

EX POST PAPER

'Vulnerable children who are brought up in an extremist environment'

Summary

Children growing up in a family with extremist influences are **particularly vulnerable to becoming radicalised themselves**. Despite the difficulties faced by practitioners to identify these children, **protecting them is essential**. Effective interventions may include offering alternative relationships and counselling, providing (intercultural) education and using trauma and creative therapy for the most severely traumatised children. Removal from the families may also be necessary in cases in which transgenerational extremism is causing significant distress to the child and is putting them in danger. But separating children from their families is not always the best solution. As such, it is crucial for practitioners to carefully consider what is in the child's best interest. This requires finding the delicate balance between what it is good for the child and what it means to force the child into a safer environment.

This ex post paper builds upon the lessons learned from the RAN YF&C meeting '*Vulnerable children who are brought up in an extremist environment*'. It is written for **family support workers, exit workers, mental healthcare professionals, youth workers and teachers** who are working with vulnerable children from violent extremist families.

Introduction

Children growing up in a family with extremist influences are particularly vulnerable to becoming radicalised themselves. Indoctrination, an extremist social network and a lack of alternative relationships make these children extremely susceptible. Additionally, children who have fled Daesh territories and other 'theatres of conflict' are likely have been exposed to violence and traumatic events, adding to the potential risk factors. Exposure to trauma can have significant implications on a child's development and overall functioning. It increases the risk of physical and mental illness in the future. As a result, these vulnerable children require long-term care and protection.

The family's involvement and support is an important tool in P/CVE and exit work⁽¹⁾. In the case of protecting children being raised in extremist households, the family may actually be the root cause of the child's radicalisation. In such cases, it is highly unlikely the family will cooperate. So how can we protect these children? During the YF&C meeting on safeguarding vulnerable children who are brought up in an extremist environment, participants exchanged experiences and explored practical guidelines and policy recommendations.

This paper will begin with a definition of the type of children being addressed. Secondly, it will review the influence (extremist) parents yield on their children and the challenges practitioners face in identifying these at-risk children. The paper will also describe the different practical interventions that can be used by practitioners. Finally, it will outline the lessons learned for returnee children.

Children growing up in an extremist family

The term 'children' can be defined in various ways, be it as young children, pre-teens or adolescents⁽²⁾. As a general rule, pre-teens are those under the age of 12 or 13, and those older are adolescents. This paper focuses on young children and pre-teens (under 13) who have been raised by an extremist family (member). Different groups of children were discussed during this meeting. These included children from religious, right-wing and left-wing extremist families, as well as those growing up in cults or neo-Confederate groups⁽³⁾. Returnee children were also discussed.

The level of experience and the amount of research conducted varies considerably for each group. For example, there is empirical research that suggests a positive correlation between extreme right-wing convictions of parents and those of their children⁽⁴⁾. This, however, is in stark contrast with the rather limited experience currently in the European Union regarding children returning from Daesh territories. At the meeting, practitioners discussed how the various extremist groups are sometimes approached and treated differently but concluded that creating equal standards for all groups is more constructive. As such, this paper

¹ RAN YF&C and RAN H&SC paper. [Working with families and safeguarding children from radicalisation](#), February 2017, Nice (FR)

² RAN Manual. [Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families](#), p.68, July 2017

³ A definition and more information about neo-Confederate groups can be found [here](#).

⁴ Trees Pels & Doret J. de Ruyter (2012). [The Influence of Education and Socialization on Radicalization: An Exploration of Theoretical Presumptions and Empirical Research](#), Child Youth Care Forum, 41(3): p. 311–325.

will not distinguish between the different types of extremist families. Only returnee children, who were identified as a distinct group, will be discussed separately.

