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EUROPEAN
UNION



EUROPEAN COMMISSION - DIRECTORATE GENERAL JUSTICE AND CONSUMERS
Programme and Financial management
Grant Agreement number: 881677 – I.N.T.I.T. – REC-AG-2019 / REC-RDAP-GBV-AG-2019

INTIT

*INtegrated Trauma Informed Therapy
for Child Victims of Violence*

Newsletter 2

April 30th, 2022



The project was supported by





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The second transnational exchange meeting

On 22nd February and on 3rd March 2022 the **2° Transnational Exchange meeting** was organized online.

Compared with the first exchange meeting, the attention - during this 2° exchange meeting – has shifted from the responses put in place by specialized and targeted services for child victims of specific forms of violence to the challenges ahead for a comprehensive response to child abuse and maltreatment by social, health and justice services, from prevention and treatment.

Co-operation between different professionals may encounter several obstacles: this happens when competences are not well defined, collaboration is not formalised, professional languages as well as practises are different and there is no “place”/organized setting where cooperation can actually happen.

These obstacles are even greater when professionals work in different services and organisations.

The exchange has helped highlight the main challenges and opportunities, models and strategies of multi-agency and multi-professional trauma informed cooperation in child protection for minors who are actual or potential victims of abuse and maltreatment each partners' Country (Italy, Estonia, Germany, Cyprus, Spain).

This was done by addressing problems or failures in the existing systems and identifying possible solutions and steps ahead intervention maltreatment

Experts from all countries involved in the project (Italy, Germany, Spain, Estonia, and Cyprus) participated in the event who are professionals in different fields (Justice, Law enforcement, Protections and Welfare, care and treatment). Each expert shared their views and experiences on how different agencies and professionals can cooperate in order to respond to the multidimensional needs of traumatized children and to prevent re-traumatization.

The **first session**, held on 22nd February, focused on the best practices/promising experiences of intervention with children and their families from the filing of the complaint, the investigation and through the legal proceedings, while the **second session**, on 3rd March, focused on best practises that have adopted a multiagency trauma informed approach in one or more areas, from prevention to treatment.



Numerous experts representing the following organizations and Universities participated in the two-days seminar to share their experience: from **Italy**, the Psychoanalytic Institute for Social Research, the Salerno's Juvenile Court, the Italian Coordination of Services against Maltreatment and Child Abuse (CISMAI), the National Council of Social Workers (CNOAS); from **Estonia**, the Lõuna Prefektuur (South Prefecture, Tartu) and the Tallinn University (Psychology of Law); from **Cyprus**, the Crime Combating Department of the Cyprus Police Headquarters and the Pancyprian Association of Psychologists, (Section of Counselling Psychology); from **Spain**, the Department of Social Services Government of Galicia and the Forensic Assessment Unit for Violence Against Children and Adolescents (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria); from **Germany**, one former Senior Prosecutor and Victim Protection Advisor for the State of Schleswig-Holstein and the University Hospital of Hamburg - Center for Psychosocial Medicine (Institute for Medical Psychology).

The meeting report is available at <https://www.intitproject.eu/>

Country Focus – Cyprus

by Prof. Andreas Kapardis

At the international level, Cyprus was one of 24 countries that participated in a short online survey on Ombudspersons and Commissioners for Children's responses to the new challenges generated by the COVID-19 by UNICEF and ENOC (European Network of Ombudspersons for Children). Nationally, on the 8th of October 2021, the House for the Child Organized a seminar in collaboration with the Commissioner for Children's Rights on "Children's rights in the midst of the pandemic" which presented findings from a large national survey of children that utilized a Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIIA). In addition, the Commissioner for Children's Rights earlier in the year wrote to the Ministers of Health, Education and Foreign Affairs about excessive restrictions imposed on refugee children in the refugee camps in Cyprus (e.g., the Pournara camp), restrictions made worse by the overcrowding in the camps.

In the context of the INTIT project, six live interviews have been conducted in Cyprus, namely 4 personnel from the Barnahus in Nicosia, the police officer in charge of the domestic violence section and the ex-Commissioner for Children's Rights) and two live focus groups- one in Nicosia (the capital) and one in Limassol (the second largest city).



