

# A CULTURALLY SENSITIVE APPROACH

**Tools for the social worker in working with unaccompanied children**



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Safe Places Thriving Children

# IMPRESSUM

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# **A culturally sensitive approach**

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**Safe  
Places  
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# INTRODUCTION

Increasing migration and a high number of refugees and forcibly displaced people cause an accelerated spread of a large diversity of cultures throughout the world (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, 2021). This results in a more diverse group of young people within alternative care settings and a large new target group, namely **unaccompanied children**. This evolution brings several challenges. Social workers come into contact with target groups of which they have little knowledge. Cultural barriers are experienced, which can jeopardize the quality of care. This puts care workers in an uncertain position. Within trauma-informed care, the impact of culture is undoubtedly an important factor to take into account. Firstly, because trauma-related mental health problems are particularly common among refugees (Baärnhelm, Ekblad, Ekberg, & Ginsburg, 2005). In addition, traumatic experiences are very complex and are largely influenced by a person's identity (culture, ethnicity, nationality, etc.) (Vinson, Majidi, & George, 2019). Given the uniqueness of unaccompanied children as a target group and the complexity of traumatic experiences, social workers should be able to demonstrate a strong sensitivity to culture (Bemak & Chung, 2017). However, herein lies a potential pitfall. On the one hand, social workers should be sensitive to the specific vulnerabilities of unaccompanied children, but on the other hand, they should not reduce or categorize them based of these vulnerabilities. In this appendix, we will first elaborate on the specific vulnerabilities of unaccompanied children. Then we will look at what cultural sensitivity means in working with this target group and why it is relevant in trauma-informed practices. Finally, we will discuss some tools for the social worker to assume a culturally sensitive approach within a trauma-informed framework. The purpose of this appendix is not to replace information of the practical guide but rather to supplement it regarding unaccompanied children.



# UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN AND TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES

Unaccompanied children in alternative care settings have come a long way before ending up in those settings. They often underwent traumatic events in their home country and travelled in extreme conditions. Once they arrive in a new country, they are confronted with an unfamiliar world without family or a social network to fall back on, a world in which they themselves are perceived as strangers. Unaccompanied children as a target group are thus subjected to a series of specific vulnerabilities that can further trauma. The practical guide discussed **'Adverse childhood experiences'**

(ACEs). Felitti and Anda showed a clear link between ACEs and physical, mental and social problems later in life (cfr. p. 23 practice

guidance). Although unaccompanied children are a very diverse group, they are characterized by a number of common ACEs. Both in the country of origin, on the way to a host country and after their arrival in this

host country, these adolescents and children can experience traumatic experiences or experiences that further trauma (Vinson, Majidi, & George, 2019). As a social worker, it is important to be aware of possible vulnerabilities specific to this target group. It is however crucial not to reduce young people to the identity of 'unaccompanied child' and its associated vulnerabilities. A person's identity consists of a large number of characteristics/axes that intersect. Being a refugee or unaccompanied child is therefore only one of many and does not represent a young person's complex, multidimensional identity (Day & Badou, 2019).

Researcher Vinson and colleagues (2019) break down the experience of refugees or migrants into three phases. In each of these phases, traumatic experiences or experiences that further trauma can occur.



## PHASE 1

The first phase takes place before a person flees their home country. In this phase, **pre-migration traumas** can occur (Vinson et al, 2019). Often refugees undergo experiences such as torture, war, persecution and loss of loved ones prior to their displacement. This can be an acute trauma, but also a complex trauma, for example as a result of prolonged exposure to violence and danger or a lack of consistent, loving care due to separation from caregivers. Such profound experiences affect mental well-being and are often a precursor to psychological trauma and other health problems later in life.

**Events or situations that cause young people to flee their home countries are (De Haene, Loots, Derluyn, 2014; UNHCR, Platform kinderen op de vlucht, 2020):**

- **War and armed conflict**
- **Persecution** - E.g. due to ethnicity or political orientation of the family.
- **Escaping abuse and violence** - Being recruited by the army, armed forces or gangs; domestic violence within the family or community; having no one to turn to for protection, etc.
- **Natural or ecological disasters** - Hurricanes, floods, volcanic eruptions, droughts caused by global warming, etc.
- **Exploitation** - Human trafficking, forced labor or sexual exploitation.
- **Persecution due to sexual orientation or gender identity (LGBTQI+)** - When the young person's sexual orientation or gender identity is not accepted within the local community/culture.
- **Family expectations** - Parents send their children away in hopes of a better quality of life and future prospects.
- **Economic or educational aspirations** - When the home country offers few opportunities.
- **Family reunification** - E.g. children and young people move in with a parent or other relative or are sent ahead by relatives in hopes of later reunification.

