FINAL BULLETIN

EMPOWERING FUTURES:
Therapeutic Foster Care for Unaccompanied Minors and their Foster Families Results, Insights, and a Call for Collaboration

In this issue

INTRODUCTION

by Katja Fournier, Researcher at the Centre for family Studies, Odisee University of Applied Sciences

In this issue, we explore the **vital role of therapeutic foster care** in supporting unaccompanied minors. We'll dive into why this initiative matters, share key insights into the **project's outcomes**, and **highlight future directions** as we continue to build stronger support systems for these vulnerable children. We also invite you to **join us in** this important dialogue—your contributions and experiences are essential to shaping the next phase of our work.

The numbers are striking:
41% of people in forced migration are children.
10% of these children are unaccompanied.
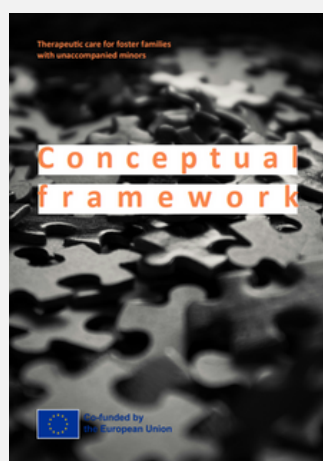43,000 unaccompanied minors arrived in the EU in 2023 alone.

But these statistics are more than numbers—they are the **stories** of children facing unimaginable challenges. Separated from their families, they embark on perilous journeys in search of safety, often in unfamiliar, overwhelming environments.

As we reflect on their journeys, consider what these experiences represent:
- The months spent in transit, grappling with fear and uncertainty.
- The loved ones lost or left behind along the way.
- The long, often agonizing wait for asylum decisions, stuck in limbo with no clear answers.
- The struggle to be seen, heard, and understood—especially as a child—in the midst of these circumstances.

How can we, as a society, better support these children—as children first and foremost—on their path to safety, stability, and hope for the future?

We will delve deeper into these critical questions and share resources, including a **Practical Guide for Foster Care Workers,** a **Conceptual Framework**, and **Policy Recommendations,** all designed to strengthen the support available for unaccompanied minors and their foster families.

RESULTS & URGENCY TO ACT

The conceptual Model of the FORM project

**Strengthening Bonds and Acknowledging the Unknown –
Foster Care for Unaccompanied Minor Refugees: A Look back at three years of
developing a Conceptual Model and a Practical Guide**

by Prof. Dr. Patrick Meurs and Corinna Poholski (University of Kassel, Odisee)

At the end of three years of fruitful collaboration between the five partners of the Erasmus + FORM project, we have brought together the knowledge and concepts as well as the practical experiences we have shared along the way and finally published the **Conceptual Framework** and the **Practical Guide** (both available online on the project's website).

With the Conceptual Framework and the Practical Guide, we have created a basis to **make the specific needs of unaccompanied minors visible and accessible to foster care workers,** and to provide foster care workers with an **exile- and trauma-sensitive approach to guide them in supporting foster parents** in the task of creating a healthy and trustworthy environment and home for their fostered minors.

Together with the project partners we have developed a **theoretical and practical basis** and taken a first step towards a specialized field of foster care on which we can now build further bridges to strengthen the bonds within foster families.

Our contribution at the **Department of Psychoanalysis at the University of Kassel** was to develop an informative programme for foster care workers, in order to support them in their counselling of foster parents of children and youngsters with a background of flight and exile.

Recognising that behind a child's withdrawal, aggression or extreme affect there may be an emotion that is too painful to feel or an experience that is too painful to remember, we in the FORM project set out to open up **reflective spaces** and a **safe environment** for foster care workers. This space for reflective teamwork, intervision or supervision for foster care workers contributes to their professional resources in working with foster families and helping foster parents to remain a safe base for their fostered children – even when these parents have no words or understanding for their child's inner state, or even when they are facing a severe crisis in their foster family. Our approach therefore outlines a **relationship-based**, exile- and **trauma-sensitive training programme** and places the foster care workers at the heart of the FORM project, at the heart of enhanced foster care.