The influence of parents

Participants at the meeting reached a general consensus that transgenerational extremism is likely to occur. Sikkens et al. (2017)⁽⁵⁾ agree that transition of extremists ideas of parents to their children is common. However, they distinguish three different perspectives in literature on the influence parents may exert on their child with regards to the radicalisation process:

- *Direct parental influence on radicalisation.* This refers to a fundamental intergenerational transmission of ideology. Studies show that radicals often share the same extreme views as their parents, who serve as their role models. As such, parents' prejudices and extremist ideals have a direct influence on their children.
- *Indirect parental influence on radicalisation.* This refers to the influence of the family situation and style of upbringing. Unstable family situations may fortify the radicalisation process. The lack of good relationships with parents or the loss of a family member may also push a child into the arms of a radical group – which takes the role of a substitute family. This, more latent influence, is unrelated to the ideology of the parents.
- *No parental influence on radicalisation.* This takes into consideration scholars who argue that parents have no influence on the radicalisation of their children. It's an assumption based on the findings of several studies showing little evidence of family influence. Some studies simply confirmed Islamic jihadi extremists and terrorists come from a wide-range of family backgrounds. There are also studies showing Muslim extremist youngsters have distanced themselves from their parents' Westernised ideology and lifestyle.

To evaluate the influence of extremist parents on a child's radicalisation process, it is important to consider the family situation that is being studied. The latter two perspectives primarily involve studies that explore the influence of families in extremist cases, in general. The perspective that subscribes the direct parental influence on radicalisation focuses on children who grow up in an extremist family. **While most extremists may not come from an extremist family, extremist families do appear to produce children with extremist views.** But this is not just limited to parental influence and indoctrination. For instance, one recurrent finding in the existing literature is that young people join gangs, cults or extremist groups because they have family members or friends who are already members (Hafez & Mullins, 2015)⁽⁶⁾. This so-called *kinship radicalisation*⁽⁷⁾ has increased in recent years. This is partly explained due to improved intelligence services that have made it harder for extremist groups to recruit outsiders.

⁵ Elga Sikkens, Marion van San, Stijn Sieckelink, Micha de Winter (2017). '[Parental Influence on Radicalization and De-radicalization according to the Lived Experiences of Former Extremists and their Families](#)', Journal for deradicalization

⁶ Hafez, M., & Mullins, C. (2015). As cited by Sikkens et al. (2017), p.9

⁷ Hafez, M. (2016). As cited by Andrea Aasgaard (2017). '[Scandinavia's Daughters in the Syrian Civil War: What can we Learn from their Family Members' Lived Experiences?](#)', p. 247

How to identify children in extremist families?

One of the challenges of protecting children from extremist families is to recognise them and their families in the first place. Parents are the one most important partners in identifying cases of radicalisation when children are being influenced by peers or recruiters. In such cases, the parents may report their concerns, seek help and collaborate with professionals. In the case of extremist families, however, it is very unlikely the parents will assist in any way. This can be especially difficult if the families live in like-minded communities.

Referrals of extremist family cases will therefore primarily rely on the awareness of concerned first-line practitioners. Training of professionals and a well-functioning multi-agency P/CVE approach is hence of additional importance for this group. The network of local institutions (schools, social services, psychologists, youth centres and the police) is needed to gain as much insight as possible into the potentially extremist families.

Considerations for practitioners and policy makers

- Train first-line professionals in the prevention of radicalisation. Awareness and the ability to recognise extremism, as well as information about the proper channels to refer concerns, are especially vital for the identification of this group. Professionals are key.
- Cooperate with youth and family judges to reach out to the parents.
- Make use of formers and ex members from the community to make a connection. However, this does not work in every case. For instance, formers might not be on speaking terms with their former community members.

What interventions work?

So what interventions can help to protect children growing up in extremist families? There are several exit or family support interventions that may help. But do “regular” family, social work or exit approaches also work if a child lives at home and feels a strong sense of belonging with his or her family? To answer this question, the following two issues should be considered:

- There is no one-size-fits-all approach available. Since every child’s character and extremist context in which they live in is unique, the approach needs to be customised.
- Efforts to interfere in a like-minded community requires a different approach than when dealing with a child from a single extremist family.

