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EURHOPE

EU as a solidarity's house for minors out of home

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EURHOPE PROJECT

OPERATIONAL GUIDE for TRAINING THE TRAINERS

The training program for trainers of “supportive positive adults” is a fundamental component for the success of a project aimed at supporting adolescents with social difficulties who live in care communities.

1. ANALYSIS OF THE PHENOMENON AND CONTEXT: MINORS OUTSIDE THE FAMILY AND THE NEED FOR SUPPORT

The protection of minors' rights, particularly those most vulnerable, is one of the European Union's objectives, with efforts to reduce poverty and social exclusion, including for those outside family care (Porto Social Summit, 2021). Regarding this target group, as early as 2009, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) approved the *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children*, ensuring that every state guarantees minors the opportunity to grow up in their own family whenever possible. If that is not feasible, alternative care options should provide a safe and supportive environment.

Similarly, one of the EU's goals is the deinstitutionalization of minors outside family care, promoting family- and community-based care solutions. For this reason, four new EU policies published in 2021 emphasize the need for investment in such initiatives: EU Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights, EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, European Child Guarantee, European Strategy for the Rights of People with Disabilities. The quality of emotional relationships that minors experience significantly impacts their growth. It is therefore essential to ensure that those outside family care have access to nurturing environments that offer learning opportunities and relationships similar to those found in a family setting. From experience, the project partnership has identified relational mentoring as a key preventive and promotional strategy, rather than a late-stage reparative intervention. This approach offers meaningful connections while simultaneously fostering social inclusion and promoting foster care for adolescents outside family care, a group that is often more difficult to place in such initiatives. The best outcomes for inclusion and civic participation in this group have been observed within mentoring programs that provide meeting spaces and social interactions between minors and positive adults. As Professor G. Lavanco emphasizes, “Solidarity arises spontaneously when an emotional connection is created, when there is an exchange of glances and encounters.”

In Italy, more than 8,000 adolescents (ages 11-17) live in residential communities, out of a total of 15,000 minors outside family care. In most cases, their families' circumstances do not allow them to return home once they reach adulthood. This vulnerability exposes them to social marginalization and both economic and relational poverty, which significantly impact their bio-psycho-social well-being. A similar experience of loneliness is shared by a significant number of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors, mostly aged 16-17, who arrive in Italy without adequate relational support. While they receive formal support such as housing, education, and care from professional socio-educational staff in residential communities, only a small percentage benefit from long-term, informal, and integrative relationships with positive adults who can provide a stable and supportive social network.



A significant number of these adolescents would greatly benefit from the presence of one or more mentoring individuals or families who, in collaboration with residential communities and social services, could build a lasting relationship with them. As early as 2004, the CNSA – National Coordination of Foster Care Services highlighted the importance of this measure: “Mentoring for adolescents living in care facilities is highly effective... Through this initiative, young people can establish relationships with adults, with the hope that these connections will become significant and lasting.”

Unfortunately, despite its proven value, this form of intervention remains sporadic and marginal, often reliant on the goodwill and sensitivity of individual professionals and services, rather than being systematically implemented at the local or national level. Notably, in 2017, the Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policies, in issuing the National Guidelines for Residential Care for Minors, recommended that services “encourage the development of networks of meaningful and supportive relationships” and, in particular, “promote proximity to one or more supportive families or individual adults, who can expand the range of reference points and support systems available to these minors.” The goal is to allow them to experience sharing, emotional closeness, and solidarity. There is also extensive international scientific literature that highlights the importance of offering informal support relationships to young people outside family care, in addition to the formal support provided by professionals (Driscoll, 2013; Gilligan, 2008; Newman, 2004).

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Gilligan R. (2008), Promoting resilience in young people in long-term care – the relevance of roles and relationships in the domains of recreation and work, *Journal of Social Work Practice* 22 (1): 37 – 50.

Newman T. (2004), What Works in Building Resilience? Barnardo's, Ilford.

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2. GUIDING IDEAS (REFERENCE PRINCIPLES) OF THE EDUCATIONAL MENTORING PROJECT

2.1. THE RELATIONSHIP WITH POSITIVE ADULTS AS A PATHWAY TO ADOLESCENT WELL-BEING

Positive and direct relationships with adults are fundamental to the social well-being of adolescents. Reflective and dedicated mentors provide support, guidance, and behavioral models that positively influence young people's psychosocial development. Investing in these relationships and promoting supportive relational environments is essential to fostering balanced growth and preventing negative outcomes in adolescents.