FORM empowers the foster care worker with a deeper understanding of a fostering context that is faced with exile-related loss and trauma dynamics. FORM also empowers the foster care workers with a practical translation of this understanding that can be used within the foster families they support.

With the 10-point-programme of the Practical Guide we shed light on how foster care workers can support foster parents to provide a supportive relationship for the minors during the first period of their arrival in a new environment, in a new phase of their life and in their (new) family.

With this ideal in mind, we have emphasised the **10-point- programme**, focusing on the **ability to mentalize, the ability to symbolize and the importance of establishing and strengthening the parent-child-relationship** as the basis for the well-being of children and adolescents and for their further development after the flight.

Our FORM project, as outlined in the Conceptual Framework and the Practical Guide, can help the foster care workers to overcome challenging moments, nourish professional resources and reflect on case dynamics.

These new perspectives, gained through reflective team exchanges, have their impact on the attitude of the foster care worker and are an essential resource for the relationship between foster care workers and foster parents, as well as for the encounters and relationships within the foster family.

The results of the FORM project will therefore also benefit the relationship between the foster parents and their foster children and youngsters, especially in the phase of arrival and new beginnings.

This will be possible by emphasizing the attachment to origins (roots) or their sense of belonging, and by opening the way to a secure relationship through which fostered children and youngsters can develop and find ways into their lives, a live that motivates them and that they deserve.

Policy Recommendations: Strengthening Support for Unaccompanied Minor Refugees and Foster Families

by Katja Fournier, Researcher at the Centre for family Studies, Odisee University of Applied Sciences

Without coordinated and sustained action, unaccompanied minors may continue to face barriers that hinder their ability to heal, thrive, and contribute to society. We must act now to ensure that these children receive the support, care, and opportunities they deserve.

Ensuring Safety and Stability in Foster Care

- Policies as a Safety Net: Foster care workers, foster parents, and unaccompanied minors need policies that provide a solid support system, offering safety in the background and clear guidelines to navigate complex situations.
- Recognizing the Realities: We must acknowledge the challenges faced by unaccompanied minors and foster parents. There is a risk of underestimating the emotional, psychological, and logistical complexities these groups encounter daily.
- The Importance of Strong Policies and Networks: A robust therapeutic foster care system cannot thrive without solid policies and strong networks of support. We must resist placing the responsibility for systemic issues solely on individuals.
- De-institutionalization and Child Well-being: While de-institutionalization is a positive goal, we must carefully consider how to ensure the child's well-being and the continuity of meaningful connections within foster care. A comprehensive, multi-level approach is essential.

A Holistic, Rights-Based Approach

- Support for Foster Families and Service Providers: A holistic, rights-based approach must include comprehensive support for both foster families and the institutions serving them. This approach should consider the unique needs of a sector that is often fragmented and under pressure.
- Raising Awareness and Promoting Rights: Spreading awareness about the rights of unaccompanied minors is crucial. We must reinforce access to these rights and share best practices to promote their well-being.

Promotion of Inclusion and Integration

- Civic Integration Programs: Flexible and inclusive civic integration programs should be strengthened to facilitate the integration of UMR into society. These programs must be adaptable to the individual needs of each child.
- Social Integration Initiatives: Increased funding for social initiatives will help foster better integration, while promoting empowerment and social cohesion among UMR and the broader community.

Education and Asylum System Improvements

- Educational Pathways: we must enhance school registration procedures and create clearer educational pathways for UMR. This should include assessments of their educational background to ensure appropriate placement.
- Simplification of Asylum Procedures: the asylum process should be simplified to reduce delays and uncertainty. This includes comprehensive screening and assessment processes, as well as alternative reception options tailored to children's needs.

Trauma- and Culture-Sensitive Mental Health Services

- Specialized Psychological Care: Expand access to specialized mental health services that are trauma- and culture-sensitive. These services should include effective mourning and grief support to help UMR cope with their traumatic experiences.
- Ongoing Monitoring of Well-being: regular monitoring of the emotional and psychological well-being of minors is essential to ensure they receive the appropriate care and attention.