Several of the interventions practitioners can use to protect these children are listed below. They are presented in order of increasing specialisation, beginning with the most low-key and accessible interventions: (1) Alternative relationships; (2) Education; (3) Counselling; (4) Trauma/Creative Therapy; (5) Removing a child from their family.

For all interventions listed below, the benefits and challenges are described, as well as key considerations to be taken into account.

1. Alternative relationships

Children growing up in an extremist family may be isolated by people that uphold extremist views. Alternative relationships can help children to get acquainted with other values and behaviour, and build a network

outside of an extremist group. This can be a relatively low-key intervention as alternative relationships can be offered while not directly confronting the extremist home situation. This can be realised by:

- Building alternative relationships and create a stable, long-term network of people and institutions around them. As RAN EXIT reaffirms, building new relationships is key to providing children with new perspectives, developing social skills and accepting new or different values. Potential alternative relationships can be formed with natural stakeholders, such as sports coaches, caretakers and personal mentors who can help the child get back on track.
- Finding a safe space where they can have alternative experiences via e.g. group and youth work.

In addition to (preferred) informal alternative relationships, one could also assign formal alternative relationships. In this case, professionals do not wait to be approached, but actively reach out. In Germany, family assistance that focuses on signalling drug or alcohol abuse can require a family to be assigned an external councillor. Family assistants could also be trained and deployed for cases of extremist families. This would of course be a more direct and less low-key intervention.

To protect children, it is crucial to put them in the centre of attention. If they are told they matter and asked what they need, they will slowly start trusting and sharing. Gradually, they will begin coping with their issues.

Considerations for practitioners and policy makers

- Relationships need continuity. To support this, policymakers should consider that funding earmarked for these professionals needs to be long-term, as is the case with other long-term institutions like the police. Temporary project schemes should not apply.
- Role models who the children can look up to is essential, according to the report by the Swedish Children's Ombudsman.
- Children should be judged on their current views and ideas. They should also be helped by building a relationship on value.

2. The role of education

Extremist families generally teach their children to have an ethnocentric perspective of the world: their culture is the only (right) one and all other cultures should be measured according to the preconceptions originating from their own standards and customs. Some extremist parents do not want their child to even come into contact with other ethnic groups or to learn about values that are different from those taught at home. Overcoming this can be challenging, especially if the child feels hostile towards certain groups, which he or she has never even encountered on a personal level.

This is one reason education may be a powerful antidote against extremism. **Schools** are one of very few settings where practitioners can work undisturbedly with the child outside of the family. They are also able to stimulate children from different backgrounds and bridge ethnic, cultural and religious boundaries⁽⁸⁾. Not surprisingly, a lot of training takes place here. Thanks to the safe setting of the school, teachers are generally

⁸ Trees Pels & Doret J. de Ruyter (2012). ['The Influence of Education and Socialization on Radicalization: An Exploration of Theoretical Presumptions and Empirical Research'](#), Child Youth Care Forum, 41(3): p. 311–325.

considered to be the solution to many different P/CVE related problems. However, teachers may face the following challenges:

- They are under pressure to meet all expectations. They are expected to follow various training seminars on different topics, to absorb all the material straight away and to apply the information whenever needed.
- As reported by the Swedish Children's Ombudsman⁽⁹⁾, many teachers, social workers and youth workers do not know how to deal with these children.
- Professionals may think they can protect the children by not talking to them about these difficult issues. However, avoiding the difficult issues and working around them may make the child feel (even more) lonely and isolated.

One type of education that focuses on broadening one's views about others is **intercultural education or mediation**. This is beneficial when teaching someone to see the world through someone else's eyes and to understand there is a common ground between them. This eventually stimulates empathy. It analyses how we think and brings about a more complex way of thinking.

Considerations for practitioners and policy makers

- Invest more time in training teachers and offer them more opportunities to discuss their experiences in supervised settings. Professionals need to be guided in this because the work is very intense.
- Invest more in professionals who have experience dealing with extremism, and who know how to work with these children, how to address difficult topics and how to encourage them to share their views. One way to do this is to ask the child what his or her dreams are and what it is they are currently doing to achieve them.

