

Working with families and safeguarding children from radicalisation

Step-by-step guidance paper for practitioners and policy-makers

Introduction

When someone becomes radicalised and behaves in an extreme way, this does not only affect the person him or herself, but also their family, friends, wider social circle and society. Today's reality is one in which radicalisation is not uncommon as a phenomenon. Families, youngsters and children across the EU are confronted with recruitment by terrorist groups such as Daesh, Al Qaida and others, with home-grown terrorism and extremist movements (e.g. on the far-right and far-left) and with a growing number of both refugees and returnees (including children, youngsters and families) leaving conflict zones to come (back) to the EU.

What are the challenges?

Preventing radicalisation is in itself a challenge, and doing so at an early stage is even more so. Nevertheless, this should be the long-term approach to mitigating the risk of violence related to extremism and terrorism. For vulnerable individuals and their social environment, current prevention challenges are:

- *Detecting those who are at risk of radicalisation*: in the process of radicalisation, changes might occur very quickly, but the early stages of radicalisation are difficult to detect because their indications (isolating behaviour, frustrations) are similar to those associated with other problems, such as addictions.
- *Being able to get into contact with them and support them and their families in a change of direction*: families and social surroundings play a key role in this process, as will be explained in the step-by-step approach.
- *Supporting both the individual and their family during the disengagement process*: cooperation is key to be effective but not always easy to obtain. Also the relationship between the individual and his/her social environment is not always positive, which might have driven them into extremism or terrorism in the first place.

In addition to these general challenges, one of the key issues at this moment (spring 2017) is families and children who have been confronted by and / or engaged in terrorism fuelled by Daesh, Al Qaida and other terrorist organisations, and who have radicalised. Over the last couple of years, thousands of Europeans, among them families and youngsters, travelled to Syria and Iraq to live with and fight for terrorist organisations. As this point in time, the number of foreign fighters travelling to conflict zones seems to be on the decline; however, there are concerns that the number of returnees will rise. At the same time, EU Member States have acknowledged a growth in far-right extremism across Europe, fuelled even more by the influx of refugees. In this context of growing polarisation and growing extremism, families who have been directly affected are struggling with the daily consequences, as well as grievances.

For example, although experience with returnees is limited, requests from families who want their child to return are growing. There are challenges in dealing with these requests:

- in many countries the policy for dealing with returnees is not always clear to the different stakeholders, which makes it difficult to provide families with the right information;
- Daesh is spreading threatening propaganda about returning;
- there are many practical difficulties in relation to paperwork, especially when children born in the conflict zones are involved;
- parents have a tendency to send money to their children for their return, but such transfers may be regarded as criminal activity in some countries, so family workers need to explain this to parents and warn them not to do this.

Aim and use of the step-by-step guidance paper

The aim of this paper is to support and offer guidance to policy-makers and practitioners responsible for the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism in family settings, especially those involving (young) children. This guidance is the result of shared insights, lessons, practical examples and policy recommendations from the field. The toolkit focuses on families and children dealing with radicalisation in a wide range of scenarios:

- families that have one or multiple family members who are vulnerable to a process of radicalisation (including children and young adults);
- families where one or multiple family members have taken extremist actions such as leaving their home to join an extremist group (including children and young adults);
- families and children that have fled areas affected by terrorist groups;
- families where one or multiple family members are in prison, convicted of terrorist (related) crimes.

This paper addresses extremism based on different ideologies (religiously inspired extremism, right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism, nationalist extremism). In many cases, the challenges and responses described in this toolkit are applicable across the board. If not, this will be specifically indicated.

It is based on the outcomes of the joint meeting between the RAN Youth, Families and Communities (RAN YF&C) Working Group and the RAN Health and Social Care (RAN H&SC) Working Group, held in Nice on 2 and 3 February 2017. Additional information coming from separate RAN YF&C and RAN H&SC meetings on the role of families and the role of children has also been included, along with feedback from interviews with six family support professionals (from Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, France, Belgium and Germany).¹

Key terms:

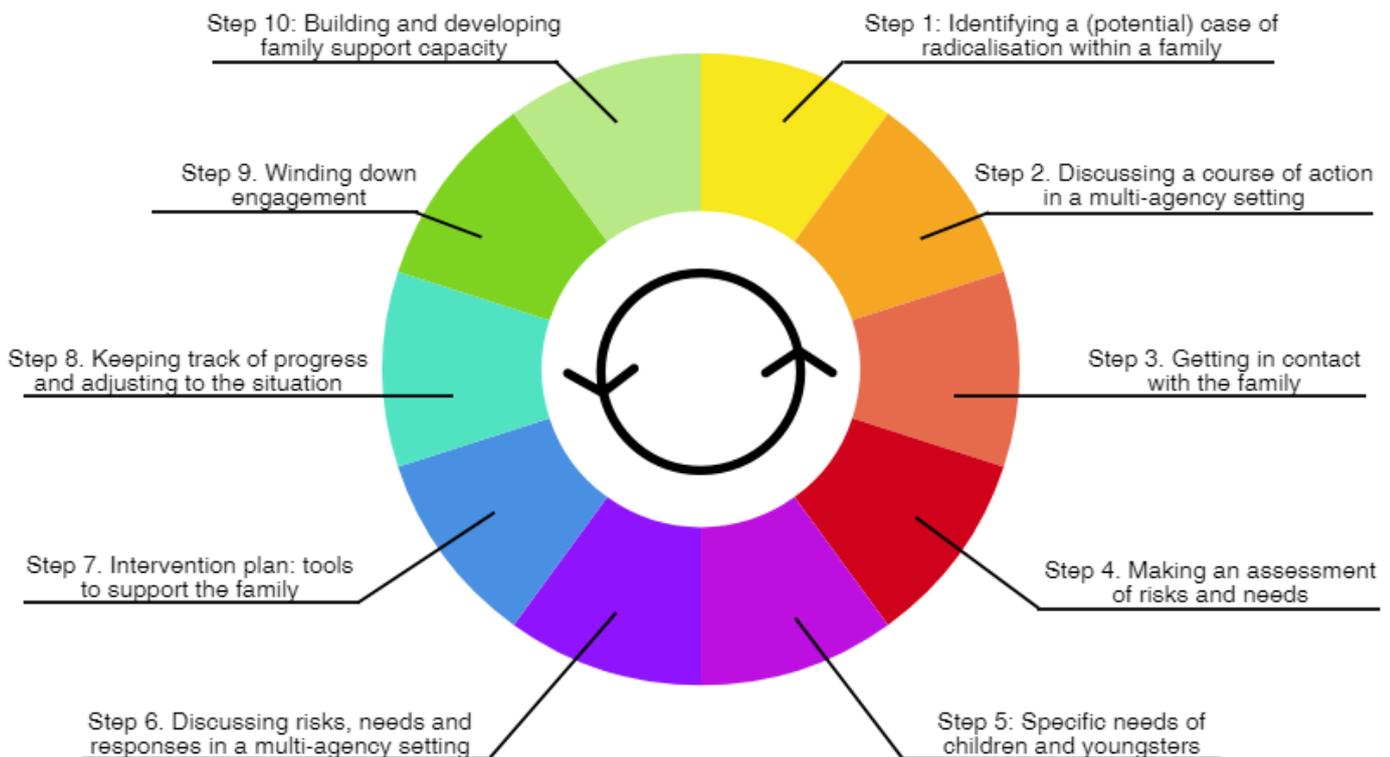
- *Family*: a group of people affiliated either by consanguinity (by recognised birth), affinity (by marriage or other relationship), co-residence, or some combination of these;
- *Child*: a person who is under the age of 18. In legal terms there are differences between countries concerning the age at which someone is considered a minor;
- *Youngster*: a minors of a specific age, usually 14-18;
- *Returnee*: an individual who has left his/her home to join an extremist group in another country and who either:

¹ This paper was authored by Merel Molenkamp, Floor Kroft and Merle Verdegaal of the RAN Centre of Excellence. This paper does not express the official view of the European Commission or one of its Member States.

- a. has requested to return to an EU country;
- b. has returned to his/her home country in the EU;
- c. is travelling to another EU country.

HOW TO engage and work with families confronted with radicalisation

This paper presents a 10-step approach to working with families. The steps are depicted in the graphic below as a circle as they influence each-other. The steps are both applicable in general as well as on a case-to-case basis. Where possible, steps are explained and illustrated with a real-life practice. When applicable, policy recommendations are also shared. Before the steps are explained, the fundamental



principles forming the foundations of a good family support approach are shared. Please note that these steps are, by definition, a simplification of a more complex reality in which different steps are often taken simultaneously.

Key principles forming the foundations of the step-by-step approach

Families:

- Families are at the core of any individual’s resilience. There is ample research showing the influence of the family environment, upbringing and the amount of love, care and attention received on someone’s resilience to negative temptations, such as joining extremist groups.²
- Family members should be seen as partners in signalling, preventing and protecting individuals at risk of radicalisation, and contributing to the safety and security of society.

Family support:

² Walsh F. (2012) “Normal Family Processes”. Chapter 17: Family resilience. New York: Guilford Press.

- The objective of family work should be to engage, build trust and form relationships over a longer period of time. This might not only influence the direct family situation in a positive way, it can also open the door to the person at risk as well as the wider community.
- It is important to take a systemic approach to the family, to look at families as a whole and the dynamics between family members. Solely focussing on the individual at risk or one of the family members is often not enough to understand the influences and pressures that exist and form one's behaviour. The social environment or community of the family also affect attitudes and behaviour. Even though the aim of counselling is to support an individual at risk, understanding the wider family and community context is crucial to do so.
- To deliver effective family support, a cooperative attitude from at least part of the family is crucial. If a family does not want to cooperate or receive support, it will be very challenging to work on the often sensitive and challenging issues of radicalisation. Forcing support on a family is very challenging and sometimes even counter-productive. For this reason, there are some cases in which the family will not be the connecting factor, and other network connections should be used to reach the individual at risk.
- Use an acceptance-based approach, at the least to start engagement. The core of the acceptance-based approach is that a family worker does not denounce or reject the perspective and attitude of a family and/or individual at risk, but uses this as a starting point for engagement. By building a trust-based relationship, it is possible to slowly help the family and individual at risk to change their attitudes and beliefs. The focus therefore is more on building relationships.
- Take the responses of family members seriously, if only because of prevention reasons. This can include family members stating that their daughter is converting, or saying they have news that their child has already died (even if there is no physical evidence, such as a body or death certificate).

Security:

- An emphasis on security, in combination with general distrust among certain families and communities towards the authorities, may create a negative spiral of distrust. From the safeguarding perspective, there must be an emphasis on understanding problems, but also on the needs families have to overcome these problems. The objective should be to help the family develop long-term resilience to radicalisation, not just to defuse the situation at hand.
- In addition, there is an emphasis on transparency towards the family instead of secrecy and working *with* the family instead of working on the case without their involvement.
- It should be underlined that the involvement of police and intelligence service is necessary and important. However, the coordination and cooperation between them and organisations or professionals focused on prevention and the family's well-being is equally important.