## PHASE 2

The second phase takes place between fleeing the homeland and settling in a new country. Leaving the home country (often by force) is in itself very drastic. Both family and social relationships, and valuable possessions have to be left behind (Vinson et al., 2019). Bemak and Chung (2017) call this **displacement trauma**. Fleeing certainly does not solve all problems. During the journey, young people face new stressors. The journey is dangerous; they encounter people with bad intentions or cover long distances at sea in rickety boats. Even seeking protection in a refugee camp does not guarantee a safe environment. Overcrowding, violence and a lack of hygiene, food and medical care can cause traumatic experiences or further existing trauma (Bekman & Chung, 2017).

## PHASE 3

The third phase starts when settling in a new country after arrival and can be defined as a **chronic phase** (Vinson et al., 2019). On arrival in a new country, the ideal image that young people have collapses and they come up against new stressors. Young

people experience such a new environment as unsafe and seemingly little things might instigate mistrust. The hope for a better life and the high expectations of them and their families give way to feelings of powerlessness. Not having control over this situation, not being able to support their family and additional loneliness often lead to destructive coping strategies (Gonzalez & Lauwereys, 2020; Cheyns, 2020).

**Daily stressors** after migration can complicate the adaptation process and the mental health of refugees. Examples include: social and economic pressures, loss of status combined with racism, discrimination and stigma, threats and violence, and alienation (Vinson et al., 2019). The following is a list of post-migration stressors that unaccompanied children may experience and may cause traumatic experiences or further existing trauma (Bekman & Chung, 2017):

- **Learning a new language, employment and education** - Frustrations about this can contribute to the creation or continuation of trauma.
- **Racism, xenophobia and stigma** can complicate adaptation after migration.
- **Political countertransference** is the negative political reaction to refugees through public and social media. These reactions contribute to the psychological trauma of refugees.
- **Survivor's guilt** - Messages about the homeland can cause survivor's guilt.
- **Lack of transparency and slow procedure** causes lingering uncertainty.
- **Little contact with family** - Contact with family in the country of origin is often difficult for practical reasons. Moreover, family members are often still in the circumstances the youngsters themselves were able to flee.

In this third phase, young people are repeatedly asked to share their traumatic experiences with social workers and government agencies. Due to the fragmentation and bureaucratic nature of services, youngsters will have to frequently repeat their trauma story. This repetition might cause young people to start treating themselves as a "moving wound". They feel defined by their traumatic experiences, and are constantly reminded of this without actually making progress. Moreover, in this process young people often experience social workers as judges who evaluate the validity and sincerity of their trauma.

**As the different stages in the migration process of refugees or migrants show, the traumatized brain of unaccompanied children has been in survival mode for months or even years. They are under constant stress. Even when they have found a host country and get in touch with social workers, the situation often continues to feel unsafe to them. On the one hand, because they find themselves in an unfamiliar environment. On the other hand, the effects of trauma are not easily reversible. Often a long period of regulation is needed before their brain is capable of learning, integrating and processing traumatic experiences (Perry, 2017).**

**Working trauma-informed means that we are aware of the fact that unaccompanied children are sensitive and that their stress response is easily triggered. From the window of tolerance (cfr. p. 40 practice guidance) we know that the 'window' of young people with traumatic experiences is generally narrower and their arousal therefore diverts more easily from their optimal arousal level. Seemingly trivial matters or events can cause a major reaction and give rise to the reliving of traumatic experiences.**

# CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Refugees or migrants can be very vulnerable to developing trauma-related problems. Despite this, trauma care within Western countries is tailored towards the indigenous, white majority and thus not to the needs of unaccompanied children. More cultural sensitivity is essential to ensure good care. Indeed, culture has a major impact on trauma. According to Vinson et al. (2019), several aspects of trauma are influenced by cultural factors, such as:

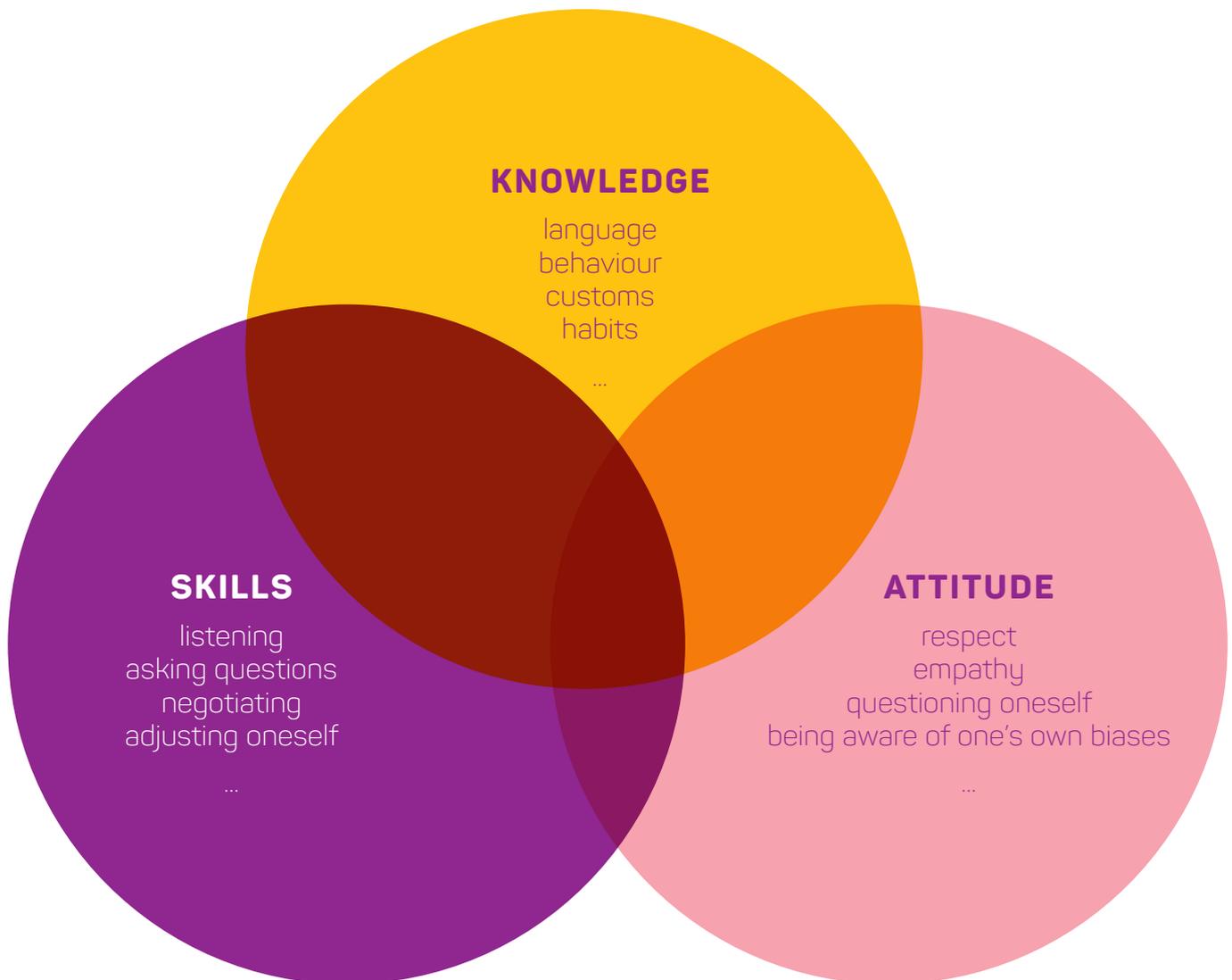
1. How trauma is experienced;
2. What meaning is given to trauma;
3. How symptoms are expressed;
4. Whether symptoms and behavior are considered abnormal or not;
5. Willingness to seek help from mental health professionals;
6. Willingness to seek help within and/or outside one's own culture;
7. The treatment response;
8. The effectiveness of a treatment;
9. Sources of strength, resistance and coping strategies.

In addition, cultural factors are important in creating a sense of security. After all, most young people do not immediately feel safe in a culture that is foreign to them and are therefore constantly alert to the input they receive from this unknown world. Moreover, social expectations towards young people are culturally determined. The influence of culture is therefore significant, and sensitivity to this is indispensable in working with unaccompanied children.

## WHAT IS CULTURAL SENSITIVITY?

The concept of cultural sensitivity can be described as the awareness of the existence of differences and similarities between people, without assigning values to them - positive or negative, better or worse, right or wrong. There is no good or bad, no right or wrong, there is just different, diverse. This includes an awareness of existing judgements and prejudices, which are often invisible within a culture (Bennett, 2017; Dabbah, 2020). Moreover, cultural sensitivity means respecting and accepting the other even when mutual comprehending is difficult.

Throughout its relatively short history, the concept of cultural sensitivity has been interpreted in many different ways: as knowledge to be acquired, as skills to be learned and as an attitude to be adopted. The answer is probably a combination of all three: cultural sensitivity needs to be reflected in someone's **knowledge, skills and attitude**. A recurring factor in all three aspects is the importance of dialogue with the young people themselves.