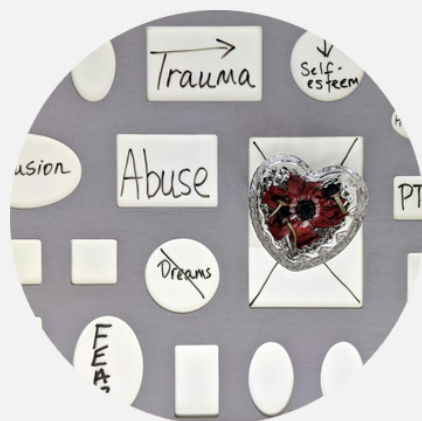### Building Community and Support Networks

- Networking and Community Building: establish networks and mentorship programs for UMR to foster connections and promote social inclusion. Cultural and language mediation services are also critical to ensure children can integrate and communicate effectively.

Evidence-Based Therapeutic Foster Care

- Collaborative Research and Development: encourage collaborative research to continuously improve therapeutic foster care practices. This includes effective monitoring and evaluation of foster care placements, as well as establishing feedback mechanisms to inform future practices.

Long-Term Support and Transition Planning

- Independent Living Preparation: as UMR approach adulthood, they need structured preparation for independent living, including support to transition successfully from foster care to adulthood.
- Post-Care Support: long-term support must continue even after a child exits foster care, providing the necessary resources and guidance for their continued development.

2. VOICES FROM THE WORK FLOOR: LOCAL PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES

Foster Care for Unaccompanied Minors in Cyprus

by Maria Iacovou, Counseling Psychologist, Foster Care Department, "Hope For Children" CRC Policy Center

Foster **Care System in Cyprus** follows a structured procedure to ensure the safety and well-being of unaccompanied minors, providing them with a chance for stability and healing in a supportive family environment.

The process of fostering begins with the **application** for foster care, followed by comprehensive **training** for prospective foster parents. This is followed by both a psychosocial and psychological **assessment** of the potential foster family, culminating in a **Final Report**. The foster families are evaluated by a Committee for the Assessment of Foster Families, with reassessments occurring every two years to ensure the continued suitability of placements.

Once approved, the Foster Department assigns each foster family a social worker and a psychologist. These professionals provide ongoing monitoring and support through regular meetings with foster parents and unannounced visits to the foster homes. The department also works closely with the Social Welfare Services, which holds legal guardianship and makes decisions concerning the children in foster care.

Implementation of the FORM Project

The FORM Project has led to the training of 9 staff members, including psychologists and social workers, who are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to better support foster families. As part of the project, 6 foster care cases have been managed, providing valuable insight into both the successes and challenges of the system.

Training for Kinship Foster Parents
A critical component of the FORM Project involves the training of kinship foster parents. These workshops are both psychoeducational and experiential, offering guidance on understanding the complex profiles of unaccompanied minors.

Support for Foster Parents
A core element of the FORM Project is providing ongoing support for foster parents. A coordinator (psychologist) leads support groups, which offer a space for foster parents to connect, share experiences, and offer solutions. These groups focus on:
- Tolerating ambivalence in their roles.
- Reducing feelings of isolation.
- Building a support network for foster families through events like a Fun Day and Christmas celebrations.
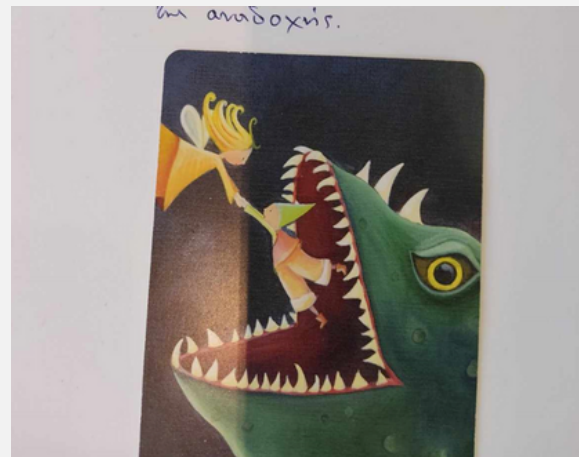
Supervision
The project also includes regular supervision for both psychologists and social workers separately, as well as for the entire team. This ensures that the professionals involved remain well-supported and can address challenges effectively.