Relationships characterized by warmth, understanding, and support promote prosocial behaviors and protect against mental health issues during growth. A recent study highlights that "warm relationships promote prosociality and protect against mental health problems during adolescence" (Fenili, F., 2023). This indicates that a nurturing and supportive environment is crucial for the balanced development of adolescents.



The reflectiveness of the adult—the ability to analyze and adapt one's behavior according to the needs of young people—is another key aspect. Reflective adults can reassess their educational approaches, prioritizing the well-being of the adolescent in their interactions. They reconsider their actions based on the effects they produce and adjust their methods and models accordingly. This approach fosters more effective communication and greater mutual understanding between adults and adolescents.

The relationship with positive adults provides young people with important opportunities to develop social skills and facilitates interpersonal connections beyond the family unit. These relationships offer adolescents alternative behavioral models and expand their social support networks. They also provide a context in which young people can learn skills such as empathy, effective communication, and conflict resolution. A relational environment that encourages emotional expression and mutual understanding facilitates the acquisition of these competencies. In particular, for young people undergoing significant transitions, such as leaving care communities, the presence of a mentor can improve their future expectations and facilitate social integration. A study on this topic has shown that such relationships provide young people with better access to education and employment, increase their social connections, and reduce their involvement in risky behaviors. In this trajectory, reference adults become "promoters of independence" for young people (Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2019). This underscores the importance of structured mentoring programs to support adolescents in vulnerable situations.

2.2. THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Civic engagement is a cornerstone of contemporary education, as it significantly contributes to both personal and social development. International scientific literature highlights how active participation in community life fosters the acquisition of key competencies and promotes essential democratic values.

The term "civic engagement" refers to the active participation of citizens in public life through actions aimed at the common good and the strengthening of democratic institutions. This concept encompasses a range of activities, including volunteering, participation in civic organizations, involvement in decision-making processes, and citizenship education. Integrating civic engagement into young people's educational pathways offers numerous benefits at both the individual and collective levels.

One of the most effective approaches in this context is Service Learning, a pedagogical methodology that combines formal learning with community service. As highlighted by Lubello (2022), Service Learning "develops a greater capacity for empathy and willingness to help others" (Lubello, 2022, p. 159). This approach not only enriches young people's theoretical knowledge but also sensitizes them to societal needs, promoting active and responsible citizenship.

In the same direction, the recommendations of the Eurydice Report (2017) state that "to increase engagement and participation, one must have the right knowledge, skills, and abilities" (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017, p. 168). This implies that citizenship education should not be limited to the transmission of theoretical knowledge but should include practical experiences that allow young people to apply what they have learned in real-world contexts.

Civic engagement is, in essence, a fundamental pillar in building democratic, inclusive, and sustainable societies. Through education, it transforms from an abstract concept into a daily practice, promoting values such as collective responsibility, active participation, and critical thinking.



It embodies what Paul Ricoeur (1990) described as the "aspiration to a good life"—the pursuit of living well, with and for others, within just institutions.

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Sulimani-Aidan, Y., Melkman, E., & Hellman, C. M. (2019). Nurturing the hope of youth in care: The contribution of mentoring. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 89(2), 134.
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Ricoeur, P. (1990). *Soi-même comme un autre*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE MENTORING ACTIVITY

EURHOPE aims to integrate young people into new networks of positive relationships within the educational community through civic participation pathways based on European values and initiatives. These initiatives seek to answer the question: “What can the EU offer me to improve my condition, and at the same time, what can I do to make my voice heard?” The actions are designed to empower minors outside the family structure to rethink and actively engage in building a Europe that is more aligned with their needs and the vision of a democratic and inclusive society.

The mentoring activities align with the priorities and objectives pursued by the Eurhope project, which are:

- **Priority/Objective 1:** Increasing knowledge and exposure to socio-political information about the EU. Achieving this goal primarily involves educational and informational actions aimed at equipping young people with a set of basic skills and knowledge necessary to understand modern society, as a prerequisite for subsequent civic participation. In this direction, the objective will be reached by including activities linked to each identified need. These activities will focus on developing digital competencies and life skills to navigate the digital and real world safely, search for, select, and understand socio-political content, assess its reliability, and enhance knowledge of politics and economics—both in general and at the European level (e.g., the modern concept of "sustainable development")—as a prerequisite for understanding the structure and function of the EU.
- **Priority/Objective 2:** Promoting opportunities to participate in discussions and actions related to European issues and challenges. To achieve this objective, civic participation activities and discussion groups will be organized with local role models and positive adults, who serve as examples of European citizenship. This goal will be met by designing activities that allow young people to express and build their vision of Europe by discussing current socio-political issues, particularly topics they consider priorities (e.g., climate change). These discussions will also address themes where significant interest gaps exist between males and females (such as gender equality), using game-based and interactive methodologies within a safe environment where they can freely express their ideas and emotions, guided by experts and positive adults.