Step 1. Identifying a (potential) case of radicalisation within a family

There are many different ways in which a (potential) case of radicalisation can be flagged to authorities and / or professionals. There is a wide variety of people who might want to report concerns. In many cases this is the direct family or someone from the direct social network (e.g. friends). But concerns may also be expressed by teachers, youth workers, sports clubs, religious organisations and neighbours. It is important that people know where they can share their concerns. European experience is that cases of concern are reported through the following channels:

- directly to (local) police, whether it is out of concern or out of fear that something criminal is going on;

- through general or special helplines: many European countries already have general crime prevention hotlines, but increasingly (in the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, France, Luxembourg), specialised helplines are also available for people who have concerns about radicalisation;
- through informal networks and platforms, such as mosques, sports clubs, online platforms;
- via other professionals, such as social and youth workers, teachers and mental health professionals.

The nature of concerns expressed can differ significantly. A mother could call because her daughter has converted to Islam and wants to eat and dress traditionally. A neighbour might spot specific symbols or flags in their neighbour's home. A teacher may have been confronted by pupils expressing extremist ideas. A father might suspect his son wants to travel abroad to join an extremist group. A family member may reach out when they receive news that their brother (for example) has died in a terrorist conflict zone.

Each concern needs to be taken seriously and assessed. There will be many cases in which, after asking and searching for additional information, attention-seeking, rebellious behaviour or a genuine interest in a new religion is identified, rather than radicalisation. However, from a prevention point of view, responses to less concerning behavioural changes are still important in preventing individuals from being pushed in an extremist direction at a later stage. Taking the example of the mother and daughter, the parents' response to a wish to convert could potentially influence whether this process happens in an open, transparent and trusting way, or one in which she is pushed out of the family environment.

Practice in action: helpline for radicalisation, Hayat, Germany

Hayat is a German counselling programme for persons either already involved in radical Salafist groups, or on a path to violent Jihadist radicalisation. Potential cases of radicalisation are sometimes brought to their attention either through the national hotline, but more often because people contact Hayat directly. Hayat was one of the key partners in establishing the national hotline in January 2012. For referral reasons (to local NGOs), the national hotline requires people to share their details. The telephone number is anonymous. Hayat will only take on a case when a request for help comes directly to them. They do not do outreach to families themselves as they see initiating contact as crucial for someone who wants to receive help.

[More information on Hayat.](#)

More information on family support and helplines can be found in the following documents:

- [Family support chapter of the RAN Collection](#)
- [RAN ex post paper: Family support: what works?](#)

Policy recommendations – identifying radicalisation within a family

- Offer perspective on how the national authorities view families dealing with these issues and how they can expect to be treated and supported by the national government, local government and/or NGOs;
- Design a reporting infrastructure for those with fears and concerns;
- Develop a communication plan, including guidance on information sharing, from a national and local perspective, on how to communicate about this reporting infrastructure.

Step 2. Discussing a course of action in a multi-agency setting

To adequately respond to concerns shared, it is important to have an infrastructure in place to deal with (new) cases of radicalisation. With regard to family support, European countries such as Belgium, Sweden, the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Denmark, and France all have multi-agency settings in which cases are assessed and discussed. Many of these multi-agency settings are organised at local level, because most information is available at this level, along with the means to respond.

Different terms are used to refer to these multi-agency settings: info-houses (Denmark, see example below), safety houses (the Netherlands), partner tables (Belgium), governmental tracking cell (France). Whatever they are called, the following partners are usually part of these multi-agency settings:

- police (local and national);
- social care and/or (mental) health care;
- local authorities;
- when relevant and important, other partners such as education representatives, employment agencies, specific psychological care bodies can be involved for particular cases;
- intelligence services are not usually a standard partner, but cooperation takes place on a case-by-case basis.

When new cases enter a multi-agency settings, information is exchanged so that a better understanding of the risks and protective factors at play is developed. Discussions also cover how urgent the situation seems to be and which of the partners is best-placed to make first contact. When there is a crisis situation (e.g. a member of the family is potentially planning an attack) and / or the safety of other professionals might be at risk, the police will make first contact. In other cases, partners will often discuss who is already involved with the family. Because building trust between the family and authorities is very important, establishing contact through someone who already has a positive relationship with the family is the most effective channel. In some cases, this can be a social worker or family worker, but it can also be someone from the employment office.

For more information on creating a multi-agency structure (including issues related to information sharing), please read chapter 2 of the [RAN Policy Paper Developing a local prevent framework and guiding principles](#).

Practice in action: info houses and information sharing, Denmark

In Denmark, family support is organised within an info house. The info house is a meeting place where, among others, police officers, social workers, municipalities, psychiatrists and crime prevention come together to discuss active and new cases, and to draw up plans for each case. The info houses are part of the Danish SSP (schools, social service and police) and PSP (Police, social service and psychiatry) models. Concerned relatives or friends can contact the info house to report suspected radicalisation. Together they decide which partner is the best-placed to contact the individual in question, and coordinate who will do what. The info house meetings take place every two weeks. Institutionally, the practice is incorporated within the ways of working of the national social and law enforcement authorities, and is therefore highly sustainable.

Passage 115 in Danish law gives legal guidance on information-sharing for the prevention of crime. This legal guidance is also followed in the multi-agency setting of the info house and for cases involving radicalisation. An important element of passage 115 is that there are no official notes taken during meetings. Information is only processed by individual professionals based on their profession's code of conduct for information-sharing. So there will be differences between how the information is used by the police and social workers.