TALLOEN & VANMECHELEN (2018)

## KNOWLEDGE

Part of a culturally sensitive approach is to be open to learning about the language, behavior, customs and habits of different cultures (Talloen & Vanmechelen, 2018). This can be done by studying literature, but ideally by entering into a dialogue with young people who grew up in this culture. In this way, you can get to know the culture through the eyes of these young people themselves. The vulnerabilities that are inherent to unaccompanied children can also be an important aspect of culturally sensitive knowledge, provided that social workers avoid (pre) assumptions on these youngsters.

However, only acquiring knowledge about cultures will not simply improve one's cross-cultural competences; one's skills and attitude are important too. Moreover,

this approach does not hold up in a society characterized by superdiversity. Indeed, migration diversifies society to such an extent that it becomes almost impossible to build up sufficient knowledge about this infinite hodgepodge of cultures and identities (Chiarenza, 2019).

## SKILLS

Important skills in a culturally sensitive approach are: being able to listen, ask questions, negotiate and adapt oneself (Talloen & Vanmechelen, 2018). As with the acquisition of knowledge, entering into dialogue with young people themselves is an important starting point. To enter into a dialogue means to show interest in the experience of a young person, to offer information about what migration to another country can bring about and to offer tools to deal with this (Gonzalez & Lauwereys, 2020). As a social worker it is important to adopt a language sensitivity in dialogue. The words a social worker uses can have a tremendous impact on a young person. Social workers should therefore learn to use respectful, supportive and caring words that take into account the young person's situation and identity (Aycock et al., 2017). Some words or sayings that might seem innocent to oneself, might be hurtful or insensitive to others.

By talking to young people you also get to know your own culture and, consequently, yourself better. This makes you more aware of your own (culturally or socially determined) frames of mind. Cultural differences are not eliminated, but are used to facilitate the relationship with young people. By not merely writing cultural differences off as an inevitable struggle for young people and social workers, but seizing them as a conversation starter, opportunities for understanding and acceptance are created (Gonzalez & Lauwereys, 2020). This in turn can strengthen the resilience of young people and promote and enhance trust.

## ATTITUDE

The attitude of the social worker is an essential part of a culturally sensitive approach. Respect, empathy, questioning oneself and being aware of one's own prejudices are important in this attitude (Talloen & Vanmechelen, 2018). Here, cultural sensitivity is not seen as knowledge that can be acquired or a skill that can be learned, but as a lifelong process in which the social worker always tries to be self-aware (Chiarenza, 2012). A culturally sensitive attitude can be broken down into three main aspects:

### **I - LEAVING OUT THE MONOLITH 'REFUGEE' OR 'MIGRANT'**

This means that refugees and migrants are not treated as a homogeneous group (Vinson et al., 2019). When we realize that there are also differences within groups - diversity within diversity as Chiarenza (2012) calls it - we see a more nuanced person

before us. Looking at the intersection of culture with gender, age, class, sexuality and others helps social workers to recognize individual diversity (Chiarenza, 2012). Rather than seeing individuals in the context of their culture, social workers adopt an open attitude to diversity and difference. Every encounter has the potential to be cross-cultural and should therefore be treated as such (Vinson et al., 2019).

## **II - MAKING YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERTS OF THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES AND IDENTITY**

The social worker should step out of the role of expert and let young people themselves be experts of their own experiences and identity. The own voice of the person is at the center of culturally sensitive care, not only by creating space for the personal story of the young person, but also by taking their wishes, expectations and beliefs into account. This also means that we give young people the opportunity to integrate into our society, without having to throw away their own cultural values and standards. Essential to this attitude is a genuine, respectful curiosity and openness, free of assumptions or prejudices. 'Not knowing' can be a strength of the social worker.

## **III - A SELF-CRITICAL AND SELF-CONSCIENCE ATTITUDE**

Social workers should actively question their own position. Culturally sensitive thinking means being aware of our socially and culturally determined views (Breebaart, Nanninga, Alim, & Mast, 2019; Bennett, 2017). Through active self-reflection, social workers not only see 'the migrant' or 'the refugee' as having a culture and an ethnicity, but also themselves. Everyone has a culture and ethnicity, and no one is neutral. Transparency towards youngster on this is essential. Having conversations with young people about your own interpretations, customs, habits, etc. and how they differ can add to this transparency.

A major obstacle to such self-criticism is one's own biases. These are often deeply ingrained and historically grown thinking patterns or prejudices and are therefore difficult to recognize. We are often unaware of the (cultural) framework from which we look at and experience the world. After all, culture is handed down to us from birth. We are born into it and brought up in it, so the world around us becomes self-evident and is experienced as neutral. If we want to work in a culturally sensitive way, we have to drop the idea that we can pursue objectivity. After all, we always think, act and react from culturally colored frameworks (Breebaart et al., 2019; Gonzalez & Lauwereys, 2020). Building on this attitude, social workers can start recognizing their own position of power and forming relationships based on equality. Within such relationships, young people are not judged or condemned based on their history and sharing a trauma story is an opportunity for empowerment rather than a source of new injury.

