



EX POST PAPERS

RAN YF&C Academy: 'Children growing up in extremist families',
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Children growing up in extremist families

This ex post paper of the RAN Youth, Families and Communities (YF&C) Academy meeting aims to transfer and disseminate lessons learned from earlier RAN meetings as well as examples of working practice on this topic among a broader group of (new) practitioners in the field. Furthermore, it aims to add to the earlier literature on this topic by introducing new features and aspects. This paper can be useful for newcomers to the fields of youth work, health- and social-care, education, and local municipalities that are responsible for long-term preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) interventions, which are required for these vulnerable children, as well as for experienced practitioners in the field of EXIT, and experts from adjacent fields such as the field of cults. Key questions that are addressed in this paper include: How to recognise extremist families? How can one assess the potential risks of the child? What general and more specialised interventions can be identified? What is needed for effective multi-agency approaches?

Introduction

The topic of children growing up in extremist families has become even more important with several European countries gradually starting to repatriate children and families of Daesh militants. These children as well as children who are raised in a far-right or far-left family within the EU, are often vulnerable to becoming violent extremists in the long-term themselves. There are several potential risk factors that may lead to their own radicalisation, varying from being indoctrinated to being exposed to traumatic experiences or violence. Exposure to trauma represents a significant risk to the child’s development and overall functioning, and increases the risk of physical and mental issues in the future. These vulnerable children may therefore require long-term care and safeguarding.

This paper summarises and aims to disseminate lessons learned on this topic, both from earlier meetings as well as the Academy in Rome. Furthermore, it adds to earlier literature on this topic by introducing new features and aspects, and by providing more in-depth information on certain topics. This paper firstly discusses the extremist setting in which children may grow up. Second, it discusses how to identify an extremist setting in a family. A specific focus in this regard is on the role of education in rehabilitating children into society after they have been taken out of an extremist setting. Thirdly, the paper focuses on dealing with children who grow up in extremist settings. This includes guidance on doing risk assessments prior to interventions, as well as on several interventions itself (e.g. counselling, taking the child out of the family, and/or trauma therapy). Lastly, examples of inspirational multi-agency approach with such children are given.

Growing up in an extremist setting

Understanding the effect of growing up in an extremist family on a child is difficult. Often, these extremist families may live in a closed-off environment, which makes it difficult to understand what is happening inside this family or social context. In some cases, extremist groups have devised tactics to keep social services away, for example, by continuously switching their names and residences. It may therefore be hard to build up a legal case against these groups.

There is a risk that the child may feel misunderstood by not only its social surroundings but also by the practitioners dealing with the child and its family. This is especially applicable in cases where the child is removed from its family context. Practitioners should keep in mind that life in an extremist setting is all the child may know. When taken out of the extremist setting, the child has to build up a new identity, get used to living in a ‘normal’ society, and might have to deal with traumas. It has to be kept in mind that children might not feel that they are ‘rescued’, but rather like they are taken away from their trusted community, friends, and possibly family. Using a type of therapy that is consistent with this trauma is key in helping the child rehabilitate into society. A consequence of children not receiving proper mental health care, could be their seeking replacement for their community and a sense of belonging in other potentially harmful or extremist groups (e.g. gangs).

Testimony: Being taken out from an extremist family environment

“I grew up in a closed community without books from the outside world, or going to a regular school or TV. My generation was raised as the ‘perfect generation’, ‘god-chosen’ to build up the world again after Armageddon (the end of the world) had taken place. At the age of 10, I was taken out of this closed community unwillingly and I had to integrate into the normal world. It was particularly difficult for me to fit in, learn about these habits, and eventually build a new identity. This remains a challenge up until today. Finding a therapist who was willing to help someone raised in a closed community appeared to be difficult as well. Eventually, getting the right mental health care, feeling connected with my therapist and having a safe space to open up and not feel ashamed was key in building up a new, authentic identity.”

Recommendations for practitioners and policy makers thus include:

- Giving children access to mental health care is key for building up a new identity. Psychologists may feel that taking up a case of a child that has grown up in an extremist setting may be too challenging because they cannot relate to it. Nevertheless, trauma therapy combined with giving the child a sense of acceptance and love may already be helpful for the larger part.
- Make sure to be aware of what the child has left, instead of gained, by being taken away from the extremist setting. This may include friends, family and a part of their identity.