Additionally, following a bottom-up approach, the outcomes of these discussions will be systematized and developed during dedicated workshops. These workshops will create various forms of representation (e.g., theater performances, short films, podcasts, etc.) to engage the public and raise awareness on the discussed topics. These initiatives will be accompanied by participation in events promoted by the European Parliament for young people (e.g., the European Youth Event).

In this context, the role of mentoring adults is to provide each young person with a meaningful, empathetic, and proactive relationship that enables them to:

- Benefit from guidance—from a sort of “mentor”—who closely supports their personal growth and maturation, creating an empathetic space where their value and the value of others are recognized.
- Overcome cultural and socio-economic barriers by developing a deeper understanding of diverse social and cultural realities through shared activities.
- Develop transversal skills such as critical thinking, effective communication, and teamwork, learning to engage with real-world problems and develop creative and collaborative solutions.
- Cultivate a sense of responsibility towards the community and understand the importance of their contribution to the democratic process.

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4. PROFILE OF TARGET GROUPS (BENEFICIARIES, OTHER TARGETS) IN THE MENTORING PROMOTION PATHWAY

4.1. MINORS OUTSIDE THE FAMILY (BENEFICIARIES)

Minors outside the family are at high risk of long-term social exclusion due to their condition. This includes fewer opportunities to participate in societal debates and contribute to shaping the future. This issue is particularly critical, as the EU aims to leave no one behind and to support the rights of the most vulnerable individuals. Adolescents, in particular, are often difficult to place in family-based programs and/or social inclusion initiatives due to their age, making them more vulnerable to long-term social exclusion. For this reason, Eurhope focuses on minors aged 13 to 16 who are residing in residential care facilities. Whenever possible, and based on the willingness of the minors to participate, gender quotas will be ensured, with at least 50% of participants being girls. The program will involve approximately 30 minors per country, for a total of 90 minors.

4.2. POSITIVE ADULTS (OTHER TARGET GROUPS)

A key target group for engaging minors is positive adults from local communities. These adults will be trained to serve as role models for European citizenship, embodying and passing on European values to the minors involved. This initiative also offers an opportunity for adults to further develop their own European citizenship, increasing their awareness of EU goals and policies while actively promoting human rights and equal opportunities in Europe.



Gender quotas will be ensured (at least 50% women), with 15 adults involved per country, for a total of 45 adults.

5. PROFILE AND POSTURE OF THE TRAINER FOR MENTORS

Training adults who volunteer to support young people in difficulty living in residential communities is a delicate and essential process to ensure they can fulfill their role effectively and responsibly. As previously described, positive adults, often engaged in complex and sensitive contexts, are called upon to build meaningful relationships with young people and provide emotional, educational, and social support. For this process to be successful, trainers of these adults must possess specific skills, an appropriate training style, and a professional posture that fosters a positive, inclusive, and safe environment. In this context, the trainer's profile and approach to the educational process become crucial.

5.1. TRAINER PROFILE

The trainer of positive adults must have a set of specific skills, ranging from educational and psychological knowledge to the ability to facilitate the development of trust-based and supportive relationships between adults and young people. The person in this role must have an adequate theoretical background, including a solid understanding of psycho-pedagogical principles, relational dynamics, and the specific needs of adolescents in situations of social vulnerability.

5.1.1 Practical and Theoretical Experience

The trainer must possess a solid theoretical background on adolescent psychology, social issues, and adult training. However, theoretical knowledge alone is not enough. It is equally important for the trainer to have practical experience, preferably in contexts supporting young people in difficulty or similar educational settings. This hands-on experience enables the trainer to fully understand the challenges, dynamics, and obstacles that positive adults will face in their mentoring role. The combination of theory and practice allows the trainer to gain a comprehensive vision of the situations, provide concrete examples, and tailor training content to the real needs of the adults being trained.

5.1.2 Emotional and Relational Competence

A key aspect of the trainer's profile is emotional and relational competence. Since trainers prepare adults who will work closely with vulnerable adolescents, it is essential that they can establish relationships based on trust, empathy, and active listening. The trainer must be able to recognize the emotions of the trainees and respond appropriately to their needs, both practically and emotionally. A good trainer is not just a content expert but also a facilitator of emotional and relational growth among course participants.