3. Counselling

Research⁽¹⁰⁾ shows that high-risk families can have on a negative impact on a child's mental health, but that counselling can make a statistically significant positive impact. Counselling is already often applied in in P/CVE and exit work and can also be used to assist children that grow up in an extremist family. It can be done with the child individually, but also with the whole family unit.

Counselling the whole family

Some participants indicated that counselling and educating the whole family, when possible, is the favoured option. If a child is reached out to individually and forms different ideas and opinions because of this intervention, there is the possibility that the parents will start acting out even more. By including the parents in the process, a child's transition to developing a broader worldview might go more smoothly. However, working with extremist family units is challenging. One difficulty is that families rarely react as a unit (different

⁹ Swedish Ombudsman for Children "[Children and young peoples experiences of violent islamist extremism](#)"

¹⁰ Aronen E. (1993). '[The effect of family counselling on the mental health of 10-11-year-old children in low- and high-risk families: a longitudinal approach](#)', J Child Psychol Psychiatry. 1993 Feb;34(2):155-65.

family levels respond differently to counselling). Therefore, practitioners need to balance the interest of all concerned.

To deliver effective family support, a cooperative attitude from at least part of the family is crucial. At the meeting, participants shared their experiences. They discussed cases in which parents supported their child's disengagement process and cases where children were excluded from the family – rejected by the parents – for changing their worldviews. Parents who do not wish to cooperate or receive support make it very difficult for practitioners to work on the sensitive and challenging issues of extremism. Also, forcing parents to cooperate might even prove counterproductive. In this case, the direct family is probably not the connecting factor. Other family members, such as grandparents, cousins or aunts and uncles, might be a better connection. In some cases, other network connections should be used to reach out to the child at risk.

Considerations for practitioners and policy makers

- Creating a stable and sustainable network of different institutions in which all work harmoniously is crucial when working with the family, but there have been only few successful cases so far. Practitioners need to evaluate the family dynamics and form a network that aspires to fulfil the same goal, working in unison and not against each other.
- It is important to assign one key professional to coordinate the case and to serve as a direct point of contact.

Individual counselling for the child

One of the concerns practitioners raised during the meeting is that children from extremist families are rarely asked for their opinion by both their family members and the institutions surrounding the family. Individual counselling can therefore give a voice to the children. To achieve its aim, practitioners need to consider the following challenges related with individual counselling:

- Even if working with a child individually, practitioners need to secure parental consent. Convincing parents will be challenging.
- There is no clear-cut process to re-socialise and distance a child from the extremist group. Unpacking a person's identity and reframing is challenging and, as participants indicated, many professionals find this difficult. Changing one's behaviour is not a linear process, but involves a lot of back and forth because the autonomic nervous system cannot immediately engage with the new setting. It takes time for people to stop falling back into old habits and returning to their old identity when they feel insecure.
- Sometimes practitioners have trouble dealing with their client's religion or ideology. They might have a negative perception of the religion or ideology or they may feel they do not know enough about it to discuss with their client. In the case of religiously inspired extremist families, religion is a central part of the child's predicament. As such, it should not be contested but discussed openly with the child. Aside from being part of the problem, practitioners should keep in mind that religion can also be a great help for some children who need to deal with their trauma: some will find safety and support in their faith.

Considerations for practitioners and policy makers

- Working with general early-prevention intervention methods can be useful for children from extremist families⁽¹¹⁾. Exercises related to identity, belonging, critical thinking, and family relations can improve children's life skills and broaden their knowledge. These should be undertaken by qualified and culturally competent individuals, supported by both community and statutory networks of professionals.
- For children under the age of 12, the earlier the counselling or intervention takes place, the better their chances for successful rehabilitation.
- Imposing one's own views on the child is counterproductive. Efforts to understand the child, as well as his or her perspectives, and being culturally sensitive to the child's background is more helpful in building trust.
- When working with a child individually, blaming the parents will not help either the child or the parents. Therefore, practitioners should avoid doing so.
- Practitioners do not always need to have excessive knowledge of the ideology or religion. Sometimes, it is even helpful to pretend not to know so much about the religion in order to gain greater insights into their perspective.
- Include (moderate) religious leaders in this process. They know the sensitivities in discussing religion and can help with having the right conversation. It should be the child who sets the boundaries for what is discussed.