## PITFALLS OF CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

There are also some potential pitfalls associated with cultural sensitivity that are important to be aware of (Chiarenza, 2012):

- Culture is often seen as only linked to one's ethnicity. Such a focus on ethnic differences ignores much of the identity of refugees and reduces them to their ethnicity. Culture is related to a large number of identity traits, behaviors and habits, and thus not only to ethnicity.
- Culture is often considered to relate only to 'the other'. The refugee or migrant, who does not comply with a Western, white norm, is thus culturally colored, whereas the native social worker is culturally neutral. Social workers should therefore not critically evaluate their cultural framework according to this logic. This creates a cultural norm and perpetuates exclusionary mechanisms. With increasing interculturalisation, the established society should question itself and recognize the dominant group's privileged position (Arikoglu et al., 2014).
- A focus on cultural differences can divert attention from structural factors at play in inequality. This can lead, for example, to the attribution of a vulnerability to trauma to culture: A young person has psychological problems because they belong to a certain culture. Chiarenza (2012) calls this a form of victim blaming.
- As mentioned earlier, a focus on culture can cause people with the same cultural background to be treated as one homogeneous group. Care workers should always avoid this and pay attention to all aspects of a person's identity, to diversity within diversity. Each individual, albeit coming from a certain culture, lives out this culture in a personal, unique way. Culture can be an important component of one's identity, but is not the only component.



Social workers should ask themselves how culturally sensitive they are in dealing with young people. Remember that this is a challenging learning process that requires an open and curious attitude. The following questions are important to ask:

- What assumptions do I make about a young person? Do I know the person behind the nationality or religion?
- Am I aware of my personal values? How do they influence my professional attitude?

Some tips for the professional:

- Show interest in themes that live in the different populations you work with. How do they differ between population groups? How does the young person experience this? Is there understanding or rejection of certain themes? Talk about this.
- Communicate clearly. Take the time to clarify the expectations and the desired help or support. Always check whether you understand each other properly. Do not use explicit phrasing, by which you impose your own interpretations on the other, but be curious and ask how the other person feels about it. This helps to build trust.
- Respect and value cultural differences and similarities.
- Evaluate your own cultural attitude.
- Stay curious. That way you will continue to learn and have a real connection. This leads to appropriate help and support.

It can be useful to have a culturally savvy person supervising the work done by social workers. This person might be able to identify the pitfalls and schemas that social workers might risk falling into and consequently facilitate cultural sensitivity.

SOURCE: JEUGDHULP AAN ASIELZOEKERSKINDEREN (2021)



# SOME IMPORTANT THEMES IN THE LIFE OF AN UNACCOMPANIED CHILD

When we asked unaccompanied children themselves in informal conversations about the salient features of their new context in Belgium, they mentioned surprising themes. For example, one young person talked about the Belgian culture of keeping pets: *“Dogs here are regarded and treated like children, with us they have a work function on farms or roam freely on the streets.”*

Another young person talked about dealing with adults and the elderly: *“In Belgium, you learn to look at teachers or elders and are expected to justify your behavior or opinion, while as a child we learned to look down when addressing elders.”*

Other important themes that were raised include sexuality, relationships between men and women, upbringing/parenting, food, clothing, alcohol consumption, smoking, individualistic vs. collectivistic cultures, way of living, etc.

Unaccompanied children's view of their new environment reveals that the most important cultural issues for newcomers are often invisible to caregivers who grew up in this culture. This poses a great challenge for cultural sensitivity. Indeed, it is important to be alert to the tendency to experience our own culture as self-evident and neutral, and to approach young people with the expectation that they will assimilate to this culture. As mentioned earlier, this is also precisely where the strength of cultural sensitivity lies. Cultural differences form a site from which we can enter into **dialogue** with young people. In what follows, some important themes in the life of unaccompanied children are discussed.

## IDENTITY

Unaccompanied children are faced with the difficult task of creating a 'new' identity and giving a place to both home and host country in it. These young people therefore often create sub-identities that exist between their two living worlds (home and host country). This requires a lot of energy and resilience, and inevitably causes fractures in relation to the different contexts and within themselves. In order to support young people in this process, a culturally sensitive attitude of social workers and the broader context is essential (Gonzalez & Lauwereys, 2020).