5.1.3 Conflict Management Skills

Another fundamental skill for the trainer is conflict management. Training adults who will become mentors for young people in difficulty often involves handling contrasting emotions, doubts, communication challenges, or resistance. The trainer must be able to address these situations calmly, impartially, and skillfully, ensuring that the training group progresses smoothly without individual difficulties compromising the collective learning process. Conflict management is a skill that not only enhances group dynamics but also serves as a model for future mentors, who will need to handle conflicts and challenges when supporting young people.

5.2. TRAINER STYLE

The trainer's style has a direct impact on the effectiveness of the training program. The way the trainer engages with participants, their ability to involve, motivate, and stimulate reflection are critical to the success of the training program. Various training styles exist, but the trainer for mentoring adults must adapt their approach to the specific needs of the group.

5.2.1 Participatory Approach

A good trainer should adopt a **participatory approach** that actively involves trainees in the learning process. Training should not be a one-way process where the trainer simply delivers information. Instead, it should encourage dialogue, experience-sharing, and discussion. A trainer who promotes interaction among participants facilitates reciprocal learning since trainers themselves can learn from the experiences and perspectives of the adults in training.

The participatory approach is essential for building a sense of community among trainers and participants, creating an environment where everyone is recognized and respected, and constructive discussion is encouraged. Techniques such as group discussions, role-playing, and real-life scenario simulations enable trainers to stimulate participation and deepen the topics addressed.

5.2.2 Experience-Centered Approach

The trainer should also adopt an **experience-centered approach**, where participants' experiences are valued. Training must be strongly anchored to the realities of the adults being trained, based on real cases and practical situations that they will face when mentoring young people. Direct experience is a powerful learning tool, as it allows participants to address topics and problems in a concrete and immediate way. This approach enables trainers to better respond to participants' real needs and dynamically and flexibly shape the training.

5.2.3 Empathetic and Reassuring Approach

Another key element defining a good trainer's style is their ability to create an **empathetic and reassuring** learning environment. In a training program for adults preparing to mentor socially vulnerable young people, emotions can be particularly intense and complex. The trainer must be able to acknowledge these emotions, listen without judgment, and respond in a way that makes participants feel understood and supported. Creating a reassuring environment is crucial for ensuring the psychological well-being of trainees and allowing them to explore their difficulties, fears, and uncertainties without fear of criticism.



5.3. TRAINER'S PROFESSIONAL POSTURE

The trainer's professional posture refers to their ability to maintain ethical, competent, and responsible behavior. The trainer's stance should convey authority while also demonstrating openness and availability. The approach should be based on **mutual trust** and **social responsibility**, as the trainer plays a crucial role in guiding trained adults to become positive role models for young people.

5.3.1 Professional Ethics

A good trainer must act with **professional ethics**, respecting the privacy and dignity of both participants and the young people they will support. The trainer should model appropriate behavior for participants, demonstrating a balance between professionalism, empathy, and respect for diversity. The trainer's ethical stance also involves correctly handling sensitive information and group dynamics, ensuring that training takes place in a safe and protected environment.

5.3.2 Communication Skills

Communication competence is another crucial aspect of the trainer's professional posture. The trainer must be able to express themselves clearly, precisely, and accessibly, using language that is understandable to the adults in training. They must also be skilled in active listening and in responding empathetically and constructively, fostering dialogue and discussion.

6. GENERAL OUTLINE OF THE TRAINING PROGRAM

6.1 OBJECTIVES

The training program for caregivers of minors outside the family aims primarily to provide individuals or families undertaking this journey with the necessary skills to welcome, support, and accompany minors in a family accompaniment context. This path is not only an opportunity for the minor but also a challenge for the caregiver, who must be prepared to face complex situations often characterized by traumatic experiences and relational difficulties.

The specific objectives of the training program can be divided into three main areas: **emotional-relational**, **practical-operational**, and **social-educational**.

1. Emotional-relational objectives::

- Develop the ability to empathize, meaning the ability to put oneself in the minor's shoes, understanding their needs, fears, and aspirations.
- Acquire tools to manage intense emotions, both their own and those of the minor, such as anger, frustration, sadness, or anxiety.
- Foster the creation of a secure and positive bond based on mutual trust and respect.

2. Practical-operational objectives::

- Provide theoretical and practical knowledge on how to handle complex situations, such as problematic behaviors, conflicts, or moments of crisis.
- Teach active listening techniques and effective communication, essential for creating a constructive dialogue with the minor.
- Prepare caregivers to support the minor in their journey toward autonomy, helping them develop practical skills such as money management, self-care, and problem-solving.