4. Trauma therapy

In addition to the effects parental influence or indoctrination may have on these children, research should be conducted to identify the potential signs of trauma these children may show. Agnes van Minnen⁽¹²⁾ argues that the term 'trauma' is used to describe two experiences:

- Having a difficult life: divorced parents, money problems, bullies etc.
- Experiencing the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

While having a difficult life can be very tough on any child, experiencing PTSD symptoms means they believed they looked death right in the eye. Treatment of PTSD therefore requires experienced practitioners who understand the '*survival brain*' of these children in terms of their fight-flight-freeze response to trauma.

What happens when children experience trauma symptoms?

The '**thinking brain**' is taken over by the lower brain functions which switch to '**survival mode**'. The brain is **set to repeat** itself. When a child does not deal with this, **experiences are not neatly ordered and stored** in the brain. Certain noises, smells or visions linked to the experience can cause **flashbacks**. This causes confusion because the child does not consciously recognise where they are coming from. A child in this 'survival mode' will **find it difficult to engage** because the initial response is **to survive rather than to think 'rationally'** and to discuss this with professionals who are trying to provide support. Practitioners should understand that these children do not '**fail to engage**' with services, as it is commonly assumed. Instead, they are '**unable to engage**' because of a perceived threat.

¹¹ RAN YF&C and RAN H&SC. '[Working with families and safeguarding children from radicalisation](#)', February 2017, Nice (FR)

¹² Prof. Dr. Agnes van Minnen (2018) "Verlamd van Angst" Boom uitgevers - (Only available in Dutch)

The link between trauma therapy and extremism is an important one to make. Whether bringing the child inside an extremist environment or taking them out, the child may be left with traumatic experiences. Traumatized children are more likely to misinterpret information and conversations and become hypersensitive. Parents or caretakers are important in teaching the child the right words to describe their feelings. When the 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 start to act out.

The more traumatic the events children experience, the more likely they are to face mental disorders and physical health problems⁽¹³⁾. A child's development is affected by trauma and multiple traumas need to be properly understood before they can be effectively addressed by practitioners. Trauma therapy is therefore an essential part of the deradicalisation process and exit work. For instance, if trauma is left untreated, it is very difficult for the exit work to succeed.

In the long-term, children need to start recognising their trigger points and structuring their thoughts in order to prevent this from happening again. While the symptoms of a child's trauma can usually be reduced, curing it entirely is very difficult. Children should learn how to deal with their frustration and aggression. This may mean the child first needs to live outside of the extremist setting: treating the child's traumatic experiences can be difficult if the child remains in the same setting that has caused the trauma. Further information about the different treatments available can be found in the RAN H&SC paper titled 'PTSD, trauma, stress and the risk of (re)turning to violence'⁽¹⁴⁾.

Considerations for practitioners and policymakers

- It is important to be able to understand the child's behaviour and ask questions about how and what he or she is feeling.
- There are several books on the topic of children and trauma, which can teach both parents and caretakers how to help these children and foster a sense of security:
 - Margaret E. Blaustein, Kristine M. Kinniburgh (2010) *"Treating traumatic stress in Children and Adolescents: How to foster resilience through attachment, Self-regulation and competency."* Guilford Press.
 - Prof. Dr. Agnes van Minnen (2018) *"Verlamd van Angst"* Boom uitgevers – Only in Dutch
 - Bruce Perry and Maia Szalavitz *"The boy who was raised as a dog. What traumatised children can teach us"*
- It is important to thoroughly evaluate the triggers of the trauma. This also requires building a long-term relationship with the child, providing stability, structure and the feeling that you care.
- To effectively treat the trauma, professionals need to simultaneously work on other factors that may be troubling the child. The psycho-social cycle will remain intact if it is not tackled holistically.