### **A SENSE OF BELONGING**

A sense of belonging is a necessary element in unaccompanied children's identity development, in addition to a feeling of security and mutual trust. Such a sense can only emerge from stable relationships within an environment that feels safe and comfortable. Creating this environment requires a mutual process between the young person and the new context. On the one hand, the young person must have the feeling of wanting to be part of this new context and of wanting to invest in it. On the other hand, the young person has to feel that he or she is unconditionally part of this context or group. The same mutual connection can (if possible) be made (or restored) between the young person and the pre-migration context (Day & Badou, 2019).

### **CONTINUITY IN THE LIFE STORY**

A pitfall in working with unaccompanied children is to focus too much on the integration process of the youngsters in their new context. In this way, the context in the country of origin, and with that a large part of the identity of these youngsters, is overshadowed. Integrating and embracing the context from the home country within the new context promotes continuity in the life story and identity development of young people. Firstly, this can be done by giving young people the freedom to explore their own culture within their new context. Secondly, young people can be encouraged to talk about their own family. Looking at photos together or putting together a family box with important memories can be a strong stimulus for conversation. This can also ensure that important 'absentees' are made 'present' again and are given a place in the identity development of young people. It is however important to respect the young person's readiness to talk about this as some young people may be triggered by such exercises (Gonzalez & Lauwereys, 2020; Cheyns, 2020).

### **BUILDING A SOCIAL NETWORK**

The importance of relationships with others cannot be underestimated. It is fundamental for all further growth in the search for a new life. In the new environment, contact with people from the same homeland, who are going through a similar process, can be beneficial. Indeed, young people tend to look for people with a shared experience and lifestyle. However, having the same homeland or sharing the same experience can be a starting point for building a relationship, but it does not guarantee a lasting friendship. Furthermore, it is necessary to build an overall network consisting of school contacts, support families, youth movements, sports clubs, buddies, etc. This can be a lengthy search. Social workers and educators can help to actively build this network by, for example, organizing activities where 'networking' is possible together with the young person.

# TOOLS FOR THE CAREGIVER

**“First regulate, then relate, then reason.”**

(Perry, 2020)

**In working with unaccompanied children with traumatic experiences, it is important to keep the following in mind: First regulate, then relate, then reason. This thought forms the basis for helping and talking to these young people.**

(Perry, 2020)

## **REGULATE**

Regulating means bringing young people from a state of alarm to a state of calm. By helping young people to bring their attention to the here and now, their emotion and behavioral regulation can be facilitated. A sensory exercise can help with this. Furthermore, a safe memory can provide a ‘secure basis’ for the young person, both physically and mentally. This offers a footing to obtain calmness. Teaching relaxation and breathing techniques has also proven to be useful here (Perry, 2020).

However, rest remains the priority for these young people. This can be achieved by rest in the literal sense of the word, but also by physical activity. Physical activity can contribute to the recovery of parts of the brain that have been poorly developed due to trauma (Perry, 2020). Leisure activities are also important. This stimulates positive experiences and supports a broadening of identity: “I am more than my trauma”.

## **RELATE**

After regulating comes relating. Relating stimulates maintaining calm by forming relationships with the young person. These relationships provide a safe source of support and a network that helps young people to deal with their trauma. Not only the present but also the past is positively influenced through these new relationships as it is never too late to have a happy childhood.

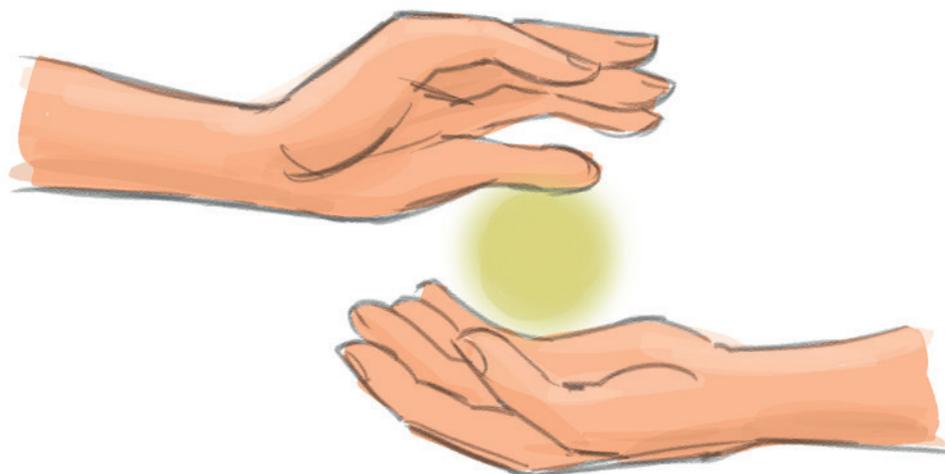
## REASON

After the young person has found peace of mind and formed a relational support base, reasoning can start. The goal of this is to go through life sufficiently resilient, with the ability to regulate themselves.

