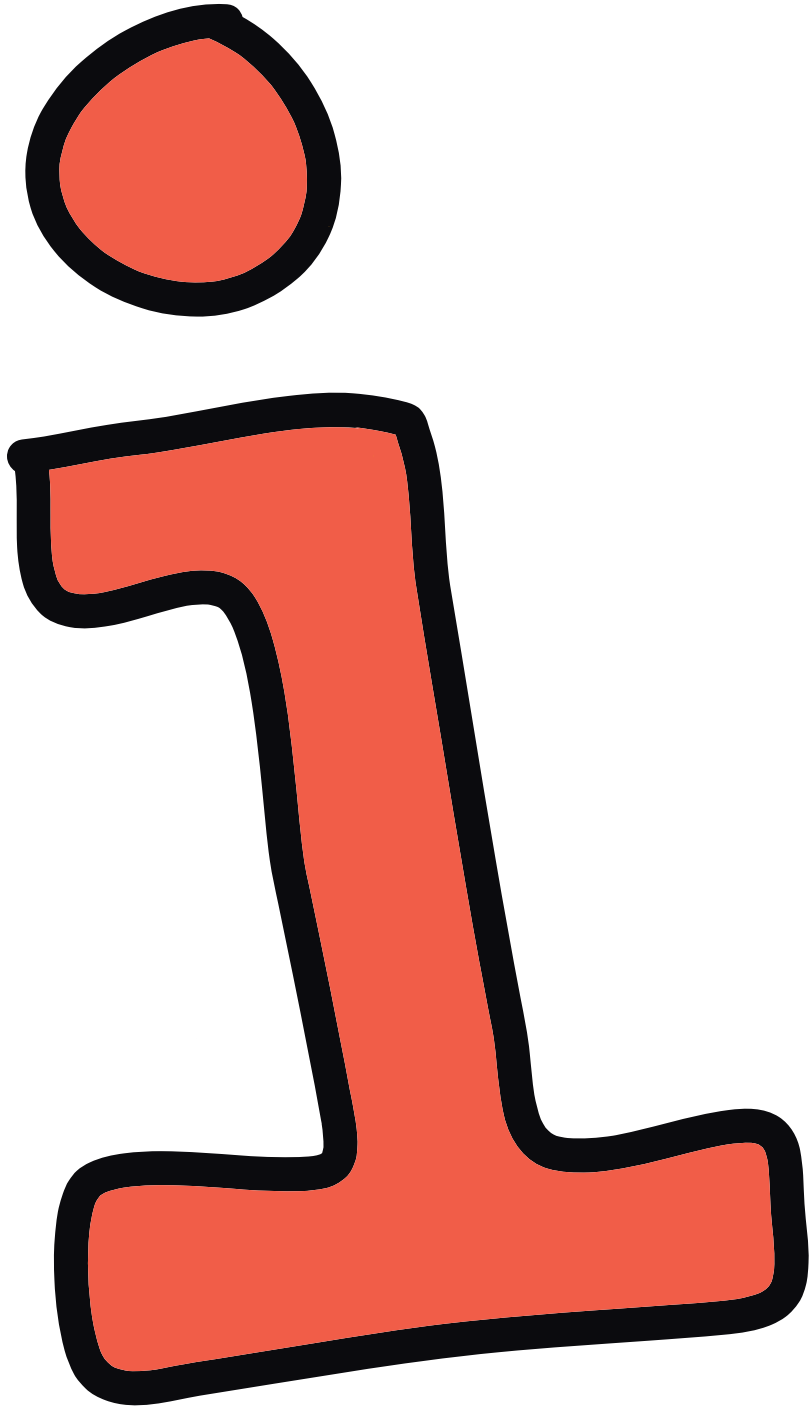
Listen Up!



CBSS Expert Group on
Children at Risk

Listen Up!

Creating conditions for children to speak and be heard

Professional communication with children at risk of exploitation and trafficking – Experience and lessons learned from the Baltic Sea Region

Financed by
Nordic Council of
Ministers

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Contributors	This report was informed by the speakers and participants in the regional seminars of the 'PROTECT Children on the Move' project during 2017 and 2018, as well as children and young people who have had experiences of exploitation and trafficking and shared their recommendations in the project consultations.
Financial support	Nordic Council of Ministers
ISBN	978-91-519-0863-2

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Listening to children – A priority

Since 1998, the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) has supported its 11-member States in promoting the human rights and the best interests of children. One of the general principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is the right of the child to be heard. In order to promote this principle in practice, the CBSS Expert Group on Children at Risk has tested different approaches to child-sensitive communication. Strengthening quality communication with children has been a leading interest in the regional cooperation over the past years.

Since 2016, the Council of the Baltic Sea States organised regional consultations to enhance national responses to child exploitation and trafficking, with the support and co-funding of the Nordic Council of Ministers.[1] Nearly 500 representatives from ministries, Ombudsoffices for children, national Parliaments and institutions, the academia and organisations, as well as children and youth, participated in these consultations. They shared the methods they work with, reflected on challenges and solutions, and tested innovative technology to train in child-sensitive communication and interviewing. Overall, the regional consultations aimed to strengthen the identification and referral of child victims and children at risk.

Strengthening professional capacities in communicating with children and enabling children to share their recommendations were essential parts of these consultations. The following lessons learned were highlighted:

- Interviewing protocols and training approaches that are informed by evidence increase professionals' skills and help them gaining confidence in child-sensitive communication.
- Innovative technology enhances the impact of training as it offers hands-on experience in how to lead sensitive conversations with children.
- By working with these methods, professionals enable children to disclose experiences of violence, exploitation and trafficking, as children are generally able to remember and provide accurate information even of traumatic events and from a young age.
- Hearing about the experience and recommendations of children who received assistance after a situation of exploitation and trafficking helps state agencies and service providers to reflect on their own roles and to understand that their behaviour and communication matter for delivering quality services.
- Supporting children and young people who have been in exploitative situations in reflecting together, becoming organised in peer-groups or associations and sharing their recommendations can further strengthen measures against exploitation and trafficking.
- National and regional consultations offer invaluable opportunities for children and young people to interact with policymakers, front-line staff and service providers, researchers and advocates to discuss and reflect together on solutions that work.

The regional consultations promoted the use of the CBSS Guidelines on the human rights and best interests of the child in transnational child protection cases. The Guidelines were developed on the basis of international standards, as well as evidence and experience from the region.[2]

[1] The regional consultations took place in Riga, Tallinn, Helsinki, Stockholm, St. Petersburg, Vilnius and Oslo between 2016 and 2018.
[2] The Guidelines are available from: http://www.childrenatrisk.eu/projects-and-publications/protect-children-on-the-move/. The Practical Guide for Caseworkers and Case Officers are available in English, Estonian, Finnish, Latvian, Lithuanian and Russian.

Persisting challenges: A low level of trust, weak communication and stereotypes

Children who are victims of exploitation and trafficking or at risk have to interact with a range of state officials and service providers and participate in numerous interviews and hearings. Important decisions depend on the quality of these conversations. Good communication enables the identification of exploitation and trafficking or any risks and helps clarifying suspicions. It is also a precondition for the provision of services in the best interests of the child. As child trafficking is a particular hidden crime, hearing the child's story offers valuable clues for its identification when information from other sources remains unavailable. To communicate with the child in a meaningful way and hear the child's story, professionals have to be trained and skilful, and equipped with practicable methods that work.

Conversations with children who are victims of exploitation and trafficking or at risk take place in informal settings, in formal and forensic interviews, and as hearings in the context of judicial or administrative proceedings. These conversations are often highly sensitive due to the level of violence that children have experienced and the issues at stake. Many different factors might inhibit the child from speaking openly, such as fear and trauma, experiences of discrimination and intimidation, threats, and a low level of trust.

A child's recruitment into trafficking represents often the culmination of a history of violence and exploitation. Many children who are exploited have grown up in situations characterised by neglect and emotional, physical or sexual violence and have been repeatedly let down by adults, within their family or community, by service providers and when trying to seek help. These experiences make it particularly difficult for the child to establish a trusted collaboration and communication with state officials and professionals. In addition, the child's age, gender, language, social and cultural background, evolving capacities and level of development, as well as health impairments or disabilities have an influence on the child's capability and willingness to communicate.

In particular when children are exploited in criminal or street-based activities, the underlying forms of pressure, threats, dependencies or the exploitation of a child's vulnerable situation can rarely be identified by mere observation. Stereotypes about children and youth who are on the street or in conflict with the law tend to make it even more difficult for these children to be heard and listened to. In these cases, weak communication increases the risk that the identification of exploitation and trafficking fails, and that the child is mistakenly considered a "runaway" or in conflict with the law. A trusted and open communication remains often the only way for professionals to understand patterns of exploitation and prevent misidentification and secondary victimisation of the child.

Professionals who work with child victims and children at risk have to be confident in how to assess a child's situation, background and experiences and adjust their behaviour and communication accordingly. Whether or not the communication between the child and the professional succeeds is decisive for the correct identification of the child and the referral to the type of services he or she needs. Quality communication helps professionals to overcome preconceptions about who is a victim of trafficking and to interact with child victims and children at risk in an unprejudiced manner and free of stereotypes. Interpreters and cultural mediators can offer help when a child has a different linguistic and cultural background.

To achieve this, professionals require and demand training on child-sensitive communication and interviewing to hear children's stories and take them into account for their actions and decisions.

In response to this need, the Council of the Baltic Sea States cooperates with state agencies and non-state partners in the region to promote child-centred and human rights-based approaches to prevent the exploitation and trafficking of children and to assist victims.

Promoting child-sensitive communication

This report provides an overview of the main learning and experience from the regional consultations organised by the Council of the Baltic Sea States with the following key messages:

- The rights and principles afforded under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child offer guidance for professionals' communication with children. Children have a right to be heard and to have their views considered in all matters concerning them. In communication with children, professionals must respect legal and quality standards with regard to ethics, safety and privacy. They need to be confident in handling sensitive conversations, reporting incidents or suspicions of violence and exploitation and providing follow-up services.

- Children are able to remember events and express their memories from an early age. The accuracy of a child's account depends on numerous factors such as age, evolving capacities, trauma, as well as the enabling support provided by professionals. Professionals require specialised training to provide support in accordance with the child's specific needs and best interests. Training effectiveness can be maximised when professionals benefit from a longer-term process of supervision, the use of evidence-based methods and practical guidance.

- Children are able to provide information and inspiration for the continued development of policies and practice and to inform quality reviews, child impact assessments and evaluations. For children and youth who have had experiences of violence, exploitation and trafficking in their childhood, making their voices heard to state officials and practitioners can have an empowering effect as it can give meaning to the bad experiences they lived through and the knowledge they gained as survivors.

- Children who are victims of exploitation and trafficking may find it difficult to trust others. They may not trust that service providers can offer meaningful help and may not even be aware of any services that could help. When enrolled in assistance programmes, some children feel like objects moved from one place to another and subjected to the decisions of others. This may feel like a continuation of the trafficking experience. To regain a sense of control, respect and self-worth, children appreciate when service providers talk to them, ask questions and listen genuinely, explain all steps and are transparent about decisions and procedures.

- Even in situations of exploitation and trafficking, children are not just vulnerable and disempowered victims. They are rights holders and survivors with specific talents, skills and ambitions. By engaging the child in trusted communication, professionals are able to assess and strengthen the child's evolving capacities and resiliency. With support, children succeed to develop their potentials, to leave harmful or exploitative relationships permanently and to rebuild their lives. Children who exit from a situation of exploitation and trafficking require continued support for (re-)integration in school and vocational

training. Children underline also how important protection from stigmatisation is for their (re-)integration in communities.

- Obtaining accurate statements from child victims is particularly important in cases of exploitation and trafficking, where the child's statement remains often the most important evidence. The interviewing method and the capability of the interviewer have a significant influence on the quality of the child's statement. Evidence-based protocols provide a clear structure to guide the interviewer in obtaining detailed and reliable statements from children.

- Modern technology offers new opportunities for strengthening the communication between professionals and children. Experience and research in this field have demonstrated the advantages of technology for professional training, case assessment and therapy. In combination with the use of evidence-based interviewing protocols, these tools enhance professional skills in leading sensitive conversations with children.

Key principles of child-sensitive communication

The rights and principles afforded under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child offer guidance for professionals' communication with children. Children have a right to be heard and to have their views considered in all matters concerning them. In communication with children, professionals must respect legal and quality standards with regard to ethics, safety and privacy. They need to be confident in handling sensitive conversations, reporting incidents or suspicions of violence and exploitation and providing follow-up services.

The right of the child to be heard

Children have the right to be heard in all matters affecting them, and the views of the child have to be given due weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12). Children have the right to be heard individually and collectively, in formal and informal settings. In addition to one-by-one communication between professionals and children, the socio-political participation of children ensures that state officials and professionals hear the concerns, perspectives and recommendations of boys and girls and take them into account for policies, programmes, services and other matters concerning them. Special procedural safeguards must be in place to guarantee the right of the child to be heard in the context of judicial and administrative proceedings.

Procedural safeguards

In all formal hearings and proceedings, procedural safeguards must be respected. The child's right to be heard is itself a procedural safeguard, which has to be guaranteed in all judicial and administrative proceedings involving a child. In addition, the child has a right to information in a language that he or she understands, the support from a guardian when a child is not cared for by his or her parent or is unaccompanied, and by a legal representative in cases of judicial or administrative proceedings. Procedures have to be documented and transparent and give the child the possibility to challenge the procedure, its outcome or final decision through effective

access to review or appeal.[3]

The right to non-discrimination

The right to be heard applies to all children, irrespective of their age and capacities. In order to guarantee that younger children, children with communication impairments or developmental delays, children who are shy, intimidated or traumatised, are able to exercise this right fully, enabling support has to be provided in accordance with the child's specific needs, level of development and evolving capacities.

The right to be heard applies without discrimination on any grounds such as the child's or the child's parents' race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, disability, birth, sexual orientation or other status. (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 2)

Child-friendly information

The child has the right to be informed about the purpose of any formal interview, hearing or consultation they participate in and how the information they share will be used subsequently. Information has to be provided in a language that the child understands, adapted to the child's age and maturity, language, gender and culture.[4] Access to child-friendly information is important for children to exercise their rights and participate in the procedures that concern them. When providing children with information, professionals have to assess the child's specific communication and information needs and adapt the language, methods and contents of their communication accordingly.[5]

Data protection and privacy

The personal data and privacy of a child are protected by national and European laws. The child has a right to be informed how his or her personal data and information will be treated by professionals, who will have access to it and how it will be shared and stored. Professionals who are working with children have to know these standards and apply them correctly in their day-to-day work.

Confidentiality rules and reporting obligations

National laws regulate when reporting obligations take precedence over confidentiality rules. Reporting obligations stipulate when a professional has to share information on incidents of violence, neglect or exploitation of a child or when a child is considered to be at risk. When talking to children, professionals must explain in a clear and transparent way the confidentiality rules they are bound by, as well as their reporting obligations, and be certain that the child has understood why these rules exist and how they are applied in the child's best interests.

Ethical standards

In the context of research and consultations with children, ethical standards of research apply. The participating children, as well as their parents or guardians, have to give their informed consent to participate. Informed consent means that the child is informed about the purpose of

[3] The Guidelines promoting the human rights and the best interests of the child in transnational child protection cases provide a detailed overview of procedural safeguards. See: Council of the Baltic Sea States, *Guidelines Promoting the Human Rights and the Best Interests of the Child in Transnational Child Protection Cases*, 2015.
[4] Council of Europe, *Guidelines on child-friendly justice*, 2010.
[5] Council of Europe *How to Convey Child-friendly information to children in migration, A handbook for frontline professionals*, Building a Europe for and with Children, 2018.

the research or consultation, how the information shared by the child will be used and stored, and how the child's personal data will be treated. Ethical standards require also that the child has a safety plan and access to support should his or her participation in a research, consultation or other activities revive bad memories or be otherwise distressing or upsetting for the child. The type of questions asked, and the methods used, should be safe and not pose any risks to harm the child in any way, for instance by reawakening traumatic memories or exposing the child to stigma. The identity and privacy of children participating in research and consultations and the privacy of their family members has to be protected. The type and quantity of information gathered from children has to be proportional and justified for the scope and purpose of the research.[6]

Listening, transparency and respect: Recommendations from children who have had experiences of trafficking[7]

Children who are victims of exploitation and trafficking may find it difficult to trust others. They may not trust that service providers can offer meaningful help and may not even be aware of any services that could help. When enrolled in assistance programmes, some children feel like objects moved from one place to another and subjected to the decisions of others. This may feel like a continuation of the trafficking experience. To regain a sense of control, respect and self-worth, children appreciate when service providers talk to them, ask questions and listen genuinely, explain all steps and are transparent about decisions and procedures.

Even in situations of exploitation and trafficking, children are not just vulnerable and disempowered victims. They are rights holders and survivors with specific talents, skills and ambitions. By engaging the child in trusted communication, professionals are able to assess and strengthen the child's evolving capacities and resiliency. With support, children succeed to develop their potentials, to leave harmful or exploitative relationships permanently and to rebuild their lives. Children who exit from a situation of exploitation and trafficking require continued support for (re-)integration in school and vocational training. Children underline also how important protection from stigmatisation is for their (re-)integration in communities.

The regional consultations organised by the Council of the Baltic Sea States were informed by children and young people who have had experiences of exploitation and trafficking during their childhood. The children and young people participated in separate consultations and developed recommendations on how children can find support in situations where they are at risk of exploitation and trafficking. By encouraging them to develop recommendations for other children

[6] See for instance: *Save the Children, So You Want to Involve Children in Research? A toolkit supporting children's meaningful and ethical participation in research relating to violence against children*, 2010, https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/so-you-want-involve-children-research-toolkit-supporting-childrens-meaningful-and-ethical.

[7] Informed by Angelica Kjos, Artist, Author and Experience Consultant, Norway, as well as children informing the Council of the Baltic Sea States consultations in the context of the PROTECT Children on the Move Project. See: Council of the Baltic Sea States, CBSS Expert Group on Children at Risk, Nordic Council of Ministers, *Oslo Conclusions on Identifying Children at Risk of Exploitation and Trafficking: Strengthening child-sensitive communication and best interests determinations Hearing the Child's Story, Conference Report*, May 2018. Council of the Baltic Sea States, CBSS Expert Group on Children at Risk, Nordic Council of Ministers, *Oslo Conclusions on Identifying Children at Risk of Exploitation and Trafficking: Strengthening child-sensitive communication and best interests determinations Hearing the Child's Story, Conference Statement*, May 2018. Council of the Baltic Sea States, PROTECT Children on the Move Project, http://www.childrenatrisk.eu/projects-and-publications/protect-children-on-the-move/. CBSS Expert Group on Children at Risk, *Children's recommendations highlighted at PROTECT III workshop in St. Petersburg*, 2 October 2017, http://www.childrenatrisk.eu/blog/childrens-recommendations-highlighted-at-protect-iii-workshop-st-petersburg/. CBSS Expert Group on Children at Risk, *Lithuanian Minister of Social Security and Labour stressed need for cooperation*, 28 December 2017, http://www.childrenatrisk.eu/blog/lithuanian-minister-of-social-security-labour-stressed-the-need-for-cooperation-to-combat-child-trafficking/.

and for state officials and profesionals, the consultations aspired also to increase the feeling of importance of child victims and to raise their awareness of sources of protection and resilience.

The consultations with children were conducted with boys and girls who had been exploited in situations of trafficking within their countries or abroad. They had left the exploitative situation, were living in a shelter, with their families of origin or foster families. They were enrolled in assistance and support programmes and had processed their experience to a point that their participation was considered ethical and safe. The consultations were conducted by professionals who were close to the children and whom they trusted. The consultations applied a story-telling method with two streams of narration, one focusing on how children can find support for leaving risky situations, the other focusing on factors that enhance children's safety and well-being in shelter homes. The consultations were non-intrusive as they did not ask about the children's personal experiences but invited them to narrate the story of an imaginary child hero who succeeds to leave a situation of exploitation and to reach a safe place.[8]

Child victims and children at risk get in contact with service providers on a daily basis. Teachers, health care professionals, law enforcement officers, social workers and others are in a good position to recognise when a child is in need of help. The children noted, however, that the communication between professionals and children tends to remain superficial so that children do not get the opportunity to establish trust and tell about the bad things that happen to them. The children advised that professionals should proactively engage children in conversations and ask questions that could encourage them to speak about their concerns. In order to disclose incidents of violence and exploitation, children want to feel they can speak openly to an adult and trust that the person will listen. They appreciate it when professionals communicate and behave in a way that reduces the child's fears and intimidation. It is ok for professionals to ask direct questions as that can make it easier for the child to disclose. The children underlined that they need information on their right to be safe and to receive help and where to turn to for help. Some children recommended that all boys and girls should learn how to distinguish between good and bad secrets. Children who are growing up in particularly marginalised and precarious conditions, or who come from a different national and cultural background than the majority population, may require information and advice from a trusted adult to understand what type of living conditions are considered "normal" for a child and which situations are considered unacceptable as they infringe against the rights of the child.

The children who participated in the consultations did not demonstrate a strong confidence in social welfare and child protection services or childcare institutions. They did not consider them as possible sources of help for a child in difficulties or did not even know about child protection services they could contact for help. Some children who were referred to childcare due to incidents of violence and exploitation, reported that they felt like an object that was moved around and subjected to the decisions of others. This might feel like a continuation of being a victim of violence and exploitation. In situations of exploitation, children are typically strongly influenced, manipulated or controlled by exploiters or traffickers. Children who are victimised within their own families and closed communities are particularly at risk of feeling alone and left without support

[8] All participating children had been identified as victims of trafficking. In Lithuania, the consultations were conducted during November 2017 by a social worker from the Centre Against Human Trafficking and Exploitation in three Lithuanian cities where children are known to be particularly at risk of trafficking. The consultations were conducted as individual narrative sessions. In St. Petersburg, Russian Federation, the consultations were conducted in the TRANSIT Shelter, which hosts children who have been exploited and trafficked, by the psychologist who works with the children at the shelter. The methodology was inspired by the Resiland method for ethical research with children on the move who are at risk of exploitation and trafficking, previously tested in different European countries, including in the Baltic Sea Region. See: Resiland, Participation, capacities and resilience of children on the move against trafficking and exploitation, http://www.resiland.org/partners/10-defence-for-children-italy.html.

when exiting this environment. For child victims of violence, exploitation and trafficking, regaining a sense of control of their lives is therefore an important part of healing and recovery.

Children would appreciate if service providers in social and health care, education and law enforcement made an effort to help the child regain control and a sense of self-worth. To achieve this, they advised that service providers inform the child about all steps and decisions, hear the child's views on all decisions that are to be taken and let the child know how their views are taken into consideration. By explaining decisions and procedures in a language that the child understands, they become transparent and understandable for the child. All of this helps the child to feel respected as a person and motivates the child to participate and collaborate with service providers.

The children had mixed opinions about police. On one side, the police was considered a possible contact to turn to for help, but there were also fears that police officers would not believe children and would punish or imprison them rather than helping them. In particular children who are exploited in illegal and criminal activities fear that they might be punished whereas it would be essential for them to trust that police officers identify them correctly as victims of exploitation and trafficking and protect them from their exploiters.

While services for recovery and rehabilitation are essential after an incident or a period of violence, exploitation and trafficking, the children would like service providers to focus also on strengthening their resilience. They recommended that professionals assess the child's personal resources in order to understand what makes the child resilient and to strengthen these sources of empowerment. Each child has his or her own talents and skills and support network that can be activated to help the child regain strength and confidence and to process the bad things that have happened to the child.

As there might be risks to the child's safety and recovery from incidents that lie further back in the child's past, children would like service providers to assess their situations in a more comprehensive way. When responding to the most recent incident, service providers have to take the child's history of violence, exploitation and neglect into account. In order to achieve this and to offer meaningful services, they need to hear and understand the child's story. Understanding the child's story is also decisive for preventing that a child is returned to family members or other persons who have previously infringed against their rights.

After an experience of violence, exploitation and trafficking has ended, when in contact with numerous state officials and service providers, a child might feel alone and weak. The children suggested that it can be empowering and reassuring for a child to get support from an adult who acts as a guardian, a support person or mentor and watches over the child's best interests and wellbeing while in contact with service providers.

The children reflected on what they needed to support their recovery and reintegration and to prevent re-trafficking after an experience of exploitation and trafficking. Some children want to return to their families, wherever the family is offering a safe and caring environment and was not complicit in the exploitation and trafficking. They underlined the importance of reintegrating into school as soon as possible, as a good school education and vocational training provides them with a basis for leading an independent and self-determined life as adults. The children were concerned, however, that it would be difficult to get back to school after having missed a lot during the period of exploitation and a lengthy absence from home. It could therefore make more sense for some children to learn a profession, enter the labour market or start a business.

Some children advised that it would be preferable to move to another town after an experience of trafficking, rather than returning to their home communities. In the home town, the child is likely to be confronted with negative attitudes and stigmatisation because she or he had been trafficked. Starting a new life in a different city could help the child avoiding this hurtful experience. The children's narrations suggest that there is a need to support the rehabilitation of children more proactively, including through reintegration support at school, support for vocational training and entrepreneurship. In addition, stereotypes against child victims of trafficking have to be redressed and service providers have to make more efforts to protect the identity and privacy of child victims of trafficking, helping them to regain a feeling of dignity and respect for themselves. Gaining social esteem and respect in their communities was important for the children.

Overall, the children appreciated the opportunity to participate in the consultations, it felt good that someone was interested in them as persons, listened to them and asked about their opinions. In light of this positive feedback, some of the organisations who facilitated the consultations with children planned to use the methodology regularly to engage children actively who are victims of exploitation and trafficking or at risk and to hear about their perspectives and recommendations.

Strengthening professional capacities to elicit information from child victims and children at risk

Children are able to remember events and express their memories from an early age. The accuracy of a child's account depends on numerous factors such as age, evolving capacities, trauma, as well as the enabling support provided by professionals. Professionals require specialised training to provide support in accordance with the child's specific needs and best interests. Training effectiveness can be maximised when professionals benefit from a longer-term process of supervision, the use of evidence-based methods and practical guidance.

Public officials and service providers communicate with child victims and children at risk in the course of case assessment and casework. They hear the child in order to assess immediate needs and family situation, any risks to the child's safety, as well as sources of resiliency and support. Children are heard in care planning procedures, for purposes of health care and education, and in the context of best interests determinations. Informal conversations take place when professionals interact with children during leisure time activities, in education or care settings.

Children who are outside their country of habitual residence, as migrants or asylum seekers, might be interviewed by border guards, immigration or asylum officers. Interviews take place to determine the child's identity and age, to decide whether a child should apply for a residence permit or for international protection and to assess their applications.

Children, who have experienced acts of violence, exploitation and trafficking are likely to undergo additional interviews and hearings as part of investigations and proceedings under criminal or civil law. Where children are in conflict with the law, including due to breaches of immigration regulations or labour law, they might be interviewed by the police as suspects.

In all these different contexts, professionals have to be aware of the evolving capacities of the child to give accurate accounts of specific events they experienced. Knowledge, skills and training is necessary for professionals to become confident in child-sensitive communication, to assess

the child's needs and to adapt their communication style in order to create enabling conditions for the child to speak out.

Research confirms children's capability to make accurate statements also after traumatic events

Children who have lived through experiences of exploitation and trafficking are often perceived primarily as vulnerable victims. Due to their young age and exposure to traumatic events, professionals may have little confidence in the capability of child victims to remember events in detail and give accurate accounts of their experiences. These doubts are dispelled by research findings, which show that children are capable of remembering, expressing their memories and acting as reliable witnesses, even after exposure to traumatic stress.

Are children able to make accurate statements?

Children are generally able to remember incidents they experienced. Their capability to express what they remember and to provide accurate information depends however on a number of factors. The most important factors that influence a child's capability to disclose information are the interviewer's ability to elicit information and the child's willingness and ability to express it. Research in this field reveals some fundamental principles and rules that professionals have to observe in order to positively influence the child's willingness and ability to disclose. These rules and considerations form the basis of evidence-based interviewing protocols, which guide the interviewer step-by-step through the interview and help creating supportive conditions for the child to speak out and to make an accurate statement.[9]

How does age affect a child's capability to make accurate statements?

Children are able to give accurate accounts of their experiences from a young age. As of the age of three, children are generally able to provide information on a specific event they experienced, although their capability to share information in free narration is still limited at that age. As of the age of six years old, children remember more details and share more information about a specific event than younger children.

The child's capability to narrate in free recall and to resist suggestive questions by an interviewer evolves significantly with age. 4-6 year old children tend to provide slightly more information when they are asked specific and directive questions, whereas open-ended questions might elicit less information from this age group. At a younger age, children are more susceptible to the way questions are phrased and are more likely than older children to respond erroneously to leading and suggestive questions, or to questions posing a choice between different options. Interviewers who are trained and experienced in using free recall questions and prompts, however, are able to elicit accurate and detailed information even from young children. As of the age of 5 years, children tend to be more capable of sharing information in free recall. Researchers advise that interviewers use child-sensitive and evidence-based methods for communicating with children and interviewing them irrespective of the child's age.[10]

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[9] Lamb, Michael E., Orbach, Y., Hershkowitz, I., Esplin, P.W., Horowitz, D., Structured forensic interview protocols improve the quality and informativeness of investigative interviews with children: A review of research using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/eutils/elink.fcgi?dbfrom=pubmed&retmode=ref&cmd=prlinks&id=18023872.

[10] Hershkowitz, Irit, Lamb, M.E., Orbach, Y., Katz, C., The Development of Communicative and Narrative Skills Among Preschoolers: Lessons from forensic interviews about child abuse, *Child Development*, December 2011, 83(2): 611-22. Lamb, Michael E., Orbach, Y., Hershkowitz, I., Esplin, P.W., Horowitz, D., Structured forensic interview protocols improve the quality and informativeness of investigative interviews with children: A review of research using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol, *Child Abuse and Neglect,* 2007, 31(11-12): 1201–1231.

How do experiences of violence impact a child's communication?

For professionals, it can be difficult and almost impossible to judge from a child's behaviour or communication whether a child is a victim of violence, exploitation and trafficking. While some child victims appear to be notably harmed, intimidated and scared, others act in an empowered way and display strong personalities, yet others might behave aggressively. Behaviour and communication depend on a range of factors, such as the level of development, the support a child receives, self-confidence, personal resilience and level of choice or self-determination in life.

It is however not untypical that children who have had traumatic experiences feel tired, have a low self-confidence, mistrust adults and state officials, have feelings of shame and guilt and difficulties to concentrate. Fear and threats against the child or the child's family members might prevent the child from speaking openly about his or her experiences. Child victims might suffer physical and mental health symptoms, including illness, poor teeth and hygiene, anxiety and depression. Experiences of violence, neglect and exploitation that continue for prolonged periods of time slow down a child's physical and cognitive development. All these symptoms have an impact on the child's communication and behaviour. Professionals need to be prepared to treat the child with care, respect and empathy, irrespective of the child's communication and behaviour. Child-sensitive communication can help children to feel valued as persons, to speak out about their emotions and to regain confidence and resiliency to cope with adverse experiences.[11]

In formal interviews, the rapport building phase helps the interviewer to get acquainted with the child and establish trust. In informal settings, professionals have made good experience engaging children in conversations on sports, hobbies or other themes that interest them. In Sweden, researchers succeeded to engage children on the move in a trusted and open conversation by using maps where the children were eager to identify cities and countries they had transited. This helped them gaining confidence and speaking also about their experiences during their journeys.[12]

How does traumatic stress affect the child's memory?

Stress and traumatic experiences have an impact on memory. Children react however differently to stress and trauma, as the specific circumstances of the case, their personal resiliency and the level of support they receive influence their capability to cope and remember. The brain is typically associating traumatic events with the emotions and sensations of the moment and stores these associations at an unconscious level. After the traumatic event, memories of it can be triggered by fragments of events, sensations or emotions that are similar to those experienced during the traumatic event. Remembering and talking about traumatic experiences is always stressful. This stress level can create difficulties for the child to remember, find the right words and express their memories. Prolonged exposure to traumatic experiences are particularly difficult to remember as the chronic stress they create is impacting the child's memory in the longer term.[13]

The interviewer has to be aware of these dynamics when interviewing child victims of exploitation and trafficking, take time for the interview, be patient and empathic. Interviews with child victims

[11] United Nations Children's Fund, *Let's Talk, Developing effective communication with child victims of abuse and human trafficking*, Practical handbook for social workers, police and other professionals, UNMIK, Government of Kosovo, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, by Barbara Mitchels, September 2004, p. 10, 12-14.
[12] Council of the Baltic Sea States, CBSS Expert Group on Children at Risk, Nordic Council of Ministers, *Oslo Conclusions on Identifying Children at Risk of Exploitation and Trafficking: Strengthening child-sensitive communication and best interests determinations Hearing the Child's Story, Conference Report*, May 2018.
[13] United Nations Children's Fund, *Let's Talk, Developing effective communication with child victims of abuse and human trafficking*, Practical handbook for social workers, police and other professionals, UNMIK, Government of Kosovo, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, by Barbara Mitchels, September 2004, p. 13, 18.

of violence are recommended to take place as soon as possible after the incident, while the child's memory is still fresh.[14] In cases of prolonged exposure to violence and exploitation, as might be the case when a child has been trafficked for lengthy periods of time, it can be appropriate to provide the child first with a possibility for rest and recovery before conducting the interview.[15]

Qualified professionals and child-sensitive communication: Core elements of a functioning child protection system

Child-sensitive communication is a fundamental element of a functioning child protection system. Children have to be heard and listened to in order to benefit from protection and support services that are targeted to their needs. Meaningful assessments and referrals can only be made when professionals have the skills, the conditions and methods to create an enabling environment for children to speak out and to be heard and listened to.

Professionals whose communication skills are weak and undeveloped might feel insecure in interacting with children and asking questions. Without access to information on the child's story and views, professionals might refrain from taking decisions, take decisions too late or take wrong decisions. To prevent this, training has to ensure that professionals are prepared to handle sensitive conversations to obtain information from children as the basis of their casework.

A combination of training, guidance and supervision enables professionals to apply communication and interviewing skills effectively in practice

Research on the effectiveness of training in child-sensitive interviewing revealed that professionals often fail to apply the acquired knowledge in their workplace. Evidence shows that training effects can be maximised when the training is followed-up by a longer-term process of supervision. This continued support helps professionals to adopt and maintain recommended practices in their work. Continued support after a training course can be provided by verbal and written feedback and review, supervision and guidance material. Periodic supervision with trainers and peer review sessions with colleagues enable professionals to consistently reflect on and improve their skills, behaviour and practice, to consolidate learning and gain more confidence about the methods or tools they have been trained to use. In addition, hands-on guidance material such as the NICHD protocol provide orientation and help professionals to operationalise the knowledge obtained in training courses in their daily work practice.[16]

Carrying out sensitive conversations with children who are victims of exploitation and trafficking is stressful for professionals as the cases and levels of violence are often difficult to handle. Training is therefore also required to strengthen professionals' resiliency to cope with the stories they hear from children in their workplace. Adequate training and supportive working conditions, including time to rest and recover, as well as supervision are essential to prevent chronic exhaustion, burnout or fatigue.[17]

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[14] Lamb, Michael E., Orbach, Y., Hershkowitz, I., Esplin, P.W., Horowitz, D., Structured forensic interview protocols improve the quality and informativeness of investigative interviews with children: A review of research using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol, *Child Abuse and Neglect,* 2007, 31(11-12): 1201–1231.

[15] See: Unicef, *Reference Guide on Protecting the Rights of Child Victims of Trafficking in Europe*, 2006, https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/49997af7d.pdf.

[16] Lamb, Michael E., Orbach, Y., Hershkowitz, I., Esplin, P.W., Horowitz, D., Structured forensic interview protocols improve the quality and informativeness of investigative interviews with children: A review of research using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol, *Child Abuse and Neglect,* 2007, 31(11-12): 1201–1231.

[17] United Nations Children's Fund, *Let's Talk, Developing effective communication with child victims of abuse and human trafficking*, Practical handbook for social workers, police and other professionals, UNMIK, Government of Kosovo, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, by Barbara Mitchels, September 2004, p. 19.

Children's experience and recommendations support professionals in strengthening child protection systems

Children are able to provide information and inspiration for the continued development of policies and practice and to inform quality reviews, child impact assessments and evaluations. For children and youth who have had experiences of violence, exploitation and trafficking in their childhood, making their voices heard to state officials and practitioners can have an empowering effect as it can give meaning to the bad experiences they lived through and the knowledge they gained as survivors.

The socio-political participation of children offers invaluable insight and inspiration for strengthening child protection systems and making them operational in accordance with the principle of the best interests of the child (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 3).

There are many different ways to facilitate the socio-political participation of children and to ensure that children's views and recommendations contribute to strengthening child protection systems at the national and local levels:

- Research and consultations with children, including child- and youth-led research where children take the lead in formulating research questions and selecting relevant methods;[18]
- Child and youth councils of organisations, institutions, schools or shelters;
- Child- and youth-led organisations and associations where children and youth organise themselves to consult on specific themes such as the prevention of violence, exploitation and trafficking, to issue public statements, advocate for the interests of specific groups of children and get other children and youth engaged;
- Ombudsoffices for children and other human rights structures engaging with children and youth to facilitate their participation and to communicate their views and recommendations to policy makers and the public; and
- Children's Parliaments at the local, regional and national levels.

Professionals working with children are, however, rarely trained in consulting with children and it is therefore useful to equip them with tools and methods they can apply. In Sweden, the Ombudsman for Children works with a method called "Young Speakers" to consult with children on different themes, including violence against children. The overall objective is to guide state agencies and service providers in carrying out consultations or interviews with children in a safe and ethical way and to take children's views into account for decision-making and planning processes. The method has been developed for officials and service providers in municipalities where almost all local decisions and activities have an impact on the lives of children. It builds on the understanding that children are the experts in their own situations. An online guide makes the method widely available to professionals working with and for children in different contexts.[19]

[18] For a discussion of involving children in research, see for instance: *Save the Children, So You Want to Involve Children in Research? A toolkit supporting children's meaningful and ethical participation in research relating to violence against children*, 2010, https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/so-you-want-involve-children-research-toolkit-supporting-childrens-meaningful-and-ethical.

[19] Ombudsman for Children, https://www.barnombudsmannen.se/unga-direkt/; https://www.barnombudsmannen.se/young-speakers/om-unga-direkt/ The method was originally developed by the Change Factory in Norway, see: Dønnestad, Eva and Marit Sanner, *Håndbok for forandrere – om verdighet i møte med de som vokser opp og de som vil vokse [Guide for Change Makers – On dignity in meetings with those who are growing up and those who want to grow]*, Forandringsfabrikken Förlag, 2006, ISBN 82-997 405-0-9.

The Young Speakers method provides step-by-step guidance on each phase of consulting with children, from the preparations and different methods for the consultation or interview, through to the analysis of the outcomes and follow-up activities. It advises practitioners on ethical considerations and how to communicate the outcomes of a consultation with children to relevant audiences, including other children, and supporting children in meeting with decision-makers to convey their key messages.

Evidence-based protocols guide professionals in interviewing children[20]

Obtaining accurate statements from child victims is particularly important in cases of exploitation and trafficking, where the child's statement remains often the most important evidence. The interviewing method and the capability of the interviewer have a significant influence on the quality of the child's statement. Evidence-based protocols provide a clear structure to guide the interviewer in obtaining detailed and reliable statements from children.

Evidence-based interviewing protocols are able to facilitate interviews with children in social and health care, law enforcement and justice, immigration and asylum. Being evidence-based means that these interviewing protocols have been tested and validated scientifically. Research has shown that they improve the quality of interviews with children and that they are reliable methods to obtain accurate statements from children.

Working with evidence-based protocols has several advantages for professionals and children. They enable professional interviewers to conduct the interview in a manner that is ethical and safe and respects the specific needs of the child. They provide a structure and approach that enable the child to give an accurate and reliable statement. This is a precondition for the child to express opinions and share information and for service providers to take the child's statement into account for casework, service planning, judicial and administrative proceedings and any decisions concerning the child. When applying evidence-based methods correctly, interviewers can consider the child's statement trustworthy. The methods enable professionals to respect quality standards and deliver meaningful results even in highly sensitive situations.

Evidence-based interviewing methods are used in formal interviews with children who are involved in administrative or judicial proceedings as victims or witnesses. In cases where the child testifies as a victim or witness of a criminal offence, forensic interviewers use evidence-based interviewing protocols to obtain a statement with a high probative value for criminal investigations and proceedings. The principles of evidence-based methods are however relevant beyond the forensic context. They offer orientation for all contexts where service providers communicate with children, such as case and risk assessments, best interests determinations and when involving children in monitoring and inspecting institutions.

[20] The guidance provided in this chapter is based on practitioners' use of evidence-based interviewing protocols in the Baltic Sea Region. See: Council of the Baltic Sea States, *Guidelines Promoting the Human Rights and the Best Interests of the Child in Transnational Child Protection Cases*, Addendum, 2016. Council of the Baltic Sea States, *AudTrain – System Based Audit of Child Welfare, The AudTrain Programme*. Council of the Baltic Sea States, *AudTrain – System Based Audit of Child Welfare, AudTrain Procedure and Glossary, 2017.*

Preparing the interview: Considerations for the interview setting[21]

Formal interviews with children have to follow a set of basic rules concerning the role of the interviewer, as well as the preparations and the setting of the interview. The following considerations need to be made in the preparations:

1. Preparing the child for the interview

The interviewer has to ensure that the child is fully informed about the interview. The child has a right to be informed when and where the interview takes place, who will be present during the interview and who will be observing through video transmission or otherwise. The child must be informed about the purpose of the interview, how the information from the interview will be used subsequently and who will have access to it. The child has a right to be informed if the interview is video recorded and how the recording will be used, shared and stored. Depending on the circumstances of the case, the interviewer might share this information with the child in the introduction phase of the interview, or the child might be informed beforehand by the interviewer, a caseworker or other competent professionals. National law regulates as of what age this information is provided directly to the child or to the child's parent or guardian.

When preparing for the interview, the interviewer takes the child's specific needs into account and ensures the conditions of the interview are supportive for the child to talk. This concerns, for instance, the gender of the interviewer, appropriate timing and duration of the interview and the presence of a support person for the child where appropriate.

2. Who conducts the interview

The child may have preferences with regard to the gender of the interviewer. Especially in cases of gender-based and sexual violence, the child might feel more comfortable when speaking with an interviewer who has the same sex as the child. If the perpetrator was a man, the child might prefer to be interviewed by a woman, and vice versa. This has to be clarified with the child and the child's primary caregiver and/or guardian prior to the interview.

3. Interviewer's appearance and behaviour

The interviewer treats the child with empathy, care and respect. The interviewer acts as a facilitator, behaves in a professional way, speaks with a calm voice and remains focused on the conversation with the child. In order to follow the structure of the interview, the interviewer takes leadership and gently directs the conversation, without being too demanding or controlling. The interviewer avoids showing his or her own feelings and opinions as the child talks and refrains from making promises or raising any hopes with regard to the child's situation. The interviewer's appearance should be neutral, not too overdressed nor untidy, avoiding flashy jewellery or other distracting items.

4. Location of the interview

A quiet and comfortable room with as little distractions as possible is a suitable environment for conducting an interview with a child. Smaller rooms are preferable. There should be a pillow in the chair for the child to be comfortable. A stress ball, teddy bear or another small item that the child can hold in her or his hands during the interview can help reducing tensions. Apart from

[21] Council of the Baltic Sea States, *Guidelines Promoting the Human Rights and the Best Interests of the Child in Transnational Child Protection Cases*, Addendum, 2016. Council of the Baltic Sea States, *AudTrain – System Based Audit of Child Welfare, AudTrain Procedure and Glossary, 2017*. Council of the Baltic Sea States, AudTrain Training Manual, 2017.

these items, the interviewer has to take care to remove any toys or other distracting objects. Depending on the case, the interviewer might keep crayons and paper or play-dough available for the child in the interview room to facilitate the conversation, especially for younger children.

5. Interview setting

A few practical measures help to create a conducive interview setting for the child to talk. The use of tables in the interview room is to be avoided where possible. The interviewer should never sit in an interrogation style in front of the child or facing the child across a table. It is preferable to use comfortable chairs that are arranged at an angle, so that the interviewer and the child can look at each other without directly facing each other. There should be free access to the door so the child does not get a feeling of being trapped or captured. It can be helpful if there is some space for the child to move, although the interview should not be conducted in a very big room.

6. Support persons and other participants in the interview

In some cases, the interviewer may consider inviting a support person for the child to be present during the interview, for instance when the child is shy, intimidated or reluctant to speak, with very young children or children with disabilities. A support person might be a staff member of the facility where the child lives, a family member or guardian whom the child trusts. The selection and admission of a support person has to be informed by a best interests assessment. In certain contexts, such as asylum interviews or other formal interview settings that are part of an administrative or judicial proceeding, the child has a right to be accompanied by his or her parent or guardian and the legal representative or lawyer.

8. Interpreters

When an interpreter is involved in the interview, the interpreter is seated next to, and possibly slightly behind, the interviewer. The interviewer keeps eye contact with the child during the interview, without looking at the interpreter. An interpreter should never sit next to the child and face the interviewer, as this way of seating would cause the child to turn his or her head to make eye contact with the interpreter rather than the interviewer.

Prior to the interview, the interviewer clarifies the wording of the questions with the interpreter and gives instructions for the interpreter's role. In some languages, the length of sentences and the number of words used can differ significantly. The interviewer should be aware of such differences and address these general issues with the interpreter prior to the interview.

The interpreter has to be trained and qualified to maintain a neutral role when translating. When the interviewer has suspicions that the interpreter is changing or adding questions, exerts pressure on the child or influences the conversation in any other way, the interview should be interrupted immediately. Some diaspora communities are particularly small and closed, so that the interpreter could be known or related to the child or the child's family members. The interviewer has the responsibility to clarify if there are any relations that could inhibit the child and prevent him or her from speaking openly. Particularly when disclosing acts of violence within the family or community, when speaking about sensitive issues such as sexual orientation or sexual violence, or when threats and risks are involved, as might be the case in child trafficking cases, the presence of an interpreter during the interview can be intimidating for the child. If necessary, the interpreter has to be changed to prevent that he or she influences the interview or the child.

Many professionals prefer to use telephone interpretation services or online communication technology to connect an interpreter from a different city or country. These options are

appreciated especially with rare languages, small diaspora groups and in sensitive cases as they offer additional safety, protect the child's identity and privacy.

9. Timing and duration

Interviews should be as short and to the point as possible and should ideally last not more than 40-45 minutes. Children should be interviewed early in the day wherever possible. The child's age, cognitive skills and personal situation could require a shorter interview. Also other factors that influence the child's concentration or participation in the interview should be taken into due consideration, such as hunger, naptime or the ingestion of medication.

10. Coping with difficult situations during an interview

Children's behaviour in interview settings can be unpredictable and, at times, difficult to handle. Whenever a difficult situation arises, the interviewer has to handle it with a sound balance of patience, determination and clear directions. The interviewer must never raise her or his voice or lose the temper. In some cases, the interview may need to be interrupted or ended, which is preferable over trying to push the child's limits.

The NICHD protocol: An effective method to obtain reliable statements from children

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) protocol[22] is one of the most widely used methods for interviewing children. Extensive testing has confirmed its effectiveness, as it improves the quality of interviews with children and enables the interviewer to obtain accurate and reliable information. The protocol has been developed by a multi-disciplinary team on the basis of research on children's memory, linguistic and communicative capabilities, social knowledge, suggestibility, the effects of stress and trauma, forensic needs, as well as the behaviour and communication of the interviewer.[23]

The NICHD protocol translates existing evidence and recommendations on investigative and forensic interviews with children into operational guidelines for professionals. It was developed as research had demonstrated the limited impact of training on the communication and interviewing skills of professionals. Professionals found it difficult to apply theoretical knowledge they obtained in training seminars in their work practice, so that the quality of their interviews and the accuracy of the information obtained from the child often remained compromised even after training.[24]

The NICHD protocol aimed to redress this gap. It provides practical step-by-step guidance for the interviewer on all phases of the interview. It includes examples of open-ended and non-leading questions, free-recall prompts and techniques to obtain the maximum results from an interview, both in terms of the detail and amount of information elicited from the child and its accuracy and reliability. The protocol guides professional interviewers in conducting the interview in a way that respects ethical standards in communicating with children on sensitive issues.[25]

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[22] NICHD Protocol, International Evidence-Based Investigative Interviewing of Children, http://nichdprotocol.com/. A recent version of the NICHD Protocol can be accessed from http://nichdprotocol.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/InteractiveNICHDProtocol.pdf.
[23] NICHD Protocol, International Evidence-Based Investigative Interviewing of Children, http://nichdprotocol.com/. Lamb, Michael E., Orbach, Y., Hershkowitz, I., Esplin, P.W., Horowitz, D., Structured forensic interview protocols improve the quality and informativeness of investigative interviews with children: A review of research using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 2007, 31(11-12): 1201–1231.
[24] Lamb, Michael E., Orbach, Y., Hershkowitz, I., Esplin, P.W., Horowitz, D., Structured forensic interview protocols improve the quality and informativeness of investigative interviews with children: A review of research using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 2007, 31(11-12): 1201–1231.
[25] Lamb, Michael E., Orbach, Y., Hershkowitz, I., Esplin, P.W., Horowitz, D., Structured forensic interview protocols improve the quality and informativeness of investigative interviews with children: A review of research using the NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 2007, 31(11-12): 1201–1231.

Evidence-based interviewing methods such as the NICHD protocol are used for investigative or forensic interviews with children. Interviewers use them to obtain statements from children who are victims or witnesses of violence in different contexts, including physical or sexual violence, exploitation and trafficking. The method has also proven effective for interviewing children on the move who have fled from violence in their home country or who have experienced severe violence during their migration. The Barnahus ("Children's Houses") and comparable models in the Baltic Sea Region use the NICHD as well as the NCAC protocols, which are comparable in structure, method and approach.[26]

The NICHD protocol is structured into different phases and steps that have to be followed as closely as possible. The interview starts with an *introduction phase*, followed by a *narrative phase* where the child speaks about substantive issues, and ends with the *closing phase*.

Phase 1: Introduction

The introduction phase serves the following main purposes:

1. Introducing the interviewer and the child
2. Explaining the rules for the interview and the child's tasks
3. Becoming acquainted
4. Building rapport

1. Introducing the interviewer, the child and the interpreter

At the beginning of the interview, the interviewer introduces him- or herself to the child and explains the purpose of the interview and the role of the interviewer. The interviewer seeks to make the child feel at ease and assures the child that he or she is allowed to talk about anything, positive and negative things.

If an interpreter is involved in the interview, the interviewer introduces the interpreter, irrespective of whether the interpreter is present in the room or connected by phone or internet.

After this basic introduction, the interviewer makes the following additional remarks and questions:

- We are here to find out something about your situation.
- We are here to understand how it is to be in your situation.
- You should feel free to say what you feel is important.
- Is there anything you would like to ask or say before we start talking?

After these introductory explanations, the interviewer asks the child to introduce him- or herself and asks some basic questions about the child, such as the child's age and level at school. If the child is from a different country, the interviewer might ask general questions about the child's life in the home community.

2. Interview instructions

The interviewer explains the child's tasks during the interview, which is to describe events in detail and to tell the truth. The interviewer explains the rules of the interview and the expectations of the

[26] National Children's Advocacy Centre, *The National Children's Advocacy Centre's Child Forensic Interview Structure*, 2012, http://www.nationalcac.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/NCAC-Child-Forensic-Interview-Structure.pdf. See: Council of the Baltic Sea States, PROMISE, http://www.childrenatrisk.eu/promise/.

child, invites the child to ask questions for clarification whenever the child has some doubts or something remains unclear. Reaching a common understanding on these basic rules it important to make the child's statement more accurate and reliable. The interviewer might use the following questions and explanations:

- Let me know if I ask the same question more than once. If that happens, it is simply because I have forgotten that I asked the same question before.
  - ➔ *When asked the same question twice, the child might feel insecure about his or her response and think that the interviewer did not like or approve of the response given before. Some children tend to vary or change their response when asked repeatedly.*
- Let me know if you do not understand the question.
- Correct me if I am wrong.
- If you do not know the answer to one of my questions, it is ok to say 'I don't know'.
  - ➔ *A child might not know how to respond to a question. The child might not understand a word or a concept due to their young age, level of development or cultural differences.*
- Do you know the difference between the truth and a lie?
  - ➔ *The interviewer makes some examples of obvious truthful and wrong statements to clarify the difference. The objective is to reach a common understanding with the child on the importance of being honest and to commit the child to responding truthfully.*
- Let us make an agreement to only tell the truth during this interview.

3. Becoming acquainted

After this introduction, the interviewer engages the child in a brief conversation that is interesting to the child, for instance talking about the child's skills or hobbies.

- Tell me more about yourself.
- Tell me about your hobbies.
- What are you good at?

This type of conversation helps to reduce the formality of the situation. It also provides an opportunity for the interviewer to assess the child's skills in communication and free narration. It is therefore important that the child does most of the talking and not the interviewer. If the child talks about skills in music or drawing or sports, the interviewer can connect to these themes and ask open-ended questions about these topics to let the child respond in free narration.

- Tell me all about your drawings, tell me all about the last picture you drew.
- Ok, so you like football, tell me all about your interest in football.
- Tell me all about the last match you played.

Before shifting to the main topic of the interview, the interviewer gives the child an opportunity to rehearse free recall. This is done by asking the child about a recent event in his or her life, for instance activities in the past weekend. If the child is very reluctant and shy at this point in the interview, he or she is likely to be even more reluctant about disclosing hurtful experiences and incidents of violence or exploitation in the interview's second phase.

Overall, these introductory remarks, explanations and questions aim to establish rapport (see Box 1).

Box 1: Building rapport

Rapport building is a communication tool that serves several purposes:

- By building rapport with the child, the interviewer aims to establish a positive atmosphere where the interviewer and the child communicate attentively and with mutual trust. A calm and trusted interaction between the interviewer and the child is a precondition for the interview to succeed.
- Rapport building enables the interviewer to assess the child and his or her emotional situation, communication skills and other factors that might impact the child's capability to provide accurate information during the interview.
- On the basis of this assessment, the interviewer has to adjust the interview style in order to create the most conducive and supportive conditions for the child to speak out.
- The assessment enables the interviewer to positively influence the child's feelings about the interview and to encourage the child to communicate clearly without feeling inhibited by the interviewer, the style or pace of the interview questions or any other issues.
- If rapport has been established well, the child and the interviewer have eye contact while they speak, the child is calm and considers the interviewer trustworthy. A good rapport makes it easier for the child to disclose more personal or sensitive information.[27]

Phase 2: Narrative – Speaking about substantive issues

The narrative phase serves the following main purposes:

1. The child narrates in free recall
2. The interviewer guides the child's narration without influencing it
3. The child shares information about substantive issues
4. Where applicable, this part of the child's statement informs judicial or administrative proceedings

In the *narrative phase*, the interviewer directs the conversation to the main topic of the interview and lets the child speak in free recall. To direct the child's narration, the interviewer asks open-ended and non-leading questions and makes the questions increasingly specific as the child talks. By using open-ended and non-leading questions, the interviewer does not influence the child's responses. This is particularly important in cases of forensic interviews that take place in the context of judicial or administrative proceedings.

Closed and leading questions have to be avoided, as the way the questions are phrased might influence the child's responses. The child's responses to closed and leading questions would therefore not be considered fully reliable. In consequence, the child's account might not be

[27] See for instance: Tickle-Degnan, L., Rosenthal, R., The Nature of Rapport and Its Nonverbal Correlates, *Psychological Inquiry*, Vol. 1(4) 1990, pp. 285-293. Collins, R., Lincoln, R.A:, Frank, The Effect of Rapport in Forensic Interviewing, *Psychiatry Psychology and Law*, Vol. 9(1), 2002. Roberts, K. P., Lamb, M. E. and Sternberg, K. J., The effects of rapport-building style on children's reports of a staged event, *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 2004, 18, 189-202. Sternberg, K. J., Lamb, M. E., Hershkowitz, I., Yudilevitch, L., Orbach, Y., Esplin, P. W. and Hovav, M., Effects of introductory style on children's abilities to describe experiences of sexual abuse, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 1997, 21, 1133-1146. Collins, Kimberly, Doherty-Sneddon, Gwyneth and Martin J. Doherty, Practitioner perspectives on rapport building during child investigative interviews, *Psychology, Crime and Law*, Volume 20, 2014, Issue 9, 884-901.

admitted as evidence in judicial or administrative proceedings. Table 1 provides a few examples of open-ended and non-leading versus closed and leading questions.

Table 1: Examples of leading and non-leading questions

Examples of open-ended and non-leading questions:	**Examples of closed and leading questions:**
Tell me what happened? Where did it happen? Who did this to you?	Did he touch you? Did this happen in your home? Did your uncle do this to you?

In the cases of children who have been exploited or trafficked or are at risk, the interviewer might guide the narration by asking questions about the child's home and family background and the current living situation of the child.

If the child is a migrant or asylum seeking child, the interviewer will ask about the child's situation in the country of origin and the experiences during the journey. Questions might be phrased, for instance, as follows:

- Now that I know you better, I would like to know how you came to this country.
- Tell me everything about your family and your home community.
- Tell me everything about your journey.
- Tell me everything about your life in your country.

The interview starts with broad questions and becomes progressively more focused. At the beginning, the interviewer asks open-ended questions and then shifts to more specific questions that must always remain non-leading. In many contexts, the interview aims to obtain details from the child's perspective about the family situation, how many family members there are, the quality of relationships and communication in the family. Only towards the end of the interview, if the child has not disclosed anything, it is ok for the interviewer to ask more specific questions to prompt a disclosure. Specific questions might include the following:

- Were you asked to do something you did not like to do?
- Did anyone force you to do something you did not like?
- Did anyone do anything to your body and you did not allow it or did not like it?
- If you think someone will do things to you that they are not allowed to, we want to know about it.
- Tell me all about that. Tell me everything from the beginning to the end, even if you think that something does not matter.

If the interviewer has previously had information on what happened to the child, as for instance information about acts of exploitation and trafficking or other forms of violence, and the child is not disclosing, it is ok at the end of the interview to ask about it:

- I know you are worried about something that happened to you, tell me about that.

The interviewer must avoid asking leading questions and suggest something that the child has not yet addressed. If the child discloses an act of violence, then the interviewer should follow up with questions about details of the incident and how often it has happened. The objective is to

obtain information about the context and environment and everything that has to do with the child's senses such as feelings, smells, hearing and seeing.

In cases of children on the move, it is also important to understand how the child paid for the journey and if he or she was accompanied by someone. The interviewer might ask if the child had any possibility to seek help during the journey and if was there anyone in their environment they could trust. The interviewer asks the child about their feelings when they lived in their home country, how they felt on the way to the country they are in now and how they are feeling on the day of the interview. It is important to ask the child about suicidal thoughts or if they wish to die. In addition to eliciting information on the child's journey, interviews with children on the move that follow the NICHD protocol provide information for asylum or immigration procedures and for the identification of risks of exploitation and trafficking (see Box 2).

Finally, it is important to ask the child about his or her dreams or how they would like to live in the future, their hopes and wishes.

Box 2: Obtaining information from children on the move on risks of exploitation and trafficking – An example from Barnahus Iceland[28]

When interviewing children on the move, the child's responses to the questions below can provide hints and clues on risks of exploitation and trafficking. The aim of the interview is to gather as much information as possible on these themes from the child in free recall, without however asking the specific questions listed below. Only if the child has not addressed these issues by the end of the interview, the interviewer can asked direct questions. This list of questions may need to be adjusted according to the context and purpose of the interview.

- How long have you been in this country?
- Are there some adults that you have more contact with than others?
- Who is your primary contact or guardian?
- How often do you see your primary contact?
- Is there someone you can talk to if something is difficult or when you are sad?
- If you get visitors, where can you spend time with them?
- Do you have your own phone or you can borrow a phone?
- Is there someone who controls whom you are calling or what you say?

Phase 3: Closure

The Closing Phase serves the following main purposes:

1. The interviewer returns to speak about neutral topics
2. The child can ask questions
3. The interviewer and the child discuss a safety plan for the child

The interviewer sums up what the child has said using the child's words. The interviewer returns then to a neutral topic, for instance talking about a hobby that the child mentioned in the

[28] Council of the Baltic Sea States, *Guidelines Promoting the Human Rights and the Best Interests of the Child in Transnational Child Protection Cases*, Addendum, 2016, p. 12-15.

introduction phase. The interviewer responds to any questions or concerns of the child and thanks the child for his or her participation.

If the interview was about a sensitive issue, such as experiences of exploitation and trafficking or other forms of violence, the interviewer uses the closing phase to discuss a safety plan with the child, for instance by asking the following questions:

- Whom can you talk to if something is bothering you and when you are sad?
- Who is there for you when you need help?

The safety plan helps the child to feel more confident about seeking help after the interview and to deal with any bad memories or issues that might upset the child.

Computer technology supports practitioners in leading sensitive conversations with children

Modern technology offers new opportunities for strengthening the communication between professionals and children. Experience and research in this field have demonstrated the advantages of technology for professional training, case assessment and therapy. In combination with the use of evidence-based interviewing protocols, these tools enhance professional skills in leading sensitive conversations with children.

In the Baltic Sea Region, technology enhanced training and interviewing programmes are being used at a growing scale. The following programmes have received positive feedback with regard to the quality of training and support for practice:

- The *Avatar-Based Interview Training* strengthens professionals' interviewing skills and helps them becoming more confident in conducting child-sensitive interviews.
- The programme "*In My Shoes*" facilitates sensitive conversations between professionals and children and encourages the child to speak out about feelings and experiences.

Avatar Based Interview Training: Innovative technology enables an authentic experience of interviewing a child[29]

The Avatar Based Interview Training (AvBIT) applies innovative technology to train professionals in leading a sensitive conversation with a child. The online tool simulates a face-to-face conversation with a virtual representation of a child. The avatar-based system makes the interviewing experience particularly authentic and has received highly positive feedback.

The Avatar Based Interview Training was developed by Linnaeus University in Sweden. It was based on a training model that the University had previously used to train police officers in conducting interviews with children. The previous model engaged the trainees in a roleplay, where one person played the child and another conducted the interview. The fact that adults roleplayed the child created, however, certain limitations. Even when a student was good at acting as a child, the simulation was not perceived as realistic.

Based on this experience, the idea emerged to develop an avatar child that the interviewer could relate to. The project team at Linnaeus University developed a prototype and proceeded to create

[29] Information provided by Pär Stihl, Chief Detective Inspector, Project Manager, Institute of Police Education, Linnaeus University, Sweden, November 2016 and December 2018. See: AvBIT Labs, https://avbitlabs.com/en/.

the Avatar Based Interview Training programme. The programme makes it possible for the interviewer to see the avatar child on the computer screen and to interact with the virtual child in real time.

Professionals require and demand training

Across different sectors, state officials and service providers have to lead sensitive conversations with children. This concerns teachers, school nurses and psychologists, social workers, medical doctors and other health care professionals, lawyers, judges, police officers, as well as immigration and asylum officers. Many professionals, however, have never been trained in communicating with children on sensitive topics.

The AvBIT programme responds to this need. It strengthens the interviewing skills of professionals and trains them in child-sensitive communication. The training helps professionals feeling more confident about their interaction with the child. It benefits children, as qualified interviewers are more sensitive to the child's needs and better prepared to support children in exercising their right to be heard.

AvBIT is currently used by the Swedish National Police for training specialised child investigators and by the Swedish Migration Board for training migration and asylum officers. It is also being tested for training child psychologists. Due to the positive results achieved thus far, the programme is used and requested at a growing scale in Sweden.

After the positive experience made in Sweden, other countries in the Baltic Sea Region and broader Europe have expressed an interest in the programme and are exploring possibilities to include it in their national systems. Some state agencies are considering to use the technology for training staff in leading sensitive conversations with adults who are victims of human trafficking.

The training programme

A training session typically engages 10 students and the instructor. The instructor controls the avatar child from his or her own computer, acts as the child and responds to the interviewer's questions. The instructor's voice is transformed to sound like a child's voice and can be adapted and tuned as required.

While one student conducts the interview with the avatar child, the other students observe the interview and provide feedback. The interview is recorded for subsequent analysis by the group of students and the instructor. The AvBIT programme includes a feedback manual, which provides guidance for the analysis of a training interview. It follows quality standards for the structure of an interview, the interview style and ethical considerations. The manual guides the students in giving feedback to each other after a training interview. This joint learning experience is supported by the instructor.

The training programme provides information on chid-sensitive communication, a package of validated methods and evidence-based interviewing protocols. The training interviews are usually conducted on the basis of the methods and protocols that the specific agency or organisations uses, which has requested the training.

Image 1: AvBIT – The avatar child Carl

At present, the training programme provides the possibility to interview the avatar child Carl, a Swedish boy aged around 9-10 years old (see Image 1[30]). The programme includes also the option to interview an avatar girl who is Swedish like Carl, as well as representations of non-European children with different national and cultural origins. While these different avatar children are available for use, they continue to be refined. The objective is to offer diverse representations of children that are close to the working context of the participating students. Considering that professionals often have to communicate with children who do not speak the same language, the programme is being amended during 2019 to include a training component on working with interpreters in the course of a sensitive interview.

After the AvBIT prototype has been developed and tested successfully since 2014, it continues to evolve. Since 2017, the advancement of the programme has been supported by Swedish Government funding.[31] In a first phase, this has enabled the development of a media server, which makes the web-based training programme accessible from any computer. The users are not required to download any software but obtain the possibility to log in to an online training platform. The programme can therefore be accessed more flexibly from any location. On the web-based training platform, participants can choose among different virtual rooms where the avatar child appears and stays for the interview. The rooms are all neutral settings, such as a classroom, an office and a plain unspecific room.

During 2019, in a second development phase supported by Sweden, Linnaeus University continues to make the programme more user-friendly and to promote an even stronger interactive engagement of all students in a joint learning experience. The training platform will be expanded to include a feedback and review area where the students who observe the interview and the instructor can comment on the interview as it takes place. While observing the interview, the students are asked to identify double or leading questions, unclear language or other elements of weak communication.

There is also a web conference function, which the instructor uses for group sessions with the students, for instance to guide them on relevant interviewing techniques. In a typical training session, the students meet first with the instructor in the conference section, then split up into the interviewing section where the interview with the avatar child takes place, and subsequently meet again in the conference section to discuss the interview and provide feedback. Through this function, the web-based training platform enables distance learning so that the participants and instructor are not required to travel.

The AvBIT programme provides a two-day induction training for the instructors who have to be able to handle the system during the training session. This requires basic technical and computer

[30] Linnaeus University, *Swedish Researchers Develop a Multi-lingual Avatar for Professionals to Interview Children in Crisis*, 31 October 2017, https://lnu.se/en/meet-linnaeus-university/current/news/2017/avatar-based-interview-training-gives-increased-competence-on-how-to-meet-children-in-sensitive-talks/.

[31] The further development of ABIT has received financial support from Vinnova, a Swedish Government agency that provides funding for the development of innovative approaches in technology and communication and other fields. See: VINNOVA, Sweden's Innovation Agency, https://www.vinnova.se/en/.

skills for the instructor to accept the participants on the online platform and manage the different rooms they use for the training sessions. Instructors require solid expertise in the specific areas where they aim to train. Experience in interviewing children, knowing how children might react in sensitive conversations, and the ability to act as a child are additional competences for instructors to manage the training sessions well. When conducting the training, some instructors are supported by an IT expert from their organisation or agency to take care of the technical aspects of the online training platform.

At present, the training of instructors takes place in face-to-face courses. In the coming years, the project team has the ambition to make the training of instructors available as a distance e-learning course, which will make the programme even more flexible and open it up to a broader target group. In the course of this development, the licensing of certified AvBIT instructors continues to be refined, as it is a precondition for the programme to be taken to scale in different countries and languages.

"In My Shoes": A computer-assisted method facilitates sensitive dialogues between practitioners and children

The computer-assisted interviewing method *In My Shoes* facilitates sensitive conversations between professionals and children.[32] The application uses images, sound, speech and video to make it easier for the child to express his or her views and to talk about experiences and feelings, including about sensitive issues such as violence, illness or other distressing events.

In My Shoes mediates a dialogue between a practitioner and a child with two main benefits: The programme encourages the child to speak more openly about his or her views, experiences and feelings, while assisting the practitioner in leading the conversation, following a structured interviewing process. The method is targeted primarily at social workers, child psychologists and psychiatrists and other mental health and health care professionals, professionals in the education sector and forensic interviewers.

In My Shoes includes a training programme, which enables professionals to become certified interviewers and use the method in their work setting. The training enhances the communication and interviewing skills of practitioners and enables them to navigate the *In My Shoes* computer programme. The training is delivered in two full-day courses, which take place with a few weeks distance during which the trainees apply the method when interviewing children. The training aims to strengthen and refine professional capacities in communicating with children with different backgrounds and needs, with the goal of eliciting from the child information on sensitive matters at stake.

During an interview assisted by the programme, the professional and the child sit in front of the computer and engage in a structured conversation. The programme facilitates this conversation, as well as the rapport building between the child and the interviewer, and encourages the child to share information as they proceed through different modules. One module encourages the child, for instance, to describe different facial expressions and feelings associated to them. Another module guides the child in talking about physical experiences. The child can use different pictures

[32] See: http://www.inmyshoes.org.uk. In My Shoes was developed in the United Kingdom by a multi-disciplinary team of academics and practitioners on the basis of research and evidence. It is widely applied in case assessment and therapy with children in the UK, while other countries are starting to promote the method. In Sweden, the Children's Ombudsman in Uppsala County is promoting the use of "In My Shoes" and offers training courses for professionals to become certified users of the programme. Barnombudet i Uppsala län [Children's Ombudsman in Uppsala County], *In My Shoes*, https://boiu.se/om-oss/verksamheter/inmyshoes/. The Children's Ombudsman in Uppsala County is a non-profit association that works independent from municipal, regional or national state authorities.

and symbols to describe where it hurts, how the pain feels and how intense it is. The modules are structured in accordance with quality standards for forensic interviews with children. Leading questions are avoided and there are no question and answer sessions. This specific approach helps interviewers to not simply ask questions from their own perspectives as adults and professionals, but to engage the child in a dialogue and listen to the child's account.[33] Each session is saved and recorded so that it can be used subsequently for the casework or to inform any administrative or judicial proceedings, if applicable.

Research from Sweden has shown that *In My Shoes* is a valid and accurate method to interview young children in pre-school age (3-5 years old) and children or youth with developmental disabilities. The programme has helped practitioners to elicit reliable information from young children about their feelings, thoughts and opinions. The computer-assisted method enabled the children to provide complete and detailed statements about their experiences. The accuracy of the statements are comparable to those elicited with evidence-based interviewing protocols used in forensic interviews. An interview based on the *In My Shoes* method usually takes longer than a traditional forensic interview. This is due to the additional time allocated for building rapport. The method is particularly suitable, therefore, for children who are shy or find it hard to open up in communication with professionals.[34]

Extensive testing of the programme has shown that it is appropriate to use in a range of contexts, including with children who are victims of different forms of violence or at risk, children who have developmental delays, difficulties with engaging in sensitive conversations and expressing emotions. It can be used effectively by children who have learning difficulties, hearing impairments, or speech or communication difficulties. The programme succeeds to facilitate conversations with children who have difficulties to concentrate or feel uncomfortable sitting in a face-to-face interview.[35]

Using the computer as a medium in conversations and interviews with children has numerous advantages, as has been evidenced by research. Many children find the use of technology appealing, it stimulates their interest and encourages them to become actively engaged. When a practitioner or interviewer sits alongside a child and both focus their attention on the same computer programme, the child may feel less pressure and stress than in a face-to-face interview. This arrangement can make it easier for the child to concentrate on the computer programme as a third component in the interaction with the professional. By providing a clear and structured method, the computer programme guides the professional and the child through their conversation and helps both feeling confident about their interaction and conversation.[36]

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[33] See: Barnombudet i Uppsala län [Children's Ombudsman in Uppsala County], *In My Shoes*, https://boiu.se/om-oss/verksamheter/inmyshoes/.

[34] See: Karin Fängström, PhD, Reg. Psychologist, Department of Public Health and Caring Sciences, Uppsala University, Sweden, http://katalog.uu.se/empinfo/?id=N8-685. Fängström, Karin, *"I don't even remember anything", Optimising the choice of method when interviewing pre-schoolers*, Uppsala University, Disciplinary Domain of Medicine and Pharmacy, Faculty of Medicine, Department of Public Health and Caring Sciences, Social Medicine, 2017, http://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1149070&dswid=2917. Fängström, K., Bokström, P., Dahlberg, A., Calam, R., Lucas, S., & Sarkadi, A., In My Shoes – Validation of a computer assisted approach for interviewing children, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 2016, 58:160–172. Fängström, K., Salari, R., Eriksson, M., & Sarkadi, A., The Computer Assisted Interview In My Shoes Can Benefit Shy Preschool Children's Communication, *PLoS ONE*, 2017, 12. Fängström, K., Sarkadi, A., Lucas, S., Calam, R., & Eriksson, M., "And They Gave Me a Shot, It Really Hurt", Evaluative content in investigative interviews with young children, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2017, 82: 434-443. Bokström, P., Fängström, K., Calam, R., Lucas, S., & Sarkadi, A., "I felt a little bubbly in my tummy", Eliciting preschoolers' accounts of their health visit using a computer-assisted interview method, *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 2015, 42: 87–97.

[35] See: http://www.inmyshoes.org.uk.

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