The four project questions to address were: **(1)** What do you believe is most effective in the provision of care and treatment to child victims of violence and abuse once they come into contact with the social services and/or criminal justice system? **(2)** What do you see as being the main challenges to providing child victims of violence/abuse with appropriate treatment and services once they enter the system? **(3)** What do you view as being the main strengths within the current system? What works best and why? and **(4)** How can and should services be developed and improved in order to better protect the children during investigation implemented by the criminal justice and/or social services systems?

On the positive side, it was found that the fact that there now exists in Cyprus a Barnahus House for the Child and if an abused child case is communicated to Barnahus by either the police or the Social Services Welfare Department, the child (and if appropriate the parent/s) is assessed and interviewed by all the relevant services (police, social workers, psychologist, police pathologist, and prosecution service). Coming together under one roof is undoubtedly most effective in the provision of care and treatment to child victims of violence and abuse once they come into contact with the social services and/or criminal justice system. The Ministry of Education is also represented at the weekly multi-agency meeting at the HFC.

In Cyprus, abused children (i.e. domestic violence, sexually abused, neglected) have been interviewed on video by specialist police personnel since 2003 and the video recording is presented in court as evidence against the accused. Thus, an abused child is interviewed in a specially constructed and equipped child-friendly room in the House for the Child which is connected with the court. This means that during a trial a child can testify without having to actually attend court, face the accused and be re-traumatized.

The fact that all the relevant services operate under one roof and are co-ordinated means that the system responds to an abused child case in much less time than in the past.

The immediate and multi-disciplinary response and the fact that specialist professionals as soon as a child abuse case enters the system assess the needs of a child at the same place in one day, results in early diagnosis and risk assessment of the child, thus providing much-needed and timely care and/or therapy and/or support to the child and, also, to the family, while contributing to prevent further victimization of the child.



The interviews and focus groups carried out in Cyprus identified the following remaining challenges for the relevant services as far as abused children are concerned:

- police personnel in different districts and in police stations to have a consistent approach in dealing with such cases, including responding immediately.
- the heavy load of child abuse cases the relevant agencies have to deal with due to the lack of sufficient and specialist staff. It should be noted in this context that the Social Services Welfare Department has people on standby after work but after hours they are neither supervised nor have psychological support.
- how best to handle a very young abused child with learning difficulties.

Additional challenges facing services and personnel working with abused children are:

- to have consistency in their cooperation with the police;
- to guard against burnout; and, also,
- to remain neutral in cases where the child's parents are in conflict with each other and to ensure one is always acting in the best interest of the child.

In Cyprus, the police and the social services can support and provide therapy to an abused child in a criminal case if the parents' consent, a requirement also if a child is to be interviewed which nowadays means on video. Often, re-constituted families are not very cohesive and this poses particular challenges for various professionals in getting them to cooperate and or to obtain their consent, especially when the offender is the grandfather, for example, or a female member of one of the reconstituted families. A major challenge in the districts of Limassol, Paphos, Famagusta and Larnaca.

In other words, all except in the capital Nicosia, an abused child has to be physically present in court in order to testify because there is no house for the Child in these cities and no facility for a child to testify from there on video and thus to testify in court from a distance.



Recommendations from focus groups participants in Cyprus

- A comment made by all participants is that they all need more training to better equip them to handle child abuse cases, while at the same time emphasizing the importance of greater public awareness about child abuse.
- All the participants also agreed that judges in particular need more specialist training in how to best handle abused children when they testify as victim-witnesses and, also, in their relationship with other professionals. Being issued with guidelines was proposed as a useful tool in helping judges.
- A Barnahus HFC is needed in each district along the same lines as the one in Nicosia, a development that would enable an abused child in the other big cities to testify from a HFC and not have to endure the traumatic experience of having to appear in court to testify.
- Finally, child abuse affects both male and female victims and the shortage of gynaecologists available and prepared to examine a female victim and to subsequently appear to testify and be cross-examined in court needs to be tackled.

In conclusion, significant progress has indeed been made in the handling of abused children with the establishment of the House for the Child, the weekly meetings of all the relevant services and NGOs under the same roof for how best to tackle a new case, and the adoption of a multi-disciplinary approach. However, some challenges still remain such as establishing a HFC in the four districts other than Nicosia, providing specialist training for judges on how best to treat children as witnesses in a trial and, finally, the provision of adequate support to staff working with abused children.



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