3. Social-educational objectives::

- Promote the minor's integration into a healthy social environment through participation in extracurricular activities, community events, and everyday life with the host family.
- Encourage the development of a "social kinship" network where the minor can feel part of a broader community outside the care facility.
- Support the minor's personal growth, helping them build an adult identity and develop relational and social skills.

These objectives can only be achieved through a structured training program that includes theoretical, practical, and experiential components, allowing caregivers to acquire not only knowledge but also cross-disciplinary skills and emotional capacities.

6.2 METHODS

The methodology of the training program is designed to ensure comprehensive and multidimensional learning, involving the cognitive, emotional, and practical spheres of participants. The approach is integrated, combining theoretical, experiential, and practical sessions to prepare caregivers to handle the challenges of family accompaniment effectively and consciously through the following components:

1. Theoretical:

- **Lectures:** Training sessions presenting theoretical content related to family accompaniment, including legal aspects (rights and duties of caregivers), psychological aspects (understanding trauma, managing emotions), and relational aspects (active listening techniques, conflict resolution).
- **Educational materials:** Guidelines, in-depth texts, and operational sheets providing useful information on specific topics such as attachment, resilience, and interacting with minors from different cultures.

2. Practical:

- **Role-playing:** Simulations of real situations that caregivers might face, such as conflicts with the minor or emotional crisis situations. This method allows them to apply theoretical knowledge and develop problem-solving skills.
- **Case study analysis:** Discussion of real-life accompaniment cases to reflect on intervention strategies and possible solutions.

3. Experiential:

- **Testimonials:** Meetings with experienced caregivers sharing their experiences, successes, difficulties, and lessons learned. This approach enhances participants' emotional engagement and awareness of accompaniment challenges.
- **Discussion groups:** Sessions where participants can share doubts, fears, and expectations, enriching the training experience with their personal insights.

4. Feedback and self-assessment:

- At the end of each training module, participants provide feedback and reflect on what they have learned. This step is crucial for consolidating acquired skills and identifying areas for improvement.



6.3 CONTENT

The training program content is carefully selected to cover all essential competency areas for caregivers, with a special focus on understanding the experiences of minors outside the family and strategies to support their development.

1. Legal aspects:

- Responsibilities of caregivers.
- Regulations on family accompaniment and child protection.
- Role of local authorities and institutions in the accompaniment process.

2. Psychological aspects:

- Understanding trauma and the emotional consequences of separation from the original family.
- Managing intense emotions (anger, fear, sadness, etc.) in both minors and caregivers.

3. Relational aspects:

- Active listening techniques and effective communication.
- Conflict management and mediation in relationships.
- Developing empathy and understanding the minor's perspective.

4. Practical aspects:

- Supporting the minor's educational journey.
- Helping develop practical skills (self-care, problem-solving).
- Strategies to foster autonomy and independence in the minor.

5. Social and educational aspects:

- Promoting the minor's social integration through extracurricular activities and daily life experiences.
- Building a support network ("social kinship").
- Encouraging the minor's relational and social development.

6.4 TOOLS

To ensure an engaging and effective training experience, various **tools** and **materials** are used to facilitate interaction and active participation, including:

Educational materials:

- **Guidelines and operational manuals** to provide clear and structured instructions.
- **In-depth texts on specific topics** such as attachment, resilience, and emotional management.
- **Operational sheets and questionnaires** for self-assessment and personal reflection.

Suggested visual tools:

- **Multimedia presentations** with graphs, images, and explanatory diagrams to enhance concept comprehension.



Recommended interactive tools:

- **Role-playing and simulations:** To apply acquired knowledge in realistic contexts.
- **Discussion groups:** To analyze real cases and encourage participant exchange.
- **Practical exercises:** With immediate feedback to reinforce learning.

6.5 FORMAT

The training program consists of a total of 8 hours, divided into three main phases: theoretical training, practical training, and experiential training.

1. Theoretical training (4 hours):

- Introduction to family accompaniment topics.
- In-depth study of legal, psychological, and relational aspects.
- Exercises and questionnaires to reinforce knowledge.

2. Practical training (4 hours):

- Simulations of real situations (role-playing).
- Case analysis and group discussions.

3. Experiential training (2 hours):

- Testimonials from experienced caregivers.
- Moments of discussion and reflection.

4. Feedback and self-assessment (2 hours):

- Evaluation of the training experience.
- Reflection on acquired skills and areas for improvement.

Thanks to its structured format and variety of tools and methodologies, this training program provides a comprehensive and in-depth preparation for those who choose to embark on the path of family accompaniment.