More information on the Danish [SSP](#) and [PSP](#) systems.

Policy recommendations – discussing potential actions in a multi-agency setting

- Facilitate a multi-agency infrastructure in which cases of radicalisation can be discussed between different, relevant sectors (local police, social workers, educators, psychologists, general doctors and so on);
- Provide legal guidance on information sharing, privacy protocols and what to do in situations of high risk or safety and security threats;
- Allocate resources at the national and local level for professionals to work on radicalisation cases.

Step 3. Getting in contact with the family

Once it has been decided who is best placed to contact the family, a house visit is the most common form of first contact. The approach taken depends heavily on the estimated level of risk. In high-risk or crisis situations, the police may literally break down the door. A house may be searched for individuals or evidence. This is often quite a public and traumatic experience for families, and follow-up by a social or family worker offering support should be organised.

In less urgent cases, the house visit will be made by one or two professionals, who will take the lead on the case and make first contact with the family. In countries such as Norway, Belgium and Denmark, this pair comprises a police officer and a family or social worker. It is advisable for families to remain with the same contact persons so that a relationship of trust can be established.

Engaging with the family

Experience has led to the following lessons on engaging with a family who is (potentially) dealing with radicalisation:

- visiting the family in their home will make the visit feel less threatening and they can speak within their own comfort zone;
- as this is often the starting point of building or maintaining a relationship of trust, it is important that there is full transparency around who is visiting the family, why they are visiting and what happens if the family does not cooperate;
- it may help to *not* focus on the radicalisation issue right away but to ask the family what they are dealing with and how support can be offered;
- it can help if the (local) police are not in uniform but in civilian attire – this makes the situation less threatening and avoids shame that could lead to stigmatisation within the neighbourhood;
- when the case involves minors, it must be decided whether the minor is involved in the first contact – if so, visits are best carried out outside of school hours.

Families that do not want to cooperate

Practitioners have indicated that in most cases, families are willing to cooperate as they also have concerns and want the best for their family members and for themselves. However, there are cases in which the family structurally refuses to engage. Advice from practitioners on how to deal with this include the following:

- invest time and keep trying through every possible lead or network partner to get in contact with the family;

- highlight the fact that you want to support and help them with their issues and that you have opportunities to do so;
- indicate the consequences should they not want to work with the family worker or social worker – they could expect a visit from the police;
- if possible within the legal framework, involving child protection can be a last resort in cases where children are at risk – child(ren) could be taken away from the family;
- if possible within the legal framework, welfare or other support could be cut as a last resort, forcing cooperation.

When legal procedures are needed to enforce cooperation, this is evidence of a lack of trust; in these cases, working with the family has less chance of being effective.

Who to involve from the family?

There are different perspectives as to who to involve in contact with the family:

- when aiming for full transparency, the child, youngster or adult who is believed to be radicalising will be involved;
- in some cases, the person about whom concerns have been expressed (e.g. by a family member) is not informed and / or involved as knowing that family reached out for help may cause fear and frustration – this could affect trust within the family; in these cases, support will be provided to the family directly, and indirectly through them to the person concerned;
- sometimes the person him / herself reaches out, for example a returnee within the justice system (in Germany they are given the helpline number); in such cases, support is provided to the individual – the family’s involvement depends on whether it has a positive or negative impact;
- if one family member has reached out for help but doesn’t want other family members to know, it is often best to respect this decision and work with the person who reached out; later it can be decided whether there are openings for wider contact with the family.

Practice in action: working through the key worker - Germany

Legato is an organisation that works with a broad range of extremist ideologies, varying from right-wing extremism to religious radicalisation. It has an acceptance-based approach and focuses on intervention work, and on providing advice to family members in particular.

Legato is not an outreach organisation. Initial contact needs to be made by a ‘key worker’ – the one who is closest to the individual at risk / the radicalised person (called the ‘index client’). This ‘key worker’ can be, among others, a relative, teacher or social worker, and is usually the one who reached out to Legato in the first place. Most cases are followed up through the key worker as they often have the person’s trust and a relationship with him / her.

[More information on Legato.](#)

Policy recommendations – getting in contact with the family

- Have a clear legal framework in place for families who do not cooperate. This framework should be communicated in the multi-agency setting, alongside guidance on when repressive measures can / should be taken. Existing legal frameworks on family support and the protection of children can steer the development of additional legal guidelines.
- Allow room for both a pro-active (based on intelligence, for example) and / or reactive support structure (based on a concern expressed by someone in or close to the family), depending on the context and the organisations who are in direct contact with the family.

Step 4. Making an assessment of risks and needs

Information collected during the initial visit feeds into an assessment of the risks and needs of the family, both in relation to the issue of radicalisation, as well as in a broader context. Current practice shows that in most EU countries, the police are responsible for a risk assessment from the security perspective. Family workers will be more involved in mapping the concerns and needs of the family. Most family workers do not have a formal needs assessment tool, but work with an intake form. This form will differ from country to country, but is an important part of the case file on the individual and family as it includes information on:

- the personal history of the individual of concern and his/her family/social network;
- the linkages between the individual, the family and other social contacts, for example in sports clubs, school, religious circles and other places (network overview);
- practical issues the family and / or the individual are dealing with such as unemployment, housing problems and educational challenges and in which they need and want help and support;
- trigger events in the individual's or family's history;
- the nature and severity of the concerns (background information).

