

WELCOME TO AIF!

Welcome to the third newsletter from the Alternative Future (AIF) partners!

The project, which is funded by the European Commission under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme, will run for two years, ending in December 2017. It aims to develop resources that will enable staff who work with young people in residential care to better understand how the experience of violence affects them, how gender impacts on perceptions and experience of violence, and how to support the young people more effectively. Ultimately, Alternative Future aims to reduce the risk of them becoming victims or perpetrators of violence in later life.

Six organisations are partners in the project. SURT (Fundació de dones) in Barcelona is the lead partner. SURT supports women who have been victims of abuse and has a strong track record in violence reduction approaches. The other partners are Animus (a provider of services to vulnerable children based in Sofia), Dissens (a gender education and research agency in Berlin), AMGI is a centre for masculinity research, education and psychosocial support, Innocenti (a child welfare and child policy organisation based in Florence) and Children in Scotland (the national network for child rights and wellbeing in Scotland).

THE AIF WEBSITE

The project has its own website. Find it at <http://alternativefuture.eu>.

On the website you will find detailed information about the project as well as regular updates on partners' activity and relevant news items.

SUMMARY OF THE MUTUAL LEARNING SEMINAR

Objective

The Mutual Learning Seminar took place in Berlin on 31 May 2017.

The aim of the meeting was to promote cross-national learning and exchange the knowledge and expertise obtained with the support actions implemented in each country.

The seminar had 20 participants, 17 women and three men. Eleven of these were from partner organisations, along with nine professionals working on residential care facilities (RCF) across Europe. These professionals had previously participated in the design and implementation of the specific support actions for the empowerment of young people in care.

The professionals came from six different countries: Austria, Germany, Italy, Bulgaria, Scotland and Catalunya.

The implementation of the specific support actions

During the mutual learning seminar, professionals had the chance to present the support actions that had been implemented in their countries.

Animus

The work undertaken was 'Embrace Gender Equality and Stand against Gender Based Violence' and 'Safe Everywhere'.

Embrace Gender Equality and Stand against Gender Based Violence

The support action was implemented at SOS Children's Villages which operates two facilities in Sofia. Each accommodates about 10 boys and girls aged 14 to 18. The residents in one, 'Friends', took part in the support action.

The residents of the centre are teenagers, when questions of identity in general, and gender identity in particular, are central to their development. They have, in addition, experienced violence and trauma and may accept some forms of violence, including gender-based violence, as normal. They may also have encountered examples of negative gender stereotyping. It was, therefore, decided that exploring the topics of gender roles and gender equality could be very useful to them.

Focus groups with both children and professionals were carried out in the same facility at the previous stage of the project. These groups had identified some of the issues for, and needs of, the residents and staff; these were mainly related to personal safety, boundaries, recognising violence, gender-based violence and gender inequality. The topics were finalised in consultation with the head of the facility, who provided information on previous activities in which the children had been involved, and the nature of their current needs.

The results achieved were a better understanding of gender-based violence and gender roles/expectations and how they have affected the participants' lives, along with ideas about, and coping strategies for, gender-based violence.

The group felt that the support action is sustainable as it gave the participants new ways of reflecting on and understanding some of their views and experiences. Issues of gender and identity are always of great importance in adolescence. The support action, and elements thereof, can easily be replicated with a different group as it requires few resources and the time commitment is not substantial.

Safe Everywhere

The support action took place at SUPC (Social Learning and Professional Center) 'Knyaz Boris I'. Facilities of this type provide residential care and skills development opportunities to prepare residents for the job market.

The topic of safety and identifying safe and secure was chosen for its particular relevance to the young people as they move into the labour market. Young people who have suffered adversity and trauma are particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. They may form inappropriate relationships, either because they trust people indiscriminately or are unable to form trusting connections with others. They often see the world as threatening or risky, thus the focus on safety is important.

In terms of results achieved, the participants analysed their perceptions of safety and of risk, shared experiences among themselves and with the trainer and were able to better identify some risks to which they have been subject in the past and how to avoid them in the future in their relationships or when seeking work. They also identified what creates a safe space and how they can work to make their living space safer for themselves and others. By sharing experiences, they managed to learn new things about each other as they do not often have to talk to each other openly, and this can help them develop a feeling of belonging and community.

The group felt that the support action is sustainable as it covers a topic which is of importance and interest to young people. They have experienced lack of safety and trust which makes them a group at risk of abuse of trust and exploitation. The exercises can be easily replicated or adapted to a similar group and setting.

Dissens

The work undertaken was 'Gender Month' and 'Youth friendly participatory methods'.

Gender Month

The AIF needs assessment found that young people living in residential care partly follow gender stereotypes that they are confronted with by media, peers and adults. While agreeing with this, staff from

this facility also felt a need for more gender-specific offers. In particular, they were worried about the boys not getting enough attention as the girls were much more present in the facility while the boys much more hid in their rooms.

After analysing this, the idea was to establish a range of activities related to gender that raise awareness about gender issues, interrogate prejudices and norms that don't reproduce images of 'all boys are like this' and 'all girls are like that'. A number of activities were planned that should be implemented in various settings within one month which would be called the Gender Month.

In terms of results achieved, the young people reflected on gender norms, they learnt new things through the videos and they tried out new activities. The young people enjoyed participating in the activities during this month. After watching the videos, they would ask question and would discuss gender issues amongst each other and with the professionals.

If done at least once a year and restricted to a certain timeframe, it was felt to be sustainable.

Youth friendly participatory methods

The work was undertaken at a facility for LGBT* youth (aged 16-21) that offers semi-residential/assisted living services and one fulltime residential care facility for young people with addictions or at risk of addiction (aged 12-21).

The staff in both facilities emphasised the need for participation of the young people, but expressed concern that the existing tools were not well received by the young people. There was a lack of participatory methods that were youth-friendly and accessible.

In terms of results achieved, the young people were given a space for experimentation and experiencing. They were allowed to express what worked for them and what not, which in itself is already a participatory process, even if they would dismiss individual methods.

The professionals expressed surprise in their own initial reluctance to implement new participatory methods, be it because of the extra work or reluctance to change in general. After starting the process, they expressed surprise and excitement about the process that was started. The young people expressed that maybe they did not like every single method but were excited at being able to try new things and were encouraged to express their opinions.

The participatory methods are a long-term project. The individual methods are there to initiate a process that is ongoing and sustainable.

Istituto degli innocenti

The work undertaken was 'The emotions circle' and 'Preventing Cyberbullying and online grooming through cartoons clips'.

The emotions circle

The Gould Institute runs two residential care facilities: 'Arco' currently hosting 9 boys and girls from 13 to 20 and 'Colonna', currently hosting 7 boys and girls from 12 to 20 years.

The support actions were carried out based on an existing activity called 'The Circle', a space in which young people can discuss freely issues and activities relating to life in the residential facilities with their educators.

The topic of emotional education was chosen because, during the needs assessment phase, it emerged both from the focus groups with the professionals and the young people that the latter have difficulty in identifying and addressing the multiple emotions they face in their everyday life. Often the young people deny or underestimate the importance of emotions. This was therefore identified as a priority area to address, with a focus on prevention, before tackling other subjects.

In terms of results achieved, the activities dealing with emotions achieved the expected results as they supported the young people in being more aware about their emotions and their importance in their everyday life. The children have appreciated this work and gained new tools about the topics that were discussed.

The actions proved to be sustainable thanks to a methodology that can be easily replicated with other similar groups composed of boys and girls of different ages, of course bearing in mind the specific characteristics of each group.

Preventing Cyberbullying and online grooming through cartoons clips

Also run at The Gould Institute, the topic of cyberbullying and online grooming was chosen because, from the needs assessment phase (both from the focus group with professionals and those with children), it emerged that, while the young people were regularly and frequently exposed to these kind of risks, they usually did not know how to recognise and manage them.

Although there were some initial difficulties, the young people were, in general, able to participate actively in the group discussion, to express their opinions freely and to challenge their peers and facilitators. The young people seem to have appreciated the activities and some of them also found them fun. In general, they helped the young people to feel more relaxed and accepted in the group. For some, the exercises also improved the relationship with their caregivers.

The professionals saw the activities about cyberbullying and online grooming as providing useful tools that would enable the young people to deal with these risks more effectively. They felt, however, that the young people would need some time to reflect on and internalise this new knowledge.

The actions proved helpful in addressing topics that are very relevant to the everyday life of the young people

involved. The methodology based on watching the videos proved to be effective as tools with which that the young people are familiar were used. This contributed to achieving more meaningful and effective discussion.

SURT

The work undertaken was 'It is not only battering that hurts', 'How are we exposed to internet risks?' and 'The magic trunk'.

It is not only battering that hurts

CRAE Sant Josep de la Muntanya is a residential foster care facility divided into six cohabitational units. In each unit care is provided to around 10 boys and girls aged 3-18.

The prevalence of gender-based violence among adolescents is not decreasing. On the contrary, according to the results of the Needs Assessment, intimate relationships based on possessiveness, jealousy and control are normalised also among boys and girls living in residential care facilities. This normalisation contributes to the perpetration of other types of gender-based violence.

In this respect, the objectives of the action were to: raise awareness among adolescents on the phenomenon of gender-based violence; prevention and recognition of the signs of abusive relationships, and the promotion of healthy and equal relationships among boys and girls.

At the end of the activity the participants (boys and girls) and professionals were asked to answer short evaluation questionnaires. Boys and girls assessed the it very positively, as it raised awareness among the young people of the nature and impact of intimate partner violence. Professionals emphasised the need to continue working on this topic. Further actions should be implemented in order to deepen the understanding of this issue among young people.

The action is sustainable and easily replicable, as its implementation does not require special material. The main obstacle for its replication in other countries might be the language barrier (the monologue used is only in Spanish).

How are we exposed to internet risks?

CRAE Elima is a residential foster care facility that provides care to 18 girls from 14-18 years old. The facility is located in Sabadell, a city near Barcelona of more than 200.000 inhabitants.

Young people share a lot of personal information through the internet. This sharing of information can be dangerous in respect of user privacy issues and can facilitate the perpetration of diverse forms of abuse.

In order to contribute to build safe and trustworthy spaces for young people it is important to ensure their privacy and confidentiality within and outside the facility. This action aimed to provide the girls with knowledge and tools in order to foster their self-protection and empowerment when accessing social networking, as well as preventing episodes of violence occurring in social networks.

Participants were motivated to participate and share their personal experiences. They had the chance to talk about internet risks, privacy and relationships based on control and jealousy.

In terms of assessing the results, many of the girls said that they already knew most of the internet risks mentioned before the action. Some girls thought they already used the internet safely and were reluctant to make any changes. Others said the action had given them tools for better and safer internet use. Some girls indicated that they had taken steps to make their personal accounts safer after the action.

The action is sustainable and easily replicable, as its implementation does not require expensive and specialised material.

The magic trunk

CRAE Les Palmeres is a Residential Care Facility located in Barcelona that provides care to children aged 3 -18. It is a mixed facility, for 12 boys and girls.

On the basis of the results of the Needs Assessment phase, it was clear that experiences of violence negatively affect people's emotional wellbeing, including their self-esteem and confidence.

Contributing to young people's self-esteem and empowerment is fundamental to their recovery from the experience of violence and to helping them build a life free from its ongoing effect.

The support action had very positive results. Boys and girls were highly motivated and actively participated in the action. Participants had difficulties in identifying positive features of themselves, whereas it was easier for them to identify other people's.

At the end, participants commented on the difficulties of receiving and acknowledging compliments from others, as well as defining their own positive attributes. They were all more used to criticism. The action promoted reflection on the way young people feel about themselves, their abilities and thoughts.

The sustainability of this action should be ensured through individual work.

Professionals can maximise the impact of the action by addressing the following questions in individual meetings with the participants: do you think you are the most important person to yourself?; if not, what are the reasons why you are not, and what could you/we do to achieve it?

Children in Scotland

Here in Scotland we have carried out and planned several support actions, some of which have not yet

been concluded. The young people we interviewed in the Needs Assessment identified a number of issues of importance to them, and that affected their wellbeing and life chances. All the young people we interviewed had had difficult and traumatic experiences in their early life; neglect, abuse, violence, family instability, homelessness, and parental substance misuse featured strongly in their lives.

In general the young people we talked to were very positive about their experience in care, how they were being helped and the commitment of the staff to supporting them in moving on positively towards adulthood.

They did, however, highlight a number of things that were difficult for them and affected their emotions, health and learning. One was understanding how their earlier experiences might affect them in the future, and not always having a strong sense of who they were as a person and how they 'belonged'. Others included significant sleep disturbance, feelings of anxiety and uncertainty on admission to a residential unit, and, despite their appreciation of the stability and consistency provided in the unit, an absence of fun and laughter from the unit routine.

We are carrying out a number of support actions - providing advice from specialist counsellors on how to sleep more soundly, developing better information and support around admission experiences and arranging a 'Clown Doctor' workshop to provide fun and enjoyment in a therapeutic way. A very valuable support action, positively evaluated by the young residents and the staff, has been an art and learning project around the theme of identity. This was carried out in a secure care setting and involved 7 young people (5 boys and 2 girls) between the ages of 12 and 16. It took place over 6 weeks and involved residential care staff and teachers. Though one RCO and the Head Teacher led the action, it was very much seen as involving all care and teaching staff.

Over the period of the project the young people, with staff support, explored the theme of 'identity'. This involved a lot of discussion with the young people about identity, what it means to be separated from your family, and how early life can affect you. They worked as a group which encouraged empathy and peer support. They produced a variety of artwork which illustrated the themes discussed. These included drawings, paintings and making boxes with compartments in which they could store items of personal significance. As well as having therapeutic value the project also met a number of formal learning objectives for the school curriculum. It culminated in an exhibition of the art work which was attended by social work and education managers, and where the young people were able to talk about their work and what the project had meant to them. Their individual evaluations were highly positive in terms of their wellbeing and learning.

AMGI

The work undertaken was 'Role play game: as real life' and 'Discussion forum on bullying and cyberbullying'.

Role play game: as real life

This method was piloted in a full-time RCF facility for 40 boys and girls aged 11-18. Young people also work there as apprenticeship centres are located nearby the living communities. The RCF additionally offers a school class and job coaching. It has a multi-professional staff and is run by the local authority.

The method was chosen because, over all countries in the partnership, further training in diversity/intersectionality and children's rights was wanted by about 1/3 of all interviewed professionals.

In Austria this topic was therefore part of the capacity building programme. An adult version of the role play game As real life was part of this programme, and professionals became more aware of the diversity of

youth in their RCF. Subsequently the youth version of this role play game was piloted in the RCF.

In terms of results achieved, participants experienced different gender roles, privileges and feelings that arose in different phases of the role play game. Every participant had the chance to talk about their opinion and point of view. In the ex-post-evaluation (questionnaire) the pedagogue said that the method was suitable to discuss social norms, origin, sexual orientation, which are always important and current topics in youth work and violence prevention.

To achieve sustainability this method should be recognised as one tool of the pedagogical work in the RCF to foster children's rights and awareness of diversity.

Discussion forum on bullying and cyber-bullying

This method was piloted in a full-time RCF facility caring for 40 boys and girls aged 11 to 18. Young people also work there, as apprenticeship centres are located in close proximity to the living communities. The RCF additionally offers a school class and job coaching. It has a multi-disciplinary staff group and is run by the local authority.

The needs assessment showed that a most young people living in RCFs have experienced bullying, especially in school. In the needs assessment workshops both young people and professionals said that young people in residential care frequently use social media and electronic devices, which are very important to them. Cyber-bullying is therefore a relevant topic for them.

The discussion forum is regarded as a support action for young people and professionals to share knowledge and experiences of the residents about this topic and to support children to access any help needed.

In terms of results achieved, participants talked about many current and personal examples from their own lives and those of close relatives and friends. Topics discussed: gender were; social attributes of violence; legal position; challenging and protecting against bullying and cyber-bullying. Solutions and ways to get support were communicated.

After piloting professionals fed back that they would like this type of open discussion on (cyber)bullying regularly, particularly if a new child or young person joins the RCF living community, and eventually in combination with the topic of violence in general.

Full versions of these presentations will be available in the online catalogue.

Main conclusions

Following the presentations, attendees at the seminar agreed that it is important to continue to work to protect and respect the rights of children and young people within RCFs, and to ensure that professionals are equipped to support and protect the young people inside and outside the RCF, and to promote gender equality.

Partner information:



Associate partners and co-financers:

The Scottish Government Looked After Children Division is also supporting the project.



Co-funded by the European Union
This publication has been produced with the financial support of the REC programme 2014-2020. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the Alternative Future project team, and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Commission.