Challenges in the Field

Despite these efforts, several challenges persist in the field of foster care for unaccompanied minors in Cyprus:

- Understaffing remains a significant issue, impacting the ability to provide adequate support.
- Frequent changes in the child's legal guardian complicate the consistency of care.
- The lack of a legal framework governing foster care leaves many uncertainties.
- There is a limited body of research available to inform best practices.
- A shortage of specialized translators hinders communication with children from diverse linguistic backgrounds.
- There is a lack of awareness about the specific needs of unaccompanied minors and the role of foster care in supporting them.
- Finally, there is a critical need for more specialized educational and culturally appropriate support for both the children and foster families.

Foster Care in East Flanders: Perspectives on the FORM Project for Unaccompanied Minor Refugees (UMR)

Interview with Julie Van Gysel, Coördinator FORM & Foster Care Worker and Emel Tuncel, Coördinator Diversity & Inclusion and Emel Tuncel, Staff member & coordinator Diversity & Inclusion, Pleegzorg Oost-Vlaanderen

- *Could you share insights on the foster care system in East Flanders, the significant impact of the FORM project, and how you have beenaddressing the unique needs of Unaccompanied Minor Refugees (UMR)?*

Foster Care in Flanders: A Provincial Approach

Foster care in Belgium is divided into regions, with each province having its own dedicated organization. In Flanders, there are five regions, each with a unique foster care system. Foster Care East Flanders operates within the province, which is distinct from the system in Wallonia, where foster care is managed separately.

Foster Care East Flanders: Key Numbers

As of December 31, 2023, there are 2,634 active foster care cases in East Flanders:
- 2,452 foster children (9% are UMR)
- 182 cases involving adults with physical or psychiatric disabilities in foster care

Within East Flanders, foster families are divided into two main categories:
- Non-Kinship Foster Families: 28% of cases, with 92% of UMR being placed in non-kinship families
- Kinship Foster Families: 72% of cases, where the foster family has a family or social connection with the child (e.g., relatives, neighbors, or teachers)

Foster Care Modules

We offer several foster care modules tailored to the needs of children:
- Supportive Foster Care (part-time): For children who visit foster families on weekends or for short periods, often as a temporary solution for parents who have no other support.
- Short-Term Foster Care (full-time): For children who may stay for up to 18 months while their long-term placement is explored, with the goal of eventual reunification with their biological family.
- Long-Term Foster Care (full-time): For children who cannot return home and need a stable family environment until adulthood (up to age 25).
- Emergency Foster Care: For immediate placement of children removed from their families due to safety concerns, requiring urgent care.
- Therapeutic Foster Care: A specialized approach that focuses on addressing complex psychological and emotional needs.

- *Could you tell us why Therapeutic Foster Care for UMR is essential?*

Therapeutic foster care is crucial for addressing the specific needs of Unaccompanied Minor Refugees. While we already have trauma-sensitive foster care modules, we recognized the need for additional, culturally sensitive support for this group. Many UMR are placed in kinship foster families, which adds a unique layer of complexity. These children often have trauma from their flight, face language barriers, and may not fully understand the social and legal systems in Belgium.

The FORM project was initiated to fill this gap. It emphasizes the importance of culturally and trauma-sensitive guidance, confirming that foster care workers play a key role in supporting UMR without taking on a therapeutic role themselves. This project highlights the foster care worker's essential role as a stabilizing presence, helping children and families navigate the complexities of their situation.

Rather than introducing an entirely new therapeutic model, the FORM project builds on our existing systems, providing a scientifically grounded framework to enhance the guidance we offer. The Practical Guide developed as part of the project helps foster care workers better address the needs of UMR, confirming the cultural sensitivity already embedded in our practices.