There is no standard form or advice as to how it should look as case files usually contain a great deal of subtle information and specific questions of relevance for the family support professionals.

The case file is a key source of information and guidance for the different organisations working with the family. It is therefore important to have a clear case-owner and to have sharing mechanisms in place that allow the case file to be as comprehensive as possible. It may also be helpful to include digital communication channels such as e-mails and social media conversation protocols within these files.

Policy recommendations – risk and needs assessments

- Have available an information sharing system that allows all relevant stakeholders to keep track of case files and share important, sensitive data;
- Provide guidance on ICT applications and securing the online information sources that support the information sharing system.

Step 5: Specific needs of children and youngsters

When children grow up in a radicalised environment, they are at risk of cross-generational radicalisation and violent extremism. This is the case for those children radicalised in Europe (both right-wing and religiously inspired extremists), children radicalised in war zones, and those in contact with radicalised family members. It is important that practitioners are empowered to not only interpret the signs of radicalisation, but also to engage effectively with children who are in a radicalised environment.

Current challenge: children born / raised in terrorist conflict zones

A major concern today is children born and / or living abroad in terrorist conflict zone e.g. in Syria and Iraq. Those children living in the so-called caliphate controlled by Daesh are of particular concern

because of the strong ideological reasoning to which they are exposed, as well as the way in which children are used and prepared to be soldiers. Children living in these environments will be exposed to:

- extensive indoctrination through extremist ideology;
- severe trauma caused by living in a conflict and extremely violent environment;
- combat training (more boys than girls);
- killings and suicide bombings – both as witnesses and executioners;
- physical, mental, sexual and emotional abuse and manipulation – again, as both witnesses and victims.

So far, not many practitioners have had experience of working with young children returning from Syria or Iraq. There is however experience of working with children who have grown up in war zones and as child soldiers. Learning and insight from this field might be used to develop good practice in this area.

Lessons and approaches to working with children

Whenever children or youngsters are radicalised or have been influenced by a radicalised person in his / her direct environment, there are a few steps that can be taken:

- Working with general early-prevention intervention methods, such as exercises on identity, belonging, conflict management, critical thinking, democracy, family relations, etc., can be effective. Early intervention is vital for children under the age of 12 to maximise the chances of successful rehabilitation. The exercises should be delivered by qualified and culturally competent individuals, supported by both community and statutory networks of professionals.
- Creating a safe place and atmosphere of confidence and trust is essential for children to speak freely.
- When youngsters make the transition from children's to adult services, usually when they turn 18, it is essential that professionals specialised in children and in adults work together to maximise continuity in the help provided for these children.
- Creative approaches which are based on music, theatre, sports etc. can work well with children. An example is the 'living (or human) library', an equalities tool that attempts to challenge prejudice by facilitating a conversation between two people.
- As for children who have returned from war zones such as Syria, the following should be taken into account:
 - research on child soldiers shows that it is advisable to start with carrying out normal, day-to-day activities.
 - the ideology is their identity; it protects them and helps them understand the world. Only new experiences that are outside of this ideology will make it possible for them to think differently.
- Where child returnees have been involved in violence, a criminal justice solution has the potential to further traumatise the child, ensure future recidivism, and limit opportunities for rehabilitation and reintegration. If rehabilitation is prioritised, then the needs and vulnerabilities of the child are paramount, no matter what the nature of the crime he or she has committed.
- Meeting the needs of child returnees must be informed by existing child protection best practice, and conducted within established national networks for child services. Neither NGOs nor charity groups have the capacity or the links with all necessary services to intervene alone, and so should be supported by existing statutory services.
- Where statutory services have intervened and a care plan has been developed for an individual child, community experts (such as religious leaders, community leaders, and those with experience of

conflict trauma) should contribute to revisions of this plan in line with their unique nuanced knowledge of key issues.

[More information on child returnees from conflict zones.](#)

Practice in action: chamäLION, Germany

Early prevention is of the utmost importance for (young) children confronted with radicalisation. chamäLION is a primary prevention concept that aims to promote resilience against extremist ideologies. The Idea behind it is to prevent radicalisation by giving early support in the form of personal and social resources, establishing acceptance for others and at the same time reducing discrimination.

At the heart of the practice are three modules:

- A. Belonging and orientation (awareness of diversity/different ways of life, religious beliefs, gender and origin);
- B. Identity and acceptance (knowledge of own strengths and weakness, biographical work);
- C. Conflict management (preventing violence, learning how to deal with conflicts, awareness of own feelings and communication skills).

chamäLION is aimed at children in the age range of 7-12. The tools (exercises) are designed to be implemented by teachers or social workers at school.

[More information on chamäLION.](#)

Policy recommendations – meeting children’s specific needs:

- Provide a balanced approach to the criminal persecution and rehabilitation of children and youngsters;
- Include child protection services, trauma specialists and specialists from adjacent fields such as child soldiers to design an effective multi-agency approach;
- Facilitate a smooth transition from children's to adults services.

Step 6. Discussing risks, needs and responses in a multi-agency setting

After the risk and needs assessments have been made by different professionals in the multi-agency setting, this information needs to be shared. As discussed under step 2, information sharing is challenging because of privacy regulations and professional confidentiality, as well as for safety and security reasons. In some countries, such as the United Kingdom, Denmark (see example under step 2) and the Netherlands, there are specific privacy protocols and information sharing agreements that give guidance in this process.

In countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway and Germany, the ‘case owner’ will be the family support professional. However, other professionals and organisations will be contacted and included in the implementation of the intervention plan. Case ownership in these cases means that the family support professional is aware of and coordinating the help a family and/or individual is receiving.