At that point, the social worker can get to work with the young person. For example, by means of **psychoeducation**. Providing psychoeducation can be supportive for social workers, but also for young people. The knowledge of trauma that is gained in the practical guide can help. Think for example of the information on (prolonged) stress and its impact on the body, feelings, thoughts and behavior, but also of the concise statement on how people deal with trauma: “A normal response to abnormal circumstances”. This information helps to recognize and normalize problems and complaints. Because the information about trauma is often complicated and abundant, it is difficult for both the young person and the social worker to find a clear way through it. It is therefore advisable to start from the complaints of young people themselves (Cheyns, 2020).

For young people who have little or no knowledge of the common language, psychoeducation is especially difficult. **Visualization**, expressing the story as an image, can help. This supports the verbal aspect of the conversation, slows down the conversation and enables the young person to look at their own story as an observer. Furthermore, it can be referred to again and again because it remains visible. The use of **metaphors and stories** can also support a conversation. They enable us to express things that are impossible or difficult to say, are understandable and include feelings (Cheyns, 2020). Some cultures are extremely rich in metaphors and stories. Using these culture-specific metaphors and stories can facilitate a culturally sensitive approach.

- For example, when small clouds do not get the chance to rain, they build up to rain/thunder clouds that cover the whole sky. Meaning in some cultures that when one does not get the chance to express emotions and hides them, eventually they will all come out at once.



## SOME METHODOLOGIES

Several methods have been developed to facilitate the conversation with young people. They provide tools to concretize the previously mentioned visualization and the use of stories and metaphors in conversations with young people. It is important that these methodologies are only used when the young person learned to regulate and a relationship is established. Young people can only talk about traumatic experiences when they have learned to regulate their emotions within a safe relationship.

Below is a list of some of these methodologies:

- **Tree of life.** A visual method using the metaphor of a tree to tell a story about oneself. The branches, fruits and roots represent different areas of life. This method was developed by the Dulwich Centre (Australia) in cooperation with AIDS patients in South-Africa (Denborough, 2008).
- **Team of life.** A variant of the Tree of Life where the metaphor of a football team is adopted instead of that of a tree. Here, too, fellow players, the field, the goal, etc. represent important areas of life and important people (Denborough, 2008).
- **Writing a letter.** Sharing a story/experience by writing a letter can help to create meaning around these experiences. This letter can be addressed to issues, complaints or a community/collective and can provide empowerment and connection (Denborough, 2008).
- **Life domains** and **Identity circles** are depicted in a pie chart/vendor diagram where each segment represents an important element of a person's life. The size of each segment is important as well. Using this circle, it can then be determined which areas can be discussed and which are more difficult. This brings therapeutically important themes to the surface. An identity circle is a useful tool for a clearer overview of what the young person finds important and stimulates identity expansion ("I am more than just my trauma") (Cheyns, 2020).
- **Relationship circles.** Related to identity circles with a focus on relationships and the context of the young person.
- **Lifeline.** This is a method that helps to visualize the life of the young person and to discuss topics with attention to both positive and negative experiences. It brings continuity to the unaccompanied child's rapidly changing life and at the same time looks to the future (See Appendix 3 of practice guidance).
- **Geographical life stories.** This method assumes that every person forms several sub-identities throughout their life and that these can differ depending on the geographical place. By means of a self-drawn geographical map, the social worker and the young person gradually go over sub-identities and relationships connected with certain places. In combination with a lifeline, the history behind each place can be explored (Loots, 2020).
- **Sense exercises.** When a young person worries a lot and keeps relapsing into negative thoughts, sense exercises can bring peace in the here and now. By mentioning what one hears, sees, feels, experiences, etc. the young person can be

helped to focus on the immediate surroundings (Cheyns, 2020). This is also known as 'grounding'

- **Safe place.** In moments of restlessness and panic, it can help a young person to find shelter in a previously designated safe place. This can be a physical place (e.g. bedroom), as well as in thoughts. For example, a place of which one has fond and safe memories can bring a feeling of ease and peace (e.g. at grandma's in the garden, in the shade of the plum tree).

When working with these methodologies, always ask yourself:

- What do we want to achieve?
- What can this particular methodology teach us?

Always check with the young person:

- Are they comfortable going there?
- Do they feel safe enough? Even though they are safe they might still feel unsafe.



