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Empowering Child Care Systems and Supporting Leaving Care From Inside

POLICY TOOLKIT

TO SUPPORT ALTERNATIVE CARE CENTRES, SERVICES AND FAMILIES IN STRENGTHENING THEIR STRATEGIES FOR ACCOMPANYING CARE LEAVERS TO AUTONOMY

co-funded by the Rights, Education, Citizenship (REC) Programme of the European Union

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. The CarING project: what, who and how

The European project **CarINg** (*Empowering Child Care Systems and Supporting Leaving Care from Inside*), co-funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) Programme of the European Union, is an action-research project aimed at listening to and creating opportunities for carelevers – by working with territorial social services and local stakeholders – to participate in decisions concerning their life path, allowing care leaving to assume the form of a gradual process, supported by a local network.

The main focus is on care leavers, involving them as protagonists in all phases of the project and supporting them during the process of preparing for life outside of the protection system.

The project activities have been designed to enable children, young people and families to prepare themselves well in advance for the transition period when leaving the protection system, helping to reduce the critical issues that are associated with leaving the system. All activities focus on the promotion of agency and participation of children and young people as key elements to foster a healthy and balanced transition to adulthood. This implies moving towards:

a) an increased sense of self-efficacy, also defined in relation to the participants' ability to actively plan their daily lives;

b) direct involvement of children and young people in planning and deciding their best future possibilities;

c) a growing awareness and knowledge of the social fabric around them;

d) a more predisposed attitude towards collective action among all children, young people and the actors that characterise the social ecosystem of children and young people.

Furthermore, the project has provided tailor-made training for social service and educational professionals and has stimulated the community to network around the needs and aspirations of care leavers.

Now the whole action research feels the **need to provide recommendations on how to improve policies for care leavers with a special focus on preparing, facilitating and accompanying young people during and after the process of leaving the care system.**
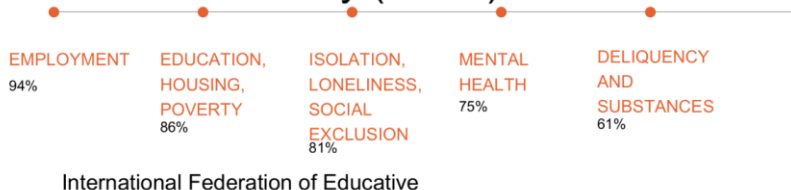
2. CarINg: literature on leaving care

The term Care Leavers refers to boys and girls who live outside their family of origin based on a Judicial Authority Order and who, on reaching the age of majority, with the exception of a few cases, find themselves having to leave the protection system and thus lose the care provided by the services that have accompanied them up to that moment.

Local child protection systems are crucial to prevent future scenarios of poverty, social exclusion, deviance and violence (Häggman-Laitila, Salokekkilä, & Karki, 2018; Harder et al., 2020; Pinkerton, 2011). According to the survey conducted by the National Ombudsperson (2016-2017 data), in Italy the number of children and young people considered 'out-of-home care' was in 2016 approximately 26,000 cases, divided into 14,000 in foster care situations and 12,000 in residential services for children and young people. More recent data collected by the Ministry for Social Policies underline a growing trend, mainly due to the presence of

unaccompanied foreign children and young people and the emergence of new situations of economic and educational poverty. Within the life trajectories of 'out-of-family' children and young people, the transition from guardianship systems to the 'outside' society represents a crucial moment in the experience of children and young people given that, if handled carelessly, it can have major negative consequences on their well-being and development, with side effects on individual and social life trajectories (Brown et al., 2014; Hiles et al., 2014; Mendes & Snow, 2016; Stein & Munro, 2008).

Major challenges for careleavers (Strahal et al., 2021) - Cross National Survey (n= 36)

EMPLOYMENT 94%

EDUCATION, HOUSING, POVERTY 86%

ISOLATION, LONELINESS, SOCIAL EXCLUSION 81%

MENTAL HEALTH 75%

DELIQUENCY AND SUBSTANCES 61%

International Federation of Educative

To face all the challenges that exist for care leavers, in August 2016, the project of International youth exchange: "*Be the change*" gathered 53 care leavers, aged 18 – 25, from 15 world countries to develop standards for care leavers.

Here are the **10 Standards for care leavers** that were developed.

1. Every care leaver should be involved in their care leaving plan and have a say in what has to be done.

2. Every care leaver should have equal rights, opportunities, access to social benefits and be adequately informed about this right

3. When applying for college/ university every care leaver should have benefits and access to scholarships sponsored either by governmental or private organisations.

4. To be able to find and succeed in a job, every care leaver should get help to become aware of and get recognized with their potential, so that they gather the chance to improve them.

5. Free health insurance for everyone. Care leavers must benefit from free health insurance.

6. To live his/her life, every care leaver needs to feel connected to some people they can rely on.

7. The workers supporting care leavers should be motivated, qualified, supportive and supervised.

8. To take care of one's own, care leavers need to have knowledge about life skills and how to organise their daily routine, like in a peer-to-peer training.

9. Care leavers need to know how to ensure their capability to keep a roof over their head.

10. After leaving care, society should provide the opportunity to turn to a mentor who guides and supports them emotionally, if needed.

3. CarINg's policy framework

At the UN General Assembly in 2009, the international community endorsed the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. They set **relevant standards for preparing children and young people for leaving foster care as well as the aftercare support that should be provided to them.** Moving Forward: Implementing the "Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children", provides more information and an explanation of these standards, also highlighting the implications in terms of policy-making with the corresponding allocation of budget and resources.

Extract from Moving Forward, pp. 100-101:

Implications for policy-making

Guidelines: § 131-136

Children who leave care require support through planning, preparation and information in order to prepare them positively for moving on from care. They should have the opportunity to develop skills as preparation for independent or semi-independent living as young adults. Support should be available for young people after they have left care and into young adulthood.

National policy should:

Ensure planning is in place for children leaving care

- Develop and implement legislation and guidance which outlines measures to support children who are leaving care and provides for aftercare support.

- Assign a specialised support worker to provide guidance, advice, facilitate and empower each child throughout the process of preparing to leave care and during aftercare support

- Provide consistent assessment, individualised planning and appropriate support for all children leaving care and as early as possible in their placement

- Ensure that children are not leaving care too young by supporting them to remain in their long-term care as they move into young adulthood

- Support foster carers and children so as to encourage the foster family to continue to be there for the child when they move into adult life

- Put in place mechanisms so that children can fully participate in planning for leaving care and can contribute to how this will be organised

- Ensure that different agencies with, for example, responsibility for housing, welfare, health and education are involved in planning and ongoing support to children leaving care

- Require the monitoring and review of aftercare plans regularly after a child moves on from care until s/he is able to live independently without systematic support

Provide support to children leaving care

- Provide opportunities for children to develop the necessary life skills and to have access to information when they are preparing to leave care.

- Require systems to be in place that ensure support for young people after they leave care with a named person available as ongoing contact.

- Provide services for children who are leaving care including access to health, social welfare, educational, vocational and employment opportunities. This should include specialist support for children with disabilities and other special needs.

- Consult with children leaving care to identify where they would like to live. If this is not close to the community where they were living during or prior to entering alternative care, discuss the implications and respond accordingly.

- Ensure that children who are currently in education and wish to continue their studies are supported in the transition to leaving care.

- Ensure that a range of different living and housing arrangements are available to children leaving care and that this is of appropriate quality.

Provide aftercare support to young people

- Support opportunities for young people to maintain contact with their previous care service, carers and friends, in recognition of the importance of ongoing relationships.

- Ensure that contact can be maintained with siblings who remain in care and other family members as appropriate.

- Ensure that children leaving care have access to high quality vocational and tertiary education, where appropriate, so that they have the same opportunities as their peers in parental care.

- Provide support with accessing education and vocational training, including financial support. Consideration should be given to the provision of scholarships or fee elimination to offset the disadvantage experienced by children raised in alternative care.

- Collect data on the progress of young people who have left care in order to contribute to greater knowledge and understanding on the outcomes of children in care.

- Encourage the extended family, community and civil society to provide support to young people who have left care. This should include support and encouragement for former foster carers and staff in formal care to stay in touch where a child wishes.

- Counter stigma and discrimination of young people who have been in care and promote children and young people's contributions as citizens.

4. CarINg's theoretical framework: the Capability Approach

The theoretical framework of the project is the Capability Approach (CA), a theoretical-practical model developed by A. Sen and M. Nussbaum for defining basic social justice. On a strictly theoretical and philosophical level, the model differs from other theories of social justice in its focus on the concrete dimension of **individuals' freedom, defined as a real capacity for self-determination and the pursuit of a life plan that individuals value.** For the CA, any intervention aimed at promoting social justice must have as its goal the expansion of the "Capability set" of individuals, that is, the set of real possibilities that are available to individuals in shaping their **existential path**, and at the same time the development of their **situational agency**.

Moreover, the CA tries to combine attention to external factors - the so-called **constraints and conversion factors** (specifically the degree to which a person can transform a resource into a functioning) that act on individuals-, with the promotion of autonomy, viewed as central to the effective exercise of full and conscious freedom to create real possibilities for the self.

M. Nussbaum's capabilities can help to reflect on the whole and globality of all the activities conducted so far within the project as well as to foster the cultural change that supports each person to think from the perspective of the **need-right-capability** transition, that is, what a child or young person can concretely do and be within the protection system.

Below is the enumeration and a brief explanation of M. Nussbaum's 10 capabilities:

1. **Life**. To be able to live a normal human life to the end.

2. **Physical health**. To be able to have good health, including reproductive health; being fully nourished; having adequate housing.

3. **Physical integrity**. To be able to move freely from place to place; to have assured sovereignty over one's body, that is, to be able to be safe from all kinds of violence; to have the ability to find sexual satisfaction and to make choices in matters of reproduction.

4. **Senses, imagination and thinking**. To be able to make full use of the senses, to imagine, think and reason-and to do so in a manner informed and cultivated by adequate education. To be able to exercise one's critical sense both politically and artistically, and freedom of worship.

5. **Emotions**. To be able to have connections with people and things outside of ourselves; to be able to love those who love and care about us, to suffer from their absence; in general, to love, to suffer, to feel lack, gratitude and justified anger. To have emotional development not marred by excessive fear and anxiety, or by traumatic events such as abuse or neglect.

6. **Practical reasoning**. To be able to form a conception of the good and engage in critical reflection on how to plan one's own form of life. (This also implies protection of freedom of conscience.)

7. **Membership**. a) To be able to live with and in respect to others, to recognize and show interest in other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to envision another's position and have compassion for that situation; to be capable of both justice and friendship. b) To have the social basis for self-respect and not being humiliated; to be able to have dignity equal to that of all others.

8. **Other species**. To be able to live by taking care of and being in relationship with animals, plants and the natural world.

9. **Play**. To be able to laugh, play and enjoy recreational activities.

10. **Control over one's environment**. a) Political. To be able to effectively participate in the political choices that govern one's life; enjoy the right of active political participation, as well as the protection of freedom of speech and association. b) Material. To be able to have property (both land and movable property), not merely in a formal sense, but in terms of concrete possibilities; to have property rights on an equal basis with others; to have the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others.

5. Caring recommendations for…

Despite the definition of the Essential Levels of Social Benefits (LEP) provided for by Article 117, paragraph 2, letter m) of the Constitution, as underlined by the recommendations of the Ombudsperson for Childhood and Adolescence (2019), the protection system is complex. Specifically, there are marked differences at the territorial level, with considerable diversification as to the concrete declinations of the protection of children, differences in the work of the social services, in the qualification, assessment and control of the alternative care centres, in the support to family foster care, in terms of promotion and awareness-raising, but also in terms of training and financial support to foster carers and so on.

In this respect, the recommendations presented here are the result of specific actions of the CarINg project. They were realised in a participatory manner thanks to the joint work of territorial services, child protection system operators and care leavers and are not intended to be generalisable, but transferable.

5.1 The protection system

The CarINg Project organised the so-called "Peer to Peer Sessions", i.e., a research action articulated in four moments of consultation and exchange between the professionists of the child protection system of the Municipality of Florence and of the Health Society of the Prato Area. The objective was the understanding of the functioning of the protection system and establishing priorities for action.

During the project activities, professional educators and social workers together reconstructed the workflow, starting from the time a case is reported (warning) to the child protection system to the child's exit from the protection system.
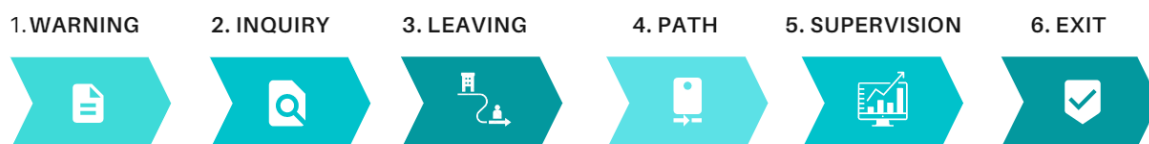

fig. 1 Workflow

Here they identified recommendations that go in the direction of promoting children's and young people's participation in the workflow:

- Streamline bureaucracy (especially for foreign families, unaccompanied foreign children and young people, children and young people with disabilities)
- Invest more resources in local areas to develop more opportunities (sports activities, aggregation opportunities, training and job opportunities) and to provide more information about the opportunities that already exist
- Create a tutoring service and a basic package of services to promote autonomy
- Increase the possibility to support and host youth >18 years old in residential care facilities
- Pay specific attention to care leavers' situations even in other areas of social services –besides the protection area– as well
- Achieve autonomy by following small steps (protection VS participation)
- Have more training opportunities on leaving care for the professionals of the protection system
- Have more interaction and collaboration between different institutions: employment, training, housing, tax assistance, and health.

5.2 Family foster care

CarINg also investigated foster families' needs, collecting recommendations for the child protection system:

- Be clear from the beginning about the child's situation
- Thinking about care leaving from the beginning of fostering:

  - by building a clear pathway that includes steps for the families and the formalisation of a renewal of commitment to the care leaver with periodic, updated assessments

  - preparing a vademecum on the procedures and opportunities available to the care leaver

- Build a meaningful relationship with the services based on steps that follow the care leaver's pathway until the "definitive" autonomy/independence of the child/ren
- Build a territorial network, specifically increasing interlocution with the health services, especially for persons with disabilities and with the police for unaccompanied minors

Moreover, the professionals of the child protection system identified existing **good practices,** that the involved municipalities are already putting into practices:

- Pay specific attention to children and young people in need of specific support
- Create a formal network of collaboration that can accompany children and young people towards the exit pathway
- Accompany of young people towards structures for autonomy (or semi-autonomy)

- Accompany towards the foster family and support from residential care practitioners
- Monitor the individual project of children and young people

The professionals also defined concrete **proposals** to work on:

- Streamline bureaucracy by creating information desks and reception points to help children and young people to deal with formal procedures and necessary documentation for their path to autonomy
- Identify a professional figure (tutor) who accompanies and supervises the young person's path to autonomy, preventing young people from feeling lost when leaving the protection system (e.g. social/youth policies)
- Provide housing policies for young adults and work and university facilities
- Rely on associations that can provide accommodation in a foreign country (e.i. "cultural" exchange)

6. Participatory construction of recommendations among care leavers and care system practitioners

M. Nussbaum's 10 capabilities have been used as macro-groups to place certain issues that emerged as particularly important from the participants of CarINg.

Care leavers, professional educators and social workers have identified some points of attention on which to elaborate formal recommendations and possible and concrete ways of intervention.

Here is the list of the three capabilities (**LIFE/PHYSICAL HEALTH; CONTROL OVER ONE'S ENVIRONMENT; MEMBERSHIP**) selected as the most important to participate in for a life worth living from care leavers' perspective.

RECOMMENDATIONS	IMPLEMENTATION EXAMPLES
LIFE/PHYSICAL HEALTH	
HEALTH SYSTEM: support the care leavers to learn how to use the healthcare system	- provide a toll-free number dedicated specifically to care leavers - support care leavers in getting an appointment or request a prescription - be co-responsible in following the indicated treatment - involve the care leavers in understanding the diagnosis and teaching them how to read the information pamphlet for medication - put more attention on the nutrition and prevention of diseases
CONTROL OVER ONE'S ENVIRONMENT	
PARTICIPATION SPACES: create a context in which the care leavers can participate in choices and be informed on decisions concerning them	- create *ad hoc* spaces and times to listen to the care leavers, making joint decisions and understanding the motivations behind each choice - have the opportunity to read, draft and learn about the objectives and the beneficiaries of the pedagogical documentation that is produced
ECONOMIC AUTONOMY: support the care leavers in their career path	- take into account working shifts in defining rules, especially in residential care - give support in the active job search (cv writing, how to approach the job interview)

EVERYDAY LIFE: avoid taking the management of daily life for granted	• support the care leavers in learning how to shop for groceries • support the care leavers in learning how to cook (e.i. preparing cooking workshops) • support the care leavers in learning hot to do minor household cleaning • support the care leavers in learning to manage money
RULES: formulate more age-appropriate and case-specific rules/give opportunity to earn trust	• assess rules on outings/permissions on a case-by-case basis • create spaces for social workers, educators, and care leaver to meet, to define and understand rules • create spaces for dialogue among the coordinators of the various facilities to discuss rules • negotiate rules according to age with specific attention to those who are no longer under age (less than 18 years)
PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE: supporting care leavers in expressing and defining goals, aspirations, dreams inherent in building their life plan <u>in time</u>	• support the care leavers in choosing a university/training/employment pathway • support the care leavers in finding housing • support the care leavers in the search for economic benefits (subsidised housing list, economic bonus) • provide a reference figure for the leaving care pathway • create discussion tables among educators and care leavers on experiences concerning leaving care

SPACE: having the possibility and the right to choose/have one's own space	- provide spaces divided by age (primary school, middle, high school) - control that the environment is conducive/appropriate for everyone, over time - have enough space to be able to bring one's own things and keep them safe (e.g., providing lockable drawers) - provide the possibility to personalise one's bed/room (e.g., being able to attach photos or posters to the walls) - provide the necessary work to maintain an aesthetical and pleasing space
MEMBERSHIP (FRIENDS/RELATIONSHIP/FAMILY)	
AWARENESS CAMPAIGN: raising awareness on the issue of living outside the biological family	- be aware that there are prejudices/stereotypes towards people living in residential/family foster care - raising awareness on the issue of living in alternative care (teachers and peers).
RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS: having opportunities to build and maintain long-lasting relationships and hanging out with friends outside: creating the conditions	- make possible for the care leavers to hang out with friends more frequently/allow them to come into the care centre - allow the care leavers to attend parties and events with more flexibility - allow the care leavers to celebrate birthdays/events in the care centre with the presence of outsiders - invest in opportunities to participate/join in sports and recreational activities - negotiate how to ensure user privacy to allow outsiders to enter the care centre while protecting insiders at the same time

RELATIONSHIPS WITH PRACTITIONERS: building relationships of mutual trust	• admit mistakes mutually • give care leavers a second chance • share with the care leavers the pedagogical documentation produced
RELATIVES: work in a network by involving care leavers, families and professionals in determining the most appropriate ways to conduct sheltered meetings	• provide for gradualness in sheltered encounters on a situation-by-situation basis (the care leaver project should be as individualised/personal as possible in this respect as well) • provide for meetings among educators, social workers and the care leaver to understand the ways of conducting protected encounters • inform families about how the sheltered meetings are conducted • inform the care leavers and their families about the purpose of the documentation produced during the meetings

The CarINg project then conducted "working tables" where operators together with care leavers identified some existing **good practices** for the implementation of these recommendations:

- Involve children and young people in bureaucratic matters

- Formulate rules case by case, taking into account the child or young person's situation, age, etc. and give him/her the opportunity to ear the professional's trust

- Build good relationships with practitioners

- Work and being connected with relatives

- Maintain good relationships with peers, i.g. allowing the young people to go out with friends and give him/her the opportunity to invite them inside the residential care centre

- Open the cere centres to others (e.g., hosting lunches at the centres where guardians, coaches, friends, etc. are invited; organisation of football matches) to show how the residential care centre life is and how the residential care centre looks like

7. CarINg's resources

Parallel to the work and activities presented so far, the CarINg project realised:

- an **audiovisual product** - facilitated by two directors - in which the care leavers tried to transform their emotions, feelings, fears, aspirations, reflections and ideas into a story, each of them building their own storyboard with the support and comparison of each other (video documentary "Controluce - la voce dei care leavers: https://youtu.be/IOHvlT5K-Mc)

- a **workshop for autonomy**, consisting of a series of meetings for care leavers (https://www.caringproject.eu/laboratori-per-autonomia-care-leavers/);

- a **tool** (application) with the aim of monitoring the pathway of the girls/boys in the care system with specific reference to the area of participation, autonomy and well-being.

8. Conclusions

The goal of the policy toolkit is to support alternative care centres, services and families in strengthening their strategies for accompanying care leavers to autonomy. In this direction, the recommendations gathered here can become working tracks for the involved adults and children and young people in care and leaving care. It would be important if each alternative care centre/service/foster family chose at least one of these aspects/recommendations to try to rethink their practices and, why not, implement them entirely.

Just to provide opportunities for reflection, we would like to conclude with some final open questions …

After reading this document…

- Name something that you learnt…

- Name someone you would like to talk to about what you read…

- Name something that you intend to work on…

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