Identifying an extremist setting or family

The role of schools - Identifying potential extremist families at schools

Schools are one of the places that can potentially identify children who grow up in an extremist family. Often such concerns are raised when a child is making comments of extreme nature, comments in support of an extremist ideology, or when a child is drawing for example offensive or racist images or images linked to extremist groups.

Unfortunately, there are no set indicators for identifying children growing up in extremist families. However, when a discriminatory or maleficent attitude or behaviour of a child is identified by a teacher, the teacher has to intervene, clarify, settle the conflict or act as a mediator. If this is not being done, it is shown to the child that such behaviour and attitude is accepted. Teachers must make sure not to profile children and youngsters, but instead respond to their needs and vulnerability in the same way as is done as with other and mainstream safeguarding issues. In every conflict, you have to negotiate about the values and moral concepts, and interact with the child in a respectful manner. This negotiation is a long lasting and permanent process, and therefore requires patience.

Furthermore, when signalling this, it is recommended that these concerns are shared and discussed with the child and parents first. Sharing these concerns may be difficult: parents may not be cooperative in discussing these and the behaviour and ideas of the child may derive from the way the child is brought up by their parents. Recommendations on how to counsel in these situations can be found later on in this paper and can also be helpful for teachers.

Nevertheless, teachers may be under pressure to meet all kinds of expectations already. Therefore, it is recommended for policy makers to:

- Invest more time in training teachers and offering them more opportunities to discuss their experiences in supervised settings. Teachers need to be guided because the work is very intense, especially the mediation between the parents and teacher once they have signalled certain worrying behaviour of the child in class.
- Invest more in professionals who have experience with dealing with extremism. These professionals know how to work with these children, how to address difficult topics, and how to encourage them to share their views.
- More recommendations on this can be found in the ex post paper on 'Vulnerable children who are brought up in an extremist environment' ⁽¹⁾ and the RAN EDU paper on 'Dropouts and going back to school' ⁽²⁾.

The role primary education in rehabilitation

Schools do not only play a role in signalling children who grow up in an extremist family: they are also key partners in ensuring the reintegration of children back into society. Reversing radicalisation requires normalisation. Together with parents, primary education plays a crucial role in making these children more resilient, and in case of children from extremist families, restoring a sense of 'normality' to their lives. Schools are also one of very few settings where practitioners can work undisturbedly with the child outside of the family. School also provides children with opportunities to interact with peers and others in a healthy way. However, when a child has never been to a regular school outside of the extremist context, school is a new environment that may be challenging for both the child and the parents.

¹ RAN YF&C ex post paper. 'Vulnerable children who are brought up in an extremist environment', 21-22 June 2018, Stockholm (SE).

² RAN EDU ex post paper, 'Dropouts and going back to school', 28-29 September 2017, Paris (FR).

³ RAN Education Manifesto, 'Manifesto for Education – Empowering Educators and Schools'.

When dealing with these children, practitioners should take into account among other things the following recommendations:

- Teachers should not avoid having difficult conversations on sensitive topics in the classroom: by avoiding the difficult issues and working around them the child may feel (even more) lonely and isolated.
- Train the trainers;
- Create a tailor-made, child-centred approach based on individual needs of the child
- Monitor and exchange on progress and problems encountered with the child with parents/family members
- Create a network for teachers to share experiences and best practices.

Testimony: Experiences of a child in a new (public) school

“When I was enrolled in a public school for the first time, I talked differently than the other children. I did not know any ‘normal’ things like Michael Jordan, basketball or Nickelodeon. I was bullied for being a ‘walking thesaurus’ because we had to speak very eloquently in my community. (...) A way to deal with this was to reply with really general answers, that caused me having two kinds of selves. Living in two different worlds at the same time, I felt really alone.”

In the [RAN Education Manifesto](#) as well as other RAN papers such as [the one of RAN YF&C](#) (page 4 and 5) and [the one of RAN EDU](#), more recommendations are shared for educators on how to deal with these children in schools. They furthermore address inspiring practices in Belgian and Dutch schools.

The Dutch Child Protection Board

An inspiring approach with regards to assessing the risks of a child that is separated from its parents is the approach of dealing with child returnees of the Dutch Child Protection Board (CPB). The CPB has been given the task by the Dutch government to investigate the possibilities of the child’s family network in the Netherlands to take their grandchild (or niece or nephew) in foster care when it returns. The CPB also indicates what specific care this child is going to need. The gathered information comes together in a report, which is the base for a return plan for the child. This plan will contain advise on where the child can be accommodated, what kind of trauma care will be needed and if religious or ideological interpretation of its beliefs is needed.