Practice in action: the Channel approach, United Kingdom

Channel is a programme focusing on providing support at an early stage to people who are identified as being vulnerable to being drawn into extremism. The programme uses a multi-agency approach to protect vulnerable people by:

- identifying individuals at risk;
- assessing the nature and extent of that risk;
- developing the most appropriate support plan for the individuals concerned.

The programme's success is very much dependent on cooperation and co-ordinated activity between partners. It works best when the individuals and their families fully engage with the programme and are supported in a consistent manner. The police coordinate activity by requesting relevant information from panel partners about a referred individual. They will use this information to make an initial assessment of the nature and extent of vulnerability. The information will then be presented to a panel.

The Counter Terrorism & Security Act 2015 is intended to secure effective local cooperation and delivery of Channel in all areas and to build on the good practice already in place in many areas.

[More information on Channel.](#)

Policy recommendations – discussing risks, needs and responses:

- Create a clear protocol for information sharing;
- Provide guidance on who to include and not to include in multi-agency settings;
- Support the creation of a 'shared' language between cooperating partners (e.g. on how to indicate risks).

Step 7. Intervention plan: tools to support the family

Intervention plans will differ from family to family. It is key that these plans are tailor-made to the risks and needs of families and individuals. Family support professionals underline the importance of having a range of interventions at their disposal to be able to provide the best care and support, and to prevent radicalisation from getting a grip on other family members.³ To structure the different types of intervention, the approach of researcher Angel Rabasa⁴, used by Hayat Germany, will be used in this paper. The approach is similar to interventions used in other EU countries.

Pragmatic interventions

In many cases, pragmatic issues such as unemployment and housing problems may stand in the way of helping a family become stable and resilient again, and able to deal with a radicalising / radicalised family member. Based on the needs assessment, pragmatic interventions can be put in place to make room for other issues to be addressed. It is also usually one of the easier ways to help a family and can help build a relationship of trust. Examples of pragmatic interventions include mediating as the family connects with youth welfare, specific schools, housing associations, job centres, sports clubs or other social organisations.

³ Note that community members might perceive families confronted with radicalisation as receiving 'special' treatment or access.

⁴ Dr Angel M. Rabasa is a Senior Political Scientist at the RAND Corporation who has written extensively about extremism, terrorism, and insurgency. He is the lead author of *Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists* (2010).

Practice in action: EXIT Sweden

EXIT Sweden is a project within the non-profit organisation Fryshuset. Their aim is to help and provide support to those who wish to leave nationalist / racist / Nazi-oriented groups and movements through hands-on, individually targeted support. EXIT offers personal meetings, provides a contact person (if needed available 24/7) and assists in contacts with governmental agencies. It cooperates with housing corporations, the police, social services, other legal entities and family and friends of those who want out. EXIT also offers counselling to parents, siblings, partners and others close to its clients.

The work is tailormade, taking into account the specific situation of the individual client, but usually focuses on building a new social identity outside of the previous extremist identity. Activities can vary from social activities and social training, to very direct hands-on engagement with moving, tattoo-removal, contact with different authorities, etc. The length of the intervention differs depending on the situation, and usually lasts from between a few months to a couple of years.

[More information on EXIT Sweden.](#)

Policy recommendations – tools to support families

- Provide local family support professionals with easy access to practical services such as housing, job-assistance, financial advice. In cases of higher risk, consider shortcuts to these services;
- Allocate additional resources at national or local level for the practical support of these families.

Interventions at affective, emotional and psychological level

A key strategy for extremist groups (whatever their ideological background) is to disrupt emotional bonds between an individual and his or her family and social environment, and to isolate the individual, increasing dependency on the extremist group. Therefore, restoring positive emotional bonds with the family and those in the social network that support disengagement is key in any intervention plan. This not only concerns the individual, but also his or her family. Isolation from the social environment is one of the biggest risk factors when trying to prevent radicalisation. Examples of interventions that tackle or seek to reverse this are:

- **Parent-child communication tools and training:** parents very often struggle to communicate with their children when they are showing signs of radicalisation or even taken action (like travelling to Syria). Parents and siblings may have many emotions (anger, misunderstanding, feeling abandoned) to deal with and these emotions may feed into the contact with their child / brother / sister. Family support professionals and expert organisations can provide them guidance on how to maintain positive contact, avoid pushing the family member further away, and restore family bonds. Many family support professionals report using a form of motivational interviewing to train parents in communication skills.
- **Peer groups:** parents, grandparents and siblings may benefit from being in contact with others who are going through the same processes and challenges with a family member. Introduction to a peer support group can be done via family support workers. Participation can:
 - help avoid social isolation caused by the stigmatising nature of being affiliated with extremism / terrorism;
 - give families a purpose or channel through which they can share grievances but also experiences and mistakes from which others can learn;
 - offer a source of additional information about the radicalisation process that can help the family feel more in control of the situation.

- help stabilise stress and develop better coping mechanisms to deal with grievances, trauma and other mental issues that may be present within these families.
- **Creative interventions:** it is important to create a soft landing for people who have returned or have been part of an exit programme; this helps to prevent recidivism from happening. Family support professionals are also therefore challenged to think outside the box when it comes to restoring bonds and avoiding isolation.
- **Make use of positive change-makers** (e.g. imams, teachers, mentors): when trying to take an individual out of isolation, rebuilding relationships within the community requires involvement by trusted and engaged community members, such as religious leaders, teachers or community centre counsellors. They can bridge the gap between vulnerable families and empowering communities. Furthermore, they can, in religious matters, address the individual from within his or her own discourse and without being seen as seeking to change this.

