-size-fits-all solutions:** no generic response is likely to successfully address the wide range of needs and vulnerabilities that children growing up in violent far-right and Islamist extremist families, considering the heterogeneity of the population considered and the unique experiences of each child.⁷⁵ A one-size-fits-all approach can be detrimental when dealing with the children of families with links to VE, as it can lead to overgeneralisation, stereotyping and an inability to effectively address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of each child.
- **Re-traumatisation:** any intervention aimed at supporting children of families with links to VE should avoid re-traumatising children. Although assessing each individual’s specific needs and vulnerabilities is essential to develop tailored support programmes, it should be considered that subjecting children to “multiple and uncoordinated screenings and assessments carried out by different actors may be stigmatizing, traumatic, and ineffective.”⁷⁶ Experts notably underline that “repeated interviewing can cause psychological harm to children, as they are asked to repeat their traumatic experiences to different individuals whom they may be meeting for the very first time.”⁷⁷ Professionals should moreover consider the impact that certain questions, including on particularly sensitive matters such as sexual and gender-based violence, might have on children.⁷⁸
- **Issues around trust- and capacity-building:** the effectiveness of support and care provided to children can moreover be hampered by a lack of trust between children and implementers.⁷⁹ Trust might be especially difficult to build in instances where the child is confronted by a multiplicity of professionals, and even more so if practitioners or individuals in close contact with the child are not adequately trained, notably in trauma-informed approaches.⁸⁰

72 UNCCT, Handbook on children affected by the foreign-fighter phenomenon: Ensuring a child rights-based approach, p.11

73 GCTF, Good Practices on Addressing the Challenge of Returning Families of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs), p.10. https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Framework%20Documents/2018/GCTF-Good-Practices-on-Returning-Families-of-FTFs_ENG.pdf?ver=2018-09-25-101427-323

74 IOM, and ICCT, Roundtables on Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration, 2022, p.16. <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2022/04/PRR-Roundtables-Report-IOM-ICCT.pdf>

75 Ibid., p.10.

76 Ibid.

77 UNODC, Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System, p.54.

78 IOM, and ICCT, Roundtables on Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration, 2022, p.9.

79 Ibid., p.19.

80 Ibid.

- **Lack of long-term support:** considering that children will likely require long-term and sustainable support to overcome the adverse experiences, and trauma they might have been confronted with, “budget restraints and lack of long-term funding”⁸¹ may also represent important challenges and impact the effectiveness of responses and programmes.

⁸¹ IOM, and ICCT, Roundtables on Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration, 2022, p.16.

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