



Safe Places, Thriving Children: Embedding Trauma-Informed Practices into Alternative Care Settings

Why do children and young adults need 'Safe Places'?

When we think about trauma, we often picture a car crash, a natural disaster or war in our mind. However, for many children and young adults, traumatic experiences occur in much more common ways.

Trauma or '**Adverse Childhood Experiences**' refer to any form of victimization in children, whether due to violence from peers or due to maltreatment or abuse by adults. They may also be caused by household dysfunction, such as living with someone who has a mental illness or an alcohol or substance problem, is (or has been) incarcerated, or if the child witnesses complicated parental separation or domestic violence.

Research shows that 23% of the European population have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience in their life, but for children and young adults in alternative care, these numbers are significantly higher:

- **3 out of 4** children and young adults in alternative care have **experienced trauma** prior to their alternative care placementⁱ.
- **Over half** of children and young adults in alternative care **experienced neglect**. 37% of these children **faced domestic violence** in their families of origin, and a third were exposed to a **parent who abused substances**ⁱⁱ.
- Every second child in alternative care has at least one **psychiatric diagnosis**ⁱⁱⁱ.

For these children and young adults, safe places are essential.

Children and young adults need safe places to thrive

When a child experiences trauma, this can have a **serious impact** on their **psychosocial and brain development**.

Children that were hurt by adults that should protect them and care for them may perceive themselves as not lovable and see the world as an unsafe place. They might have problems trusting adults, building close relationships, regulating their emotions and behaviour, as well as learning at school.

However, **it is not too late to make a difference**. Children and young adults have the capacity to face, overcome and even be strengthened by these adverse experiences. Some factors in their life can be protective in a way that they moderate the effects of trauma, and so with the right support, children and young adults who have experienced trauma can still thrive and develop to their full potential.

Trauma-informed practices support the recovery of children and young adults

In order to build trustful, caring relationships and to overcome these adverse experiences, children and young adults need care professionals that are aware of the effects of trauma and that have the skills, knowledge and experience to support their psychosocial and mental health.

By using trauma-informed practices, care professionals can **recognize the presence of trauma symptoms** and acknowledge the role trauma may play in lives of children and young people.

Trauma-informed practices aim at **meeting the specific needs** of children that experienced trauma, in order to support their development to their full potential. This means ensuring that the culture and processes of child protection organisations emphasize recognising, understanding, respecting, and appropriately responding to the effects of trauma at all levels.

In this project, we will work with both **care professionals and child protection organisations** to ensure that the need for trauma-informed practices is recognised and the practices themselves are embedded into the policies and processes of those working with children and young adults in alternative care.

Care professionals need to understand trauma and have access to quality resources

Unfortunately, information about childhood trauma does not always reach the professionals from the social, educational, health and justice sectors that work with children and young people. Many care professionals working in alternative care are unequipped or not adequately trained in how to care for children and young people who have experienced trauma.

SOS Children's Villages analysed qualitative data from internal workshops about childhood trauma that took place in seven countries (including Bulgaria and Croatia), and the **information received from 250 care professionals** shows that they would like to better understand the needs of children and young people who have experienced trauma. They see a need to learn more about supporting children in regulation of their emotions, communication and expressing themselves, as well as in the learning process at school.

Through the development of an **online training course, training manual and face-to-face trainings**, we aim to give alternative care professionals the necessary resources so they are able to recognise trauma and use trauma-informed practices in their daily work with children and young adults.

Listening to the needs of young people with care experience

In order for children and young adults to rebuild a sense of control, alternative care needs to be set up in a way that **empowers children and young people** to participate and be active in creating their future. We want to ensure that care professionals working with children and

young adults in alternative care are aware of their needs, and that the voices of young adults with care experience are heard.

In previous EU-funded projects on the topic of leaving care^{iv}, SOS Children's Villages addressed the effects of trauma on young adults living in alternative care. The young adults, as well as the care professionals, found this topic extremely important, and in their feedback, they requested that loss, separation and trauma be addressed in further trainings of care professionals.

Through **peer interviews**^v undertaken during these projects, care-experienced young adults expressed that the manner in which care workers approach their work is an important issue for them.

Some respondents had a good relationship with their caregiver. However, a number of these same young adults recognised that this was not the norm and they knew of other children and young adults for whom this had not been the case. They referred to themselves as having been 'lucky'.

In this project, we will **work closely with young adults with care experience** from each of the project countries so that care professionals and child protection organisations hear the needs of children and young adults in alternative care, and make the necessary changes needed to give them proper support.

We want to give care professionals the right tools

SOS Children's Villages is one of the world's largest non-governmental organizations focused on supporting children without parental care and families at risk. Since 1949, we have been working to ensure that children and young people grow up in a loving family environment and have their rights fulfilled. In this context, the needs of children that have experienced trauma are well known to our organization.

In March 2020, SOS Children's Villages International, together with SOS Children's Villages member associations from Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary and Serbia and the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection (CELCIS) of the University of Strathclyde started the two-year **EU co-funded project**, 'Safe Places, Thriving Children: Embedding Trauma-Informed Practices into Alternative Care Settings'.

Together, we aim to give care professionals the tools and knowledge required to understand trauma and address the needs of children and young people affected by it.

The project targets professionals working with children and young people without parental care in **Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary and Serbia**. In Greece, Serbia and Belgium, the project activities will also benefit professionals working with unaccompanied migrant and refugee children.

In order to improve the quality of care on a broader scale, we will involve **professionals from diverse sectors** to share working practices and establish understanding between services.

Key project activities

Throughout the project, we will develop and implement:

1. An **e-learning programme** that aims to reach around **1,000 professionals** from the social, educational, health and justice sectors, to equip them to better understand and identify adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and their impact on the development of children.
2. **Face-to-face trainings** to equip **400 to 500 child care professionals** in the target countries with the skills to implement a trauma-informed approach in their work with children and young people in alternative care who are affected by ACEs.
3. Organizational development workshops to embed trauma-informed care practices in around **18 selected programmes/organisations** providing alternative care to approximately **1,000 children** without parental care in order to make a **sustainable systemic change in those organisations**.
4. **Policy recommendations** to encourage the commitment of public authorities in supporting and implementing trauma-informed care practices on a national level. The adoption of these policy recommendations can have an impact on the wellbeing of **40,000 children** living in alternative care.

Follow the project

If you would like to follow the development of the project and help us to make a difference in the lives of children and young people who have experienced trauma, please go to our website at <https://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/trauma-informed-practices>, or contact us at train4childrights@sos-kd.org.

This project is co-funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) Programme of the European Union. Responsibility for this content lies solely with SOS Children's Villages International. The European Commission is not responsible for any information contained here.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Ford, T., Vostanis, P., Meltzer, H., Goodman, R.: Psychiatric disorder among British children looked after by local authorities: comparison with children living in private households. *British Journal of Psychiatry* (2007), 190, 319-325

^{iv} "Prepare for Leaving Care" (2017-2018) and "Leaving Care. An Integrated Approach to Capacity Building of Professionals and Young People" (2018-2020)

^v Leaving Care: An Integrated Approach to Capacity Building of Professionals and Young People – Scoping findings, 2018