At the **psychological level**, it is important to establish whether in addition to emotional challenges, there might also be psychological challenges or even mental illness and traumas. Family support practitioners underline the importance of cooperating with specialised psychological and psychiatric care to support families that struggle with these issues. For more information on dealing with trauma among children returning from conflict zones, see the [RAN issue paper on child returnees](#).

Practice in action: Parent support group –The Netherlands

Steunpunt Sabr (the Arabic word for 'patience') is a women's organisation and an independent and autonomous NGO that works bottom-up and offers support and empowerment to vulnerable women. With youngsters leaving the region for Syria, Sabr organised a support group for parents. The group brought together parents from different cultural backgrounds, and both Muslim parents and those of converts. The group grew fast, with parents joining voluntarily and usually finding out about it through their networks. Sabr also has close connections with community police officers who have referred parents, also from other areas, to the support group.

Sabr facilitates meetings and is present to support the parents where necessary. The needs of the parents are the starting point of the conversations. When a lot of questions were raised about Syria, Sabr arranged for government and municipal officials to join the group and provide responses. Participating parents are very happy with the support group since it offers a place to share experiences and learn from others on how to deal with the situation. Key factors are the low entry levels (very local, short communication lines), the fact that meetings are closed and in a safe space (trust between participants and the organisation) and that Sabr is independent.

[More information on Sabr.](#)

Policy recommendations – dealing with emotions and psychology

- Provide family support professionals with a flexible mandate to develop outside-the-box interventions to help restore family bonds;
- Provide resources for organisations that have established / want to establish peer groups for those dealing with radicalisation and extremism.

Interventions focused on ideology

There are many root causes for radicalisation, most of which are not directly related to ideology. However, individuals who are radicalising will often show strong ideological devotion, whether or not

they are really driven by the ideology. For those who have a strong belief in the ideology (whether it is religiously based or right-wing inspired), it might be difficult for the family and social environment to connect with them. To encourage a process of disengagement, it is important that the individual is able to change his or her perspective and to develop non-extremist, non-violent answers to life questions that were previously guided by the violent extremist ideology. Families need support in:

- **Not addressing the ideology right away:** tempting as it may be to have a confrontation about the ‘truthfulness’ or rightfulness of the ideology, these conversations will often have the opposite effect. They may even be seen as a justification for regarding family members or social contacts as infidels, inferior or weak because they don’t share the same worldview.
- **Applying an acceptance-based approach:** the core of the acceptance-based approach is that a family support professional or family member does not denounce or deny the perspective and attitude of a family and / or individual at risk, but uses this as a starting point for engagement. By building a trust-based relationship, it is possible to slowly help the individual at risk to change their attitude and beliefs. The focus therefore is more on building relationships.
- **Involve experts ideological discussions:** whether it is an imam or a former right-wing extremist, it can be useful to involve someone who can talk to the family and the individual about the ideological dimension. Where does it come from? What are the sources and why are they reliable or not? What are alternative perspectives?
- **Include family and social contacts in an exit-programme:** in more and more EU Member States, Exit programmes are being developed. Most have an ideological component. Family and other parts of an individual’s social network can be included in these programmes. See the resources below for more information about Exit programmes:
 - [RAN EXIT ex post paper: Minimum methodological requirements for exit interventions](#)
 - [RAN EXIT ex post paper: Exit work in a multi-agency setting](#)
 - [RAN EXIT ex post paper: Setting up an exit intervention](#)

Practice in action: Entr’Autres, France

Entr’Autres is an organisation seeking to prevent social connections and family links from disintegrating. Cases arrive through the network, hotline and official authorities. Working with the family is key for the organisation: without the help of the family, they cannot work with the individual. The mother is extremely important, because through her a bond can be created with the individual. Entr’Autres’ approach to de-radicalising an individual depends on his or her profile, for which they have three categories:

- Individuals who may look like they are radicalising but who in reality just want to provoke. They make up 15-20 % of cases and are the easiest category to work with;
- Individuals whose identity is disrupted. They make up 60 % of cases and even though working with these individuals is more difficult and requires a longer time-investment, success does happen and can be measured by a change in discourse;
- Truly radicalised individuals. This profile accounts for 15-20 % of cases and truly de-radicalising these people is nearly impossible.

For all categories, working with families is important, but not in the same way.

Policy recommendations - addressing ideology

- Help establish a trustworthy and legitimate network of theological and ideological experts (Islamic scholars, Christian scholars, former extremists etc.);
- Support Exit programmes guided by tailor-made risk and needs assessments. Ideology is sometimes a cover for other, deeper motivations that need to be addressed.

Step 8. Keeping track of progress and adjusting to the situation

Once the support of the family has been secured based on a tailor-made intervention plan, it is important to follow up on how this impacts daily life. Family support professionals indicate that it can be a challenging task to keep track of events and what happens within the family, especially when the family itself is not pro-active in providing this information. Maintaining contact on a regular basis is therefore necessary. Building and maintaining a relationship of trust and commitment is also of key importance to ensuring that negative effects / tendencies are also spotted early. As continuity is very important, stable family support should also be guaranteed (see step 10 on capacity building).

In some cases, the family may want to pull out of the intervention plan before the objectives agreed beforehand have been reached. As success is conditional upon the family's voluntary cooperation, it is often advisable to follow the family's wishes, while clearly stating that they can resume at any time. In high risk cases, it can be assumed that security checks and surveillance will continue.