¹³ RAN H&SC ex post paper. '[Children and youth growing up in a radicalised family/environment](#)', September 2016, Hamburg (DE)

¹⁴ RAN H&SC ex post paper. '[PTSD, trauma, stress and the risk of \(re\)turning to violence](#)', April 2018, Lisbon (PT)

Applying creative therapy

For some traumatised children, talking can be effective. However, practitioners usually find that talking about their traumas is more difficult for children. It's easier to use creative therapy, which can help a child reveal emotions without having to directly touch upon the trauma.

"I once treated a boy in therapy whom I assumed had endured something terrible but who was not talking about it. I used creative therapy to help him express his feelings. Every session I asked him what he wanted to make, and he always ended up making a mask. When I described the mask as something that you can hide behind, he agreed. This was an opening to discuss what he had to hide from."

Below are the different interventions that can be used to achieve this:

Exercise and sports can play an important role in a child's long-term reintegration into society. Sports can have the following positive impact:

- It is an easy way to interact and connect with people outside their extremist context. For instance, inter-faith football teams provide children with the opportunity to play with children from other religions. This creates a common goal and makes the other children more 'human'.
- Sports can help reverse the physical symptoms of trauma. The understanding of how trauma is stored in the body is still being researched, but physical activity can penetrate the autonomic thinking levels of the brain where logic and talking therapy cannot. Through gymnastics, children can build physical strength and gain confidence, which is very important for those who have endured physical violence.
- Physical and mental health go hand in hand. As such, there is a positive incentive for getting involved in sports.

Theatre combines dialogue and physical movement. In this way, children can work through their experiences without having to talk about these directly. *Clowns without Borders* apply similar tactics by helping children affected by crisis to laugh and play.

Playing is one of the easiest ways for children to express their feelings – much easier than talking about them. Teaching parents how to play with their child is very important, but this can be very difficult for certain parents. Playing also combines the mental with the physical. It is essential to play in the child's own language. Below are several activities that have proven to be effective:

- Drawing
- Reading children's books
- Storytelling (especially useful when treating children returning from war zones)
- Playing games with them

All these physical and creative activities can provide children with (small) achievable goals that help them to grow. Tying into the child's prior positive experiences with sports can help find the sport best suited for the child. This can ensure the child does not experience failure but merely enjoys the game. Since children need something to hope for, this incremental process can help them a lot.

Considerations for practitioners and policymakers

- There is no one-size-fits all solution. Every child needs a customised approach that has been selected after carefully exploring what works for each specific child.

5. Removing a child from their 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 so severe that that it causes 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.

Here, we will examine the impact of removing a child from their family. What impact does a lack of skills, networks and knowledge have on the child? What is the role of violence in extremist families? What are the consequences of removing a child from their family?

Lack of skills, networks and knowledge

RAN EXIT underlines that the first step in the resocialisation of extremists is to pull them out of their isolated environment and to build a new life outside the extremist group: a social network, work and housing⁽¹⁵⁾. This can be specifically challenging for children who have never lived outside an extremist environment as they can also be confronted with a lack of 'common knowledge', skills and networks that are relevant for a life in a non-extremist environment. By bringing the child into a completely new milieu, there is a big possibility they will feel like a foreigner.

"During my first week at public school, someone mentioned Michael Jordan on the playground. I asked who he was. Everyone looked at me, until one person said he was a basketball player. By asking what basketball was, my chance to fit in was done with. I did a crash course in culture and hid where I came from. I fit in, I changed, but all the while I felt that I could not connect with them. I did not know at that time who my authentic self was"

Being unaware of the knowledge and customs considered normal in mainstream society might be a barrier for building a new life⁽¹⁶⁾. 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 below.