TO SUPPORT A SOCIAL WORKER

- *Could you highlight some of the main challenges you face?*

The Importance of Culturally Sensitive Approaches. One of the significant challenges we face in supporting UMR is recognizing the cultural nuances in trauma and healing. Trauma and PTSD are universal, but how they are understood and treated can vary widely across cultures. The FORM project has been invaluable in offering non-verbal, body-oriented approaches, which are particularly effective when language barriers or cultural taboos make traditional forms of therapy difficult.

We've learned that fostering a culturally sensitive approach is crucial not only for UMR but also for children with migration backgrounds who were born and raised in Belgium. We often underestimate the importance of culturally attuned social work, which is why we continue to train our teams and encourage ongoing intervision (peer supervision) to improve our practices.

- *What are your views Looking Ahead about the Future of Therapeutic Foster Care?*

With the FORM guidance model and the accompanying Practical Guide, we plan to further train foster care workers in the specific needs of UMR. This includes deepening our understanding of culturally sensitive care and continuing to organize intervision sessions for foster care workers.

We are also working to develop a more specialized therapeutic foster care module for UMR and their kinship foster families, which will be informed by our learnings from the FORM project. Moving forward, we are committed to ensuring that this care is trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, and responsive to the unique needs of each child.

- *Is there a specific message you would like to convey?*

Yes we would like to highlight that there is a significant group of minors who are not officially classified as UMR but who come from countries like Bulgaria, Romania, or Chechnya, and lack the necessary legal documentation to remain in Belgium. These children, who are often just as vulnerable as UMR, fall through the cracks in the current system and do not have the same rights or protections. It is crucial that we do not overlook their needs.

Experiencing Therapeutic Foster Care in the Italian Context: A Community and Family-Based Approach

by Micaela Valentino e Sara Shokry, Salesiani per il Sociale

Experiencing therapeutic foster care in the Italian context: a community and family based approach

Foster care in Italy is an essential part of the system for supporting vulnerable minors, integrating a community and family-based approach that is rooted in both legal and professional frameworks.

Italian laws surrounding foster care are informed by national regulations as well as international standards, including the **Convention on the Rights of the Child,** which emphasizes the need for a protective and nurturing environment for minors in care.

Regulatory Framework

The cornerstone of foster care in Italy is the **Law 47/2017**, which provides the legal basis for the protection of unaccompanied foreign minors (UFM). This law envisions foster care not just as an alternative placement but as an integral part of a minor's individualized educational plan.

Foster care is designed to meet the specific needs of the child, ensuring that each minor is placed in a supportive family context that helps them heal, grow, and thrive.

However, it is important to note that foster care is not a one-size-fits-all solution. It may not be suitable for every child, but for those who do need it, it plays a pivotal role in their development.

The Integrated Practice Model for Foster Care

An effective approach to foster care in Italy involves an **Integrated Practice Model** that focuses on key elements: training, matching, support, networking, monitoring, and care. The process begins with thorough **training** for all involved parties—foster families, social workers, and relevant professionals—to ensure they are equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to provide a safe, therapeutic environment.
Matching is a critical step in ensuring that children are placed with families who can best meet their needs, considering factors like the child's background, specific vulnerabilities, and the family's ability to offer the right type of care. Once a placement is made, **ongoing support** and **monitoring** are essential for maintaining the success of the foster care arrangement. This includes regular check-ins by social workers, access to therapeutic services, and communication between the family, professionals, and support networks. **Networking** between professionals and the family is crucial, helping to build a holistic support system that can address any emerging issues and offer guidance throughout the foster care process.

Gradualness and Development of the Minor's Educational Plan

A fundamental aspect of foster care in Italy is the principle of **gradualness**. The development of the minor's educational plan is not rushed. Instead, it is adjusted and refined over time, allowing for the minor's needs to be met progressively as they adapt to their new family environment. This gradual integration ensures that the minor can acclimatize to their new surroundings in a way that respects their emotional and psychological development. Each child's educational plan is personalized, built on careful assessments and tailored to their individual journey.