While delivering the support programme, family support professionals might also run into other boundaries:

- Clear rules and boundaries for conduct should be agreed from the outset. In support groups, for instance, family members should talk about their relative but it should not be a forum for blame.
- Some families may not want to talk about what their relatives are doing as they don't want to think about the shame or stigma associated with their actions. In these cases, it can be helpful to include a psychologist, who can dispel taboos and encourage them to talk about these issues.
- It is crucial that meetings are as private and confidential as possible. Avoid note-taking during sessions with family members, for instance. Practitioners have found that explicit note-taking diminishes trust and creates an atmosphere of unease.
- 'Institutional blaming' is fairly commonplace. Parents might blame the security services for not preventing their children from becoming involved with known extremists. It can be helpful to include those 'blamed' when engaging by inviting (willing) persons from government departments (security services or the foreign policy office) to bilateral meetings or support groups.
- Adding an interpreter to the talks might overcome some language barriers, but might not necessarily create the right atmosphere. Experience has shown that parents / family members can also translate for each other and that they are more actively engaged and trusting if there is no interpretation.

Step 9. Winding down engagement

Engagement will usually end when goals have been achieved and one party (the service provider or family members) is confident that the family can proceed on its own:

- Evaluation or multi-agency monitoring should be used to assess whether the family support goals have been achieved and the support can come to an end.
- Examples have shown that setting a specific timeframe can be detrimental to engagement; where possible it should come to a natural end and not one dictated by capacity and resources.

- It should be borne in mind that engagement may never truly 'end'. There should always be an open door or responsive individual available to family members or the radicalised individual even after goals have been achieved.

Family support professionals have indicated that it is challenging to assess when a support programme should end. One reason is that some individuals use manipulation to 'trick' both support professionals as well as their family / social circles, letting them think they are on a different path. Intelligent youngsters, who are particularly adept at understanding what kind of behaviour and speech are expected from them, can use this understanding to cover their real thoughts and plans. There is no silver bullet to prevent this. The professionalism and experience of family support professionals and psychologists will usually play an important role in these cases.

Step 10: Building and developing family support capacity

To be able to take the actions required in steps 1 to 9, it is important to have family support capacity in place and to keep developing and strengthening this capacity. The suggestions below are based on experiences of family support in several EU Member States, and can help build and develop effective family support capacity. National and local policy-makers and civil servants have an important role in to play in creating the conditions needed to develop capacity in this area:

- start the work in the form of a pilot / experiment in which there is room for trial-error processes and to learn what is most effective in the national / local context;
- consider which form of organisation would work best in the national / local context; e.g. within the police or social services, as a separate NGO, as part of another care-organisation that already has experience in supporting families in different areas;
- ensure continuity through resources (financial, human, political);
- support the development of a broader network around the family support organisation with whom it can collaborate (e.g. police, social services, employment offices, security services, psychologists);
- ensure the safety of family support professionals (e.g. how to work with names, e-mail addresses, police protection, phone numbers etc.);
- establish a diverse group of family support professionals (male, female, different cultural backgrounds, different language skills, different professional backgrounds);
- develop a communication strategy to inform the public about how family support for the prevention of radicalisation is available;
- secure commitment from the mental health sector to assist family support professionals and avoid long waiting lists;
- involve, when possible, engaged parents who have suffered similar experiences and who want to share their reflections and lessons with others;
- look into privacy legislation and offer opportunities to develop specific privacy and information-sharing protocols to allow for easier and more effective sharing on cases;
- allow for additional training and sharing of best practice within and between countries to enhance professional capacity as well as the skills of family support professionals;
- make sure family support professionals feel supported by their own organisations and political leadership (both local and national) so that they feel empowered and able to deal with difficult situations with a lot of media attention.
- put a support structure in place for family support professionals as working with vulnerable families is very demanding and incurs an emotional / psychological burden ; the structure can involve confidential groups in which professionals can share their concerns / fears, psychological support, and sufficient contact with the organisation's management;

- evaluate the work being done with families to establish evidence-based best practice and to learn from mistakes.

Practice in action: Family Support Unit – The Netherlands

The Family Support Unit is an organisation, independent of the government, offering specialised information, advice and support to those worried about a radicalised family member. It runs alongside the Dutch Exit programme. A discussion with all relevant family members launches the process, and is followed by the drafting of a plan of action together with the family. The plan covers different life aspects (such as radicalisation, (psychological) health, work / school, finance). Participation is voluntary; professionals work at the family's home, wherever that may be in the Netherlands. The municipality in which the family lives is always informed about the Family Support Unit's involvement and must agree to family support being provided.

The unit was set up as part of [the Netherlands' comprehensive action programme to combat jihadism](#), which has 38 measures. Measure 23b was the setting up of a family support facility.

Their methodologies include the following elements:

- a strict privacy protocol: only share information with the municipality or police when there is a safety risk or after the family has granted permission – trust is essential;
- transparency in actions and relationship with other organisations;
- all case managers are professional aid / health workers, who connect with the municipality and other organisations to take care of other needs like housing or jobs;
- a multidisciplinary approach, with meetings twice a week involving all case managers, the psychological nurse, psychiatrist when needed, system therapist, researcher, coaches with extensive expertise on the jihadist network in the Netherlands and a theologian / Islam expert; case managers speak the languages of the target group;
- cases usually arrive via the municipalities, and the Family Unit should be as close as possible to what is already organised locally; nationwide coverage is also assured.

[More information on the Dutch family support unit.](#)