¹⁵ RAN EXIT ex post paper. '[Setting-up an exit intervention](#)', February 2017, Berlin (DE)

¹⁶ RAN EXIT ex post paper. '[Lessons from adjacent fields: Cults](#)', June 2017, Bordeaux (FR)

Lessons from the field of domestic violence and child abuse

A field that can provide lessons with regards to detecting and dealing with children of radicalised or extremist families is the domain of prevention of domestic violence and abuse. The process of assessing risks and danger of the child is extremely relevant within this field. There is a wealth of experience to learn from, such as how to decide whether a child should be removed from their home (either on a permanent base or just for 72 hours in case of immediate danger). It's a decision made on a daily basis.

The Domestic Abuse Disclosure Scheme or 'Clare's Law' is a method that is currently used by police officers in the United Kingdom. This scheme sets out procedures that police can use to disclose information to people concerned about someone's previous violent offences, to prevent such offences from happening again. This scheme has strict rules about which requests are taken up. This principle could also be applied to radicalisation – to detect whether extremist family members might pose a threat to their children.

Domestic violence and child abuse

According to the majority of participants, child maltreatment and extremism are linked. Violence, especially transgenerational violence, is condoned in view of the ideological cause in many extremist and cultic families. Beating the child may not be viewed as an absence of care by the family, but as a way of caring for the child and bringing them into line.

"When I was at a refugee camp, I saw children watching several shootings of people and laughing about it. This made me angry at first, but I learned that they see violence and are confronted with martyrdom daily, which makes them entirely desensitised. I therefore learned to deal with my reactions to their reactions to trauma."

Studies have shown that a child's exposure to domestic violence is the single best predictor of transmitting violence across generations⁽¹⁷⁾. This could explain why parents in extremist families often have a history of violence themselves. Furthermore, participants indicated that sexual abuse is a common denominator that also has a huge impact on the child.

Considerations to take into account

Before removing a child from their family, the consequences of this action should always be taken into account. As such, one needs to realise that damage is not always physically visible, but can also be inflicted mentally and emotionally.

Research shows that children who are removed from their home and placed in the care system achieve far less positive outcomes from a behavioural, neurobiological and social nature than those who continue to live

¹⁷ Violence and the Family (1996), Washington, DC, American Psychological Association, as cited in D'Michelle P. DuPre M.D., Jerri Sites M.A., in [Child Abuse Investigation Field Guide](#), 2015

with their parents or carers. Dryden (2017) highlights that for these children there is “*a heightened risk of becoming involved in substance misuse, anti-social behaviour, crime, and is linked to a higher propensity to carry such behaviours into adulthood, culminating in an increased likelihood of serving a prison sentence*’.⁽¹⁸⁾ What is more, removing the child may also result in the heavy risk of stimulating radicalisation with the child or other family members. It can also damage the trust of other family members, which could make them not want to cooperate anymore. Practitioners should therefore always consider what the action can achieve compared to what could happen if no action is taken.

Considerations for practitioners and policymakers

- Extremist parents with a history of violence themselves may find it tough to cope. They may be convinced they are not in a position of becoming someone of value to society and have limited knowledge about positive parenting. Therefore, practitioners should take this potential history of violence into account when approaching them.

Returnee children

Returnee children are currently receiving a lot of attention in the EU, partly because of the potential threat they pose. For instance, they may have witnessed terrible events or they may have been trained to use weapons. Also, they may have been taken to places where martyrdom is glorified and they may have been surrounded and indoctrinated by extremists. Here, we will describe working methods when the parents are in prison on suspicion of terrorist crimes. What can we learn from all the above when it comes to child returnees?

Working with child returnees can be quite a challenge for practitioners. One reason for this is that there have not been many case descriptions to provide practitioners with practical insights. Below are some steps to assist practitioners:

Considerations for practitioners and policymakers

- **Gather as much information as possible about the children**
Practitioners should understand that when they are called upon to help, there usually is very little or no information available about the children. Because these cases are usually paired with the utmost secrecy, finding out more information is not easy.
- **Choose one key point of contact for the children when collaborating with other parties**
Sometimes practitioners need to work with new partners, including those they have never worked with before. It can be a challenge to find a common ground in the different visions and tasks. Establishing a main point of contact who is responsible for the case is key to ensuring the smoothest possible transition for the children.

¹⁸ Pinto and Woolgar (2015), p. 181, as cited in Matt Dryden (2017) [‘Radicalisation: The Last Taboo in Safeguarding and Child Protection?’](#), Journal for deradicalization, p. 111

- **Find a place where they can stay**

In many cases, returnee children's parents will be sent to prison for potentially committing terrorist crimes. This means the children (if not convicted as well) need a place to stay. Keeping the children together – in a familiar setting – is very much preferred whenever possible. Here is what practitioners can do:

- Find directly related family members who can care for the children. These family members need to be checked thoroughly on a potential fundamentalist background, but generally practicing their religion is allowed.
- In case there is no direct family, the children should be placed into foster care. The foster parents need to be carefully checked and briefed as much as possible about the children.

- **Discussing their experiences and feelings**

As previously mentioned, it is highly unlikely for returnee children, who have only just been separated from their parents, to talk about their feelings directly. It is important to recognise that returnee children have been exposed, to a certain extent, to violence. As such, getting them to talk may take time. While creative therapy can be useful, it might also take a long time to show results. Children who are more reluctant to disclose their feelings should be assured that it is all right to do so.

Contrary to what was initially expected, the first cases of returnee children do not seem to show any behaviour that suggests they are suffering from a traumatic experience – not even after a couple of years. While discussing traumatic experience as early as possible makes the healing process easier in the long-term, forcing them to talk about this is not an option. Nevertheless, practitioners should continue to ask questions and to make them feel they can talk safely about anything. Body language is also a key indicator of what the child is going through. Keeping a close eye on the child to detect symptoms of trauma is key to bringing them back to a normal life as soon as possible. It is also important to customise each approach to fit the needs of the child.

- **Keep the children in touch with their parents**

One of the challenges practitioners have encountered in dealing with children of extremist families is maintaining communication between the parents and the child after they have been separated. The state of mind of the parents and the chance they will infect their child with their ideas is a key indicator. Especially in the beginning, children should always be supervised by a social worker. After a while, and with good progress, visits could potentially be done without supervision.

- **Involve trauma experts and psychologists**

Policymakers need to involve trauma experts and psychologists in cases of returnee children. Returnee children may have looked death in the eye and need experts who know how to handle this.

Conclusion

"When my parents brought me into the group, I was not the focus. When they left the group and took us with them, I was not the focus either. I did not feel rescued; living in the cult was my life and suddenly this was taken away from me."

As the quote above illustrates, the interest of the child in extremist families may be trumped by the interest of the cause. For some extremist parents, their children are a means to reach a certain outcome and part of their ideological arsenal. They can be used to defend their ideas and give mass to their group. Despite what is sometimes believed, an extremist upbringing puts the child at a higher risk, not society. There is also the difficult paradox between what we think would be best for the child and what is really in the child's best interest. Moving a child from the extremist group to a 'safer' home seems to be the right solution, but this is not always the best way to protect a child. Removing a child from the home can also have a huge emotional impact on that child. As such, it is important for practitioners to discuss with each other how to find a balance between what is good for the child and what it means to force the child into a safer situation. This is an issue that should not be decided entirely by lawmakers, as it has a strong humanitarian component as well.

What is more, the one factor that should always be considered is to what extent the family is in effect harming each specific child. This will differ per child. For instance, there will always be children who are indoctrinated, traumatised and unskilled, or who redirect their feelings of injustice towards a certain form of extremism. But there will also be those who resist and reject this extremism by themselves. Many teenagers find ways to do things differently. Where this may lead to certain young people radicalising in their teenage years, children who grew up in extremist families might do the opposite. As such, it is crucial to have someone in the child's network looking out for the child and helping him or her. This is particularly necessary in the case of children who are not strong enough to defend themselves.