## CONCLUSION

Clearly, cultural sensitivity is an indispensable component of working with unaccompanied children with traumatic experiences. The experiences that unaccompanied children undergo can make them particularly vulnerable to developing trauma-related health problems. Both events before and during migration and various stressors after migration can further trauma (Vinson et al., 2019). However, calling cultural sensitivity a “component” may be somewhat misleading. Indeed, it is not a new building block that you put on your wall of accumulated skills, but rather new cement that permeates and reinforces your previous skills and knowledge. Cultural sensitivity includes knowledge, skills and, most importantly, an attitude that are formed in a lifelong learning process. Recognizing and accepting everyone’s individual identity is essential in a culturally sensitive attitude (Vinson et al., 2019). Therefore, one might better speak of a sensitivity to differences rather than to culture. On top of this, the young person’s voice must be heard and their wishes, expectations, and attitudes taken into account. All of this must be combined with the critical questioning of one’s own cultural framework (Chiarenza, 2012). In short, social workers need to combine a trauma informed and culturally sensitive lens. Although this appendix zooms in on a specific group, unaccompanied children, cultural sensitivity is always and in every interaction important. As previously mentioned, every interaction has the potential to be cross-cultural and thus should be treated accordingly (Vinson et al., 2019).



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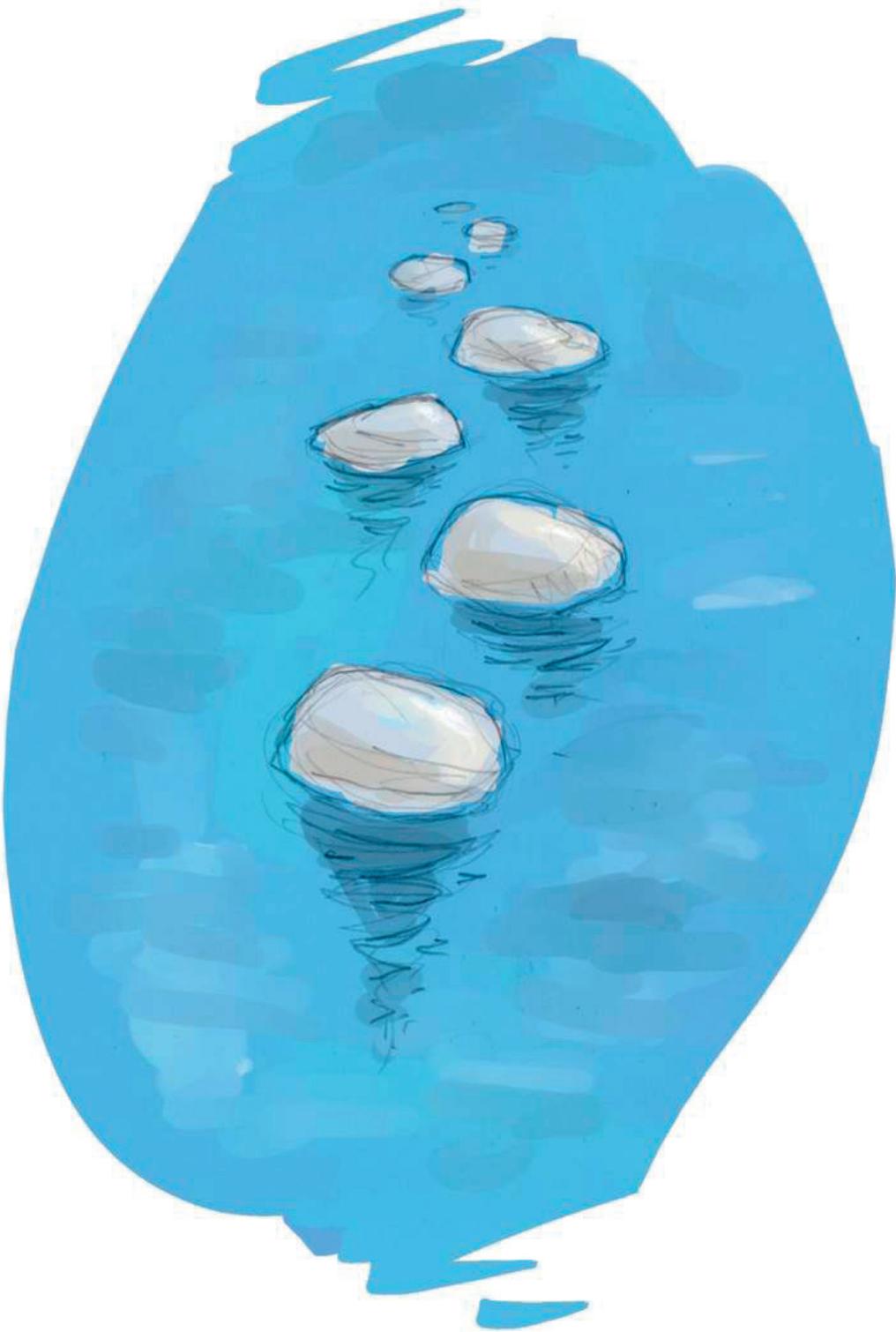
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