

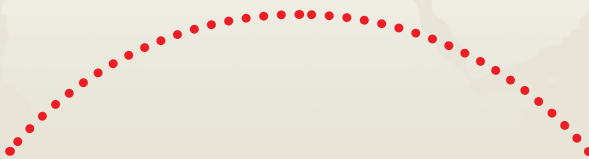


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NEAR to Guardians

Networking and Exchange
Activities to Reinforce
Guardianship on housing,
labour and education



GROWING UP TOGETHER IN EUROPE

**Reccomandations for Policies and Practices
that Promote the Inclusion of Unaccompanied Children
in the Member States of the European Union**





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Graphic Design:
Raffaella Varrone

Coordination Graphic Design:
Laura Binetti | Visual Communication Specialist | Save the Children Italy

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	INTRODUCTION	_ 5
1.	PLACE STORIES, ASPIRATIONS AND POTENTIAL AT THE CENTRE AND ENSURE A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH AT EVERY STAGE OF THE INCLUSION PROCESS	_ 6
2.	ENSURE ACCESS AND RESIDENCE PROCEDURES THAT RESPECT THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH	_ 8
3.	PROMOTE HIGH-QUALITY GUARDIANSHIP SYSTEMS AND SUPPORT THE ROLE OF GUARDIANS	_ 9