Protective Factors for Success

The success of foster care hinges on several protective factors that help guide the life journey of young people in care. These factors include:

- A **stable and supportive family context**, whether through foster care or family solidarity arrangements.
- A **strong support network** that extends beyond the immediate foster family to include social services, schools, and community organizations.
- The **ongoing support of families**, ensuring that foster parents are never alone in their roles and have access to resources and advice as needed.
- **Networking** between professionals and the family to ensure open communication and collaboration throughout the process.
- A **personalized** reception plan that adapts to the unique needs of the minor, ensuring that each child's individual circumstances are taken into account.

Foster care in Italy strives to create a system that not only provides immediate safety and stability for vulnerable minors but also fosters long-term resilience, development, and integration into society.

By focusing on a therapeutic, community-based approach that emphasizes training, support, gradual development, and collaboration, Italy's foster care system aims to ensure the best possible outcomes for every child in care, offering them a brighter future within a loving and supportive family context.

Testimony

Between November 27th and 29th, 2024, **Caterina Manzo** and **Carola Iacuitto** from the **Borgo Ragazzi Don Bosco** in Rome attended the final conference of the FORM project in the Odisee University of Applied Science in Brussels, focusing on the trauma experienced by unaccompanied foreign minors (UFM) and how foster care can offer a healing environment. Here is their testimony:

"The conference was really insightful. We heard a lot about the trauma that unaccompanied foreign minors face, and how different countries have applied trauma-informed practices in foster care. We also had the chance to share our approach, which we've developed over the years with the Department of Social Policies and Health and other Third Sector entities.

We explained how we integrate trauma-informed practices into every stage of foster care: in the training of potential foster families, we added a module specifically about trauma; during the matching process, we respect the time needed to rebuild trust; and in the accompaniment phase, we help families understand the child's experiences through a trauma lens.

We also talked about the key principles that guide our work: care, gradualness, collaboration with networks, and personalized educational plans. We introduced a form of informal reception, which isn't regulated but can really make a difference for some minors. This is important because many of these children, due to complex trauma, may find it hard to imagine themselves in a family, but having a family reference can be healing for them.

Though we saw some differences in how other countries approach this, our contribution was really appreciated. It was a great exchange, and we're all looking for shared ways to offer better support for minors across different countries and cultures, while promoting social inclusion and respecting their rights."

3.DREAMING ABOUT THE FUTURE

by Katja Fournier, Researcher at the Centre for family Studies, Odisee University of Applied Sciences and Isabel Berckmans Lecturer Social Educational Care Work, Odisee University of Applied Sciences

Dreaming About the Future

- *How can we make foster placements more resilient, sustainable, and supportive?*
- *How can we create environments where the well-being of the child is always the priority?*
- *How can we strengthen the various types of foster families to better support children in their care?*
- *How can we prevent placement breakdowns and ensure lasting connections?*
- *What knowledge, skills, and tools are needed to support everyone involved in the foster care system?*

These questions are part of a collaborative process, one that involves co-creation and building a strong network—both formal and informal.

FORM is not the end of our collaboration*. We are working on a **new project** that specifically focuses on **supporting foster parents of unaccompanied minors (UMs).** This new project aims to strengthen and enhance foster care for unaccompanied minors (UMs) by establishing learning communities. These communities will bring together foster parents, professionals, and community members to collaboratively address the challenges of fostering UMs.*

The project builds on the findings and methodologies established during the FORM project, which underscored the vital role of support systems. By sharing lived experiences, engaging in participatory research, identifying and sharing resources, and co-creating practical tools and solutions, these learning communities aim to cultivate nurturing and supportive environments that support the mental health, education, and integration of UMs. Foster parents will gain access to a network of peers and professionals where they can exchange knowledge, share emotional support, and collaboratively develop solutions. These communities are designed not just to educate but to empower, enabling foster parents to respond to the needs of UMs and fostering resilience within their own families.

With this project, we hope to enhance placement stability, improve mental health outcomes for UMs, and create a replicable model of support that can be scaled across Europe. Together, we aim to build a future where unaccompanied minor refugees find safety, belonging, and the opportunity to this initiative.

Want to join this project or interested in this initiative? Contact us at isabel.berckmans@odisee.be.

The Why in a Poem

Home by Warsan Shire:
"...no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark"