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INTIT

*INtegrated Trauma Informed Therapy
for Child Victims of Violence*

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The final conference: The challenges of caring for traumatized children

On 29th September 2022 took place the Final Conference of the **EC-funded project INTIT - Integrated Trauma Informed Therapy for Child Victims of Violence** entitled *"Primum non nocere. The challenges of caring for traumatized children"*.

As a final event, this conference has provided an exchange opportunity between European experts and project partners, with a view to showing the potential of an integrated TIC approach in addressing the needs of vulnerable children and in supporting the capacity of child servicing systems and professionals to sustain the healing and build the resiliency of trauma survivors, based on the results of the INTIT project.

The protection of child victims of violence represents an issue of significant concern given that – according to estimates – more than 50 million children in the EU experience some form of violence, abuse or neglect.

The relationship between experiences of childhood trauma and long-term effects of children's physical and psychological development is increasingly being acknowledged as a major public health challenge.

Today there is full awareness that the protection of child victims of violence, abuse and maltreatment represents a challenge that requires the intervention of different services and professionals according to an integrated working approach guided by what is called the **Trauma Informed Care (TIC) principles**.

The **TIC** approach which originates in the United States raises awareness of the impact of child abuse and childhood trauma on an individual's long-term mental and physical health. To mediate these consequences the TIC approach promotes key skills of recognizing and addressing trauma, staff training and workforce development as well as inter- disciplinary and cross sector collaboration between service providers and amongst systems of care.

In cases of violence against children a complex network of actors is involved (justice, social, health, educational and care services) who are required to share responsibility for intervention and "speak the same language," not the language of their own discipline, but that stemming from the common knowledge of the meaning of trauma, the short- and long-term effects of childhood adverse experiences (ESI) on children's well-being and mental health, the criteria for taking care of people who have been exposed to such experiences.



Indeed, Child protection systems across Europe are faced with the task of providing coordinated services that build the resiliency of affected children and reduce risk factors of trauma – including re-traumatization through service delivery. The focus on a trauma informed approach – in relation to care and services – reflects a growing body of research that demonstrates that trauma informed care can:

1. **help** service providers, parents and systems recognize and respond to the needs of children who experience trauma;
2. **enhance** the effectiveness of child-servicing systems by promoting a common language and procedures that support healing and prevent revictimization;
3. **support** the capacity of professionals and adults (parents/caregivers) – all of whom have a role to play in TIC – to cope with their own responses to trauma.

The EC-funded project “**INTIT - Integrated Trauma Informed Therapy for Child Victims of Violence**” has focused on how to assure the provision of multiagency trauma informed interventions and services for child victims of interpersonal violence and abuse.

This has been done with a specific focus on continued expansion of Barnahus in countries that have adopted the model (e.g., Estonia), while exploring how to assure the inclusion of trauma-informed integrated care in Member States.

The **INTIT project** aimed to assess, in each of the partner countries (Spain, Germany, Estonia, Cyprus), the compliance of trauma-exposed child protection systems with Trauma Informed Care (TIC) intervention standards and to strengthen the capacity of professionals and services targeting abused and maltreated minors to operate according to trauma informed approaches.

In order to enhance and expand the utilization of trauma informed care and services for child victims of violence, INTIT carried out activities at two levels: the level of knowledge and competences on trauma informed care and the systemic level. At the level of knowledge and competences the project aimed at building capacities among professionals on trauma informed principles, values and notions. As far as the systemic level is concerned, the aim was to promote integrated care provision, ensuring collaboration between different agencies (e.g., judicial, social, medical) capable of minimizing secondary victimization and maximizing the efficacy of the therapy and services provided locally while developing a national coordinated service provision system.



At the final conference took part different organizations involved in the project activities as partners, as service providers or as experienced professionals of trauma informed practises: from **Italy**, the Psychoanalytic Institute for Social Research, the Salerno's Juvenile Court, the Department for Juvenile and Community Justice (Office II DGPRAM), the Operating Unit of Neuropsychiatry of Childhood and Adolescence - IRCCS Fondazione Ca' Granda Ospedale Maggiore Policlinico of Milano, the National Council of Social Workers (CNOAS), AMIGAY, Italian Medical Association Good As You ONLUS; from **Cyprus**, the Crime Combating Department of the Cyprus Police Headquarters, the Legal Psychology at Law Department of the University of Cyprus and, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, Sub-Ministry of Welfare, represented by a social worker responsible for the psychological assessment of abused children and juvenile delinquents facing criminal charges and/or in custody cases.

Furthermore, from **Germany**, the Christliche Jugenddorfwerk Deutschlands (CJD), a former head of the Prosecutor's Office of Flensburg, trainer at the police academy of Schleswig-Holstein on sexual offences, domestic violence, victim protection as well as police and judicial video interrogations;

a victim protection delegate of Schleswig-Holstein, who initiated the first Childhood House/Barnahus in Schleswig-Holstein, an educator, DBT- therapist for social and nursing professions, trauma-focused consultant, executive department of nursing and educational service of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the Catholic Children's Hospital Wilhelmstift, in Hamburg, and the KJHV, an association providing child and youth assessment and support services; from **Spain** the University of Santiago de Compostela and the Forensic Psychologic UNit at the same University; from **Estonia**, the department of the Estonian Social Insurance Board and the Social Insurance Board Children's House.

To conclude: a few recommendations

It is possible to draw some recommendations for improving the care of traumatised children. Building on the results produced by the project on which the final conference reflected, here are some of those that appear most important and urgent. First of all, it would be necessary to improve the TIC services; this could be achieved in the following ways and strategies.



With regards to the Barnahus services:

- By **replicating** the Barnahus model more widely
- By **Implementing** medium- and long-term professional follow up of children after they leave Barnahus or residential care facility
- By **expanding** infrastructure for video-recorded interviews in abuse cases
- In addition, trauma-informed thinking needs to be **extended** to the whole organisation/system: policies, procedures and practices, organizational cultures should reflect the recognition of the impact of childhood trauma on children development, achievements, health and incorporate the TIC principles when taking Child victims of violence in charge.

With regards to integrating multi-professional/interagency- interventions:

- By **overcoming** the widespread idea that knowledge about trauma is solely in the hands of clinicians
- By **raising awareness** about the fact that assessing the impact of traumatic experiences on children's wellbeing requires an integrated multidimensional and multiprofessional approach, including social, educational, pedagogical, relational, clinical and health dimensions.

- By **Overcoming hierarchies** among professionals, services and systems so that each professional/service can contribute with their knowledge and perspectives on the case.
- By **Overcoming current difficulties** in information sharing among professionals and services.
- By **Overcoming current "pillarization" of services and self-referential systems** which are obstacle to integrated care
- By **seeking** the integration of interventions in the life contexts of minors (e.g., school).

With regards to the competences of the professionals working with traumatised children:

- By **incorporating** the TIC approach into education curriculum in schools and universities
- By **securing sustainability** through further disseminating the training material
- By **creating** database of trauma-informed trainings and services

Note that the **INTIT project** has produced European training materials available at

<https://www.intitproject.eu/>

(train the trainers methodology– Integrated TIC handbook and slides). The training materials have been tested successfully with 112 very experienced professionals and trainers that participated in the pilot training.



Country Section: Estonia

In Estonia, 15 professionals interested in trauma-informed care attended the INTIT training on trauma during childhood and trauma informed care. Police investigators and lawyers, as well as prosecutors and judges, who work in close cooperation with the Children's House, were particularly well represented in the training. The opportunity to participate in the training as a mixed group was strongly appreciated. If the Children's House brings together child protection workers, psychologists, doctors, and investigators from local authorities, it is important that the principles of the Barnahus model and trauma-informed care are also brought into the judicial system.

The judges who participated in the INTIT training considered the information they had received to be very important and were keen to participate in similar project activities and trainings in the future. It is encouraging to see that the Estonian Social Security Board is developing and offering trauma-informed trainings directed to different stakeholders, including judges and court advocates. A training programme entitled "Trauma awareness training for judges dealing with civil cases involving children" was also presented at **the final INTIT conference in Rome (September 29th, 2022)**.

Trauma awareness and awareness of intimate partner violence among participants in criminal proceedings is crucial. Many of the acts that are treated as intimate partner violence, having very serious consequences for children, are not punishable under criminal law in Estonia.

In the Estonian civil court system, the parties are equal and know what is good for them. However, when it comes to traumatised people, especially when they have been traumatised in violent intimate relations, they are not equal parties. This is why judges in the civil court need to be trained more thoroughly on what trauma does to a person. Attention needs to be drawn to ensuring that people who have suffered intimate partner violence receive additional protection in civil court. Estonian civil judges themselves also feel that they need more trauma expertise.

An important part of the Social Insurance Board's training is devoted to raising the capacity to deal with intimate partner violence cases. Trauma and intimate partner violence has an adverse and relevant impact on victims' physical and mental health. Anne Haller, who is also a victim support expert at the Social Insurance Board, is trying to change attitudes among civil judges and train them to become trauma-informed judges. Anne presented this training to an international audience in Italy.



Estonia was represented at the conference by another outstanding speaker - Anna Frank, the head of the Estonian Children's House, with whom (and the whole Children's House team) the Tartu University, had the opportunity to work closely in the framework of the INTIT project.

Anna was the trainer for the second day of the INTIT training in Estonia.

She attaches great importance to the trauma-informed approach and is keen to spread the topic more widely in Estonia. In her presentation she focused on introducing the Estonian Children's House. In Estonia, the Children's House clients are children who have been sexually abused and sexually abusive children. To help them, a Children's House has been set up with the aim of putting children's interests first and treating them in a more child-friendly way during criminal proceedings, as well as providing the necessary aftercare for children and their families. There is a strong emphasis on cooperation between colleagues, between different agencies, between different sectors. In Estonia, the partners of the Children's House are the Social Insurance Board, the Police and Border Guard Board, the State Prosecutor's Office and the Estonian Institute of Forensic Science, with whom regular meetings take place, and child protection workers, educational institutions, health care and the courts are also very important partners.

Children House workers have a background in child protection, psychology, law enforcement, and are also trained separately.

Trauma-informed care is achieved when the following conditions are met: the Barnahus quality standards are applied; multi-agency cooperation and agreements are followed; cooperation, communication, systems are implemented; the physical environment and people are invested in; work culture, feedback and regular service evaluation are considered important. Anna says that, in the experience of the Children's House, cooperation with different institutions is a difficult task, but it is possible. Nowadays, the quality of the cooperation has improved significantly. The Children's House considers it important to involve children in the development of the service.

Anna Frank's advice for organisations that want to become trauma-informed that there must be a belief, a willingness, an action, and change starts with one person, but an organisation can only become trauma-informed if everyone in it becomes trauma-informed, from the director to the steward.



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