Themes that are regularly discussed with the grand-parents include:

- Background of their son/daughter FTF
- What do they think of their child joining IS?
- How is their relationship now? (if there is still contact)
- Do their grandchildren know them (well)?
- What do they know about the current situation of their grandchildren?
- Are they prepared to take their grandchildren in foster care, if possible?
- Are they open to (a lot of) aid workers as a legal guardian, psychologists, trauma experts, etc.?

The CPB works together with various involved actors:

- municipalities: they ensure cooperation with sports clubs, foster-care guidance, therapists, schools and day care;
- family members;
- coordinators of the National Advisory Team: they work with trauma-experts, experts on ideology, child psychiatrists and doctors.

How to deal with children who grow up in an extremist family?

Identifying a single approach for dealing with children growing up in extremist families is difficult: the context of one child and its family will most likely vary from the other, and the types of intervention used also depends on whether the child is raised in a single extremist family or in a like-minded community. An additional potential problem is that most existing interventions are based on cooperation with the family. This is not always likely when working with children who (still) live in extremist families. The following chapter will first share insights on assessing potential risk factors, after several possible interventions are discussed.

Assessing potential risk factors

When assessing the child's situation, it is important to look at several factors. In addition to physical health, mental health should also be examined. By talking to not only the child but also to its parents, general risk factors and more specific risk factors can be identified. Questions that can be asked to identify an extremist setting or family include:

- Are the basic needs of the child in the family/setting being met?
- What are the living conditions?
- Is there stability in the family? Is there absence or replacement of the father?
- What does the network in the family/setting look like? Formal, and informal?
- Are there threats? Is domestic violence taking place?
- What have the children experienced and seen?
- For returnee children: are there cultural differences? How long has the child lived in the extremist setting?
- Are the parents willing to cooperate?

Radicalisation in larger extremist environment

When raised in unstable and extremist environments, many children encounter the notion of punishment, shootings and violent actions on a daily basis. In such environments, factors of radicalisation play a different role and are usually more related to the (political) context in which they grew up than to family-related extremism.

Instead of only assessing those children and youngsters individually, practitioners are urged to pay attention to (and protecting) democratic structures, which provide children with the opportunity to express themselves in non-violent ways.

Possible interventions

When an extremist family is identified, first-line practitioners can face many challenges and issues in working with the family. Ways of intervention include working with the family, counselling, trauma therapy, interventions during education and removing the child from the family. These interventions are elaborated on below. With regard to these interventions, it is important to keep in mind that, [as discussed in a previous ex post paper on this topic](#), a child may not be ready to talk about its feelings and experiences directly. Therefore, long-term approaches with regard to a child might be key. This may include creative therapy such as exercise and sports, theatre and playing ([more information in this paper](#)). Certain topics may not be relevant at the present, but may become so in the future. Therefore, a long-term approach is always relevant, so make sure to think about problems that may occur in the future.

Counselling

When working with parents that have extremist views, several challenges may occur. Practitioners often have to work in a so-called paradox: on the one hand, they have to respect and appreciate the parents in their role as father and/or mother, and on the other hand, deal with their maleficent behaviour and attitudes. Parallel to that, they have to 'win their minds' and get them to (officially) cooperate in the upbringing, caretaking and education of the child. Positioning oneself can thus be very difficult for a practitioner. For this 'dilemma situation', there is no simple answer or solution. Rather, the dilemma can only be solved by a collective and reflective strategy of the practitioner.

Some of the recommendations for practitioners in this regard include:

- A tailor-made approach for each case. Every case is different and calls for special needs.
- Try to find a common ground between yourself and the parents, and concentrate on the things you can agree on. Try to identify where the parents act in the best interest of the child, and where they potentially ignore the rights of the child. A legal framework can be used to find a common ground. For example, it could be argued with parents that they have the right to have their own identity, but may not indoctrinate or discriminate according to that same law. Be very clear in the fact that these (democratic) standards and values are not negotiable and cannot be changed.
- Be open-minded and try not to change the mind of the parents. Rather talk about what certain behaviour means for the child.

- Be transparent about the goals, the approach and the steps that will be taken. Involve them in the process and give them the time to acknowledge that it is in the best interest of the child to be involved.

The Convention of the Child (1989)

The Convention of the Child (1989) puts the interests of children into the centre and should guarantee the shelter of their identity.

The child has a right to be respected in his or her individuality and has a right to be sheltered from discrimination. All children have the right of their own opinion and of self-determination (also in terms of religion). Parents have to respect these human rights.

Alternative relationships

For children growing up in extremist settings, it is important to experience other relationships. This is especially the case when children are taken out of an extremist family or parents are convicted when coming back from (former) war zones. To experience these different relationships, it is recommended to involve different family relations, preferably those who have an emotional bond with the child. Bring actors together to make sure the best, closest possible network is built around the child. This may include grandparents, aunts or uncles. Make sure these connections are safe and assessed in advance: e.g. a grandmother could also be a source of radicalisation, although this is not a 'usual suspect'. In case there is no direct family to take care of the child, the child could be placed in foster care.

Practitioner case example

Parents may be reluctant to be involved in a long-term approach. For example, a mother did not see why her son would need help as he was doing great at school. However, when he would be able to Google his father in a few years' time, problems could arise. Be aware about solutions for these problems that might come up in the future.

Trauma therapy

It is well-known that exposure to war and violence has a serious impact on the physical and mental well-being of children. Children raised in extremist environments, specifically child returnees and refugee children whose normal social, moral, emotional and cognitive development has been interrupted by such experiences, are at risk of developing posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health disorders.

As addressed in the RAN paper on '[Building resilience among young children raised in extremist environments – specifically child returnees](#)', this system or plan should be timely and appropriate:

- 1) recognition of mental health problems (the type and manifestation need to be indicated);
- 2) creation and implementation of a care plan to effectively treat the child's mental health disorders. This needs to be age-appropriate;
- 3) measures taken to prevent later consequences from happening;
- 4) establishment of a long-term monitoring approach and follow-up plan with adequate treatment.

Particular attention should be paid to the (possible) traumas of the child, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Treatment of PTSD requires experienced practitioners who understand the 'survival brain' of these children in terms of their fight-flight-freeze response to trauma. As is indicated in [this RAN paper](#), the link between trauma therapy and extremism is an important one to make. The child may be left with traumatic experiences from both being inside an extremist family as well as being taken out of this context. Traumatized children are more likely to misinterpret information and conversations and may become hyper-sensitive. Parents or caretakers are important in teaching the child the right words to describe their feelings. When their parents are extremists and do not help their children or are the cause of these feelings, children may not know how to describe and express their feelings. This may result in the children feeling neglected and potentially starting to act out. Further information about child trauma and the different treatments of PTSD can be found in the [RAN H&SC ex post paper on 'PTSD, trauma, stress, and the risk of \(re\)turning to violence'](#).

Insight into the child's brain

A child's brain in normal state is a 'thinking and learning' brain: it is very flexible, playful and normally has little fear of making mistakes. The so-called 'survival brain' of the child is focussed on threats (e.g. Panic, obsessive behaviours, worrying about doing things wrong). Trauma causes stress and puts in place defence mechanisms, often referred to as 'freeze, fright or flight' modes. This may result in experiences being not neatly ordered and stored in the brain. Certain noises, smells or visions linked to the experience can cause flashbacks. For the child to function optimally, stress and control need to be recognised and restrained. Therefore, it is recommended to first observe the behaviour of the child and try to understand why it is acting in a certain way. Second, after the stress has been restrained, make sure that the child is surrounded by a supportive environment, where the 'survival brain' can be turned into a 'learning brain' again.

Taking a child out of an extremist family

Working with children who are still living with their family can make it difficult for them to distance themselves from (extremist) family members. If transgenerational extremism and trauma are considered to cause significant distress and danger to the child, it could be argued that the child should be removed. However, the parents' ideology alone is not legally grounds for such action. Parents are allowed to raise their children according to their own religion or ideology, even if others disagree and consider this reason enough to remove a child. After all, whether parents adhere to a certain religion or ideology does not make them 'bad' in the eyes of child. Removing the child must therefore be carefully considered: parents must truly qualify as unfit to raise their children. Several important elements to take into account when considering removing a child from their family are described in [this paper](#) (page 18).

Multi-Agency approaches

No single service can provide all of the effective responses that are needed when dealing with children growing up in extremist families or returnee children. Instead, a comprehensive approach is required which involves multiple actors and multi-agency work (MAW) to address the personal, familial and social needs of the child.

Existing good practices with regard to MAW include the **Go! Project** in Belgium. It involves schools, social care partners, mosques, parents, police, NGOs and law enforcement for the prevention of radicalisation and polarisation. The GO! Communication policy is based on three narratives:

- A connective narrative (learning together – living together, family support);
- An alternative narrative (with a focus on 'active citizenship', citizenship booster and critical thinking. E.g. in one of the schools, information was needed about democracy, so trainings were provided by different partners).
- A counter narrative (by involving Islam experts also for little children).

Within the model, several theoretical grounded models are used. The pyramid of deClerck ([see this paper](#)) shows that prevention needs to take place at all levels. As Declerck points out, "without a profound analysis of a problem on all underlying levels, you take the risk of only doing symptom management". Next to this model, the Bronfenbrenner model is used to look at all the different layers of relationships around a child. By using Bart Brandsma model, polarisation is understood and managed by seeking a middle ground. These models can thus be helpful for drawing a MAW strategy.

Another inspiring MAW approach is the one aimed at **Prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism in Aarhus**. It is built up around a prevention triangle, similar to the DeClerck model. There is a general (e.g. awareness briefings and spreading knowledge), more specific (infohouse, mentor programmes) and individual level (EXIT programmes) approach. In Aarhus, all cases with concern for radicalisation are entered into a multiagency setting called the 'Infohouse', which consists of members from police, the social services, social psychiatry, children and youth, and employment services. These agencies discuss the case and its risk, and protective factors at play, and make an assessment. Based on this assessment, the Infohouse members decide to either not proceed with the concern *or* to enact one of the five possible actions, being counselling, mentoring or involving the social services, EXIT or psychiatry.

Go! Project Belgium

Sarpsborg has created its own action plan to prevent radicalisation in schools and kindergartens, similar to the Go! Project in Belgium. The goal is to ensure that children and young people grow up to become confident and resilient citizens, equipped to make conscious life choices for themselves and for the Sarpsborg community. The fundamental idea is that this can be achieved through democratic competence work linked to the themes of inclusion, critical thinking and diversity competence.

They try to strengthen teachers in tolerance, reflection on their own attitudes and gaining critical thinking in the classroom, and work on these topics with students as well. They also have school parental meetings about words of reproach, racism, critical thinking to build tolerance in the local community (e.g. extra training courses on trauma reactions, extra information briefings about the child, etc.).

General recommendations for MAW include:

- Make sure there is continuity in social workers: make sure that families see the same faces over a long term
- Appoint a single point of contact who coordinates the network of agencies
- Safeguard alternative relations, also with alternative family members, if the parents do not trust the services or are scared (e.g. police who could build trust with the eldest brother in the family)
- Make sure there is trust between the agencies in the cooperation, especially between the security and social services

Lastly, there is the inspiring example of **Sarpsborg municipality**. They follow up around 20 people who are affected by violent extremism in the family or are violent extremists both on Islamist and right-wing extremism, as well as formers of right-wing organisations. They have a multi-agency approach in all cases where the family

wants contact. In cases where they do not want contact, they discuss the issues in a multi-agency coordination group. As more than 40 persons are involved in the multi-agency approach in some of these families, all with different motivations, goals and measures, having coordination and overview is key. In addition to the recommendations with regard to MAW, they also recommend:

- To have two employees per service to not only achieve continuity, but also to reduce the stress symptoms of employees. The long-term work is demanding and employees need support and guidance.
- Make sure all employees develop their conversation techniques and trauma knowledge.
- To focus on family support. Stigma and fear about reactions can make it difficult for the family to be open about their radical vision in meetings with social workers, or their role in the family.

Using a 'crisis'

In case of the GO! Policy, a crisis occurred when reports came out of toddlers making extremist body movements. By not focussing on these specific incidents, but rather on problems at the underlying levels, this 'crisis' was used to work with several actors and get things done.

Conclusion

Dealing with children who grow up in an extremist family is challenging and complex, and requires long-term efforts from all agencies involved: families, schools, social services, health services and municipalities. This paper has provided several examples of inspiring practices with regards to multi-agency work where several services work together to ensure that the child is taken care of in the best possible way. Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that challenges remain: professionals within the multi-agency network may have a hard time getting access to the family, in understanding them, discovering and understanding factors that may trigger stress within the family, and might struggle with providing information to other services. This all has to do with the complexity of the situation: each child can respond differently and has experienced different (traumatic) events: a tailor-made approach is key. For all professionals who work with these children and families, it is

important to remain professional and neutral – only then, common ground can be found. This paper touched upon new insights in ways to do so, especially by using the legal right of the child (e.g. to develop its own opinion, without discrimination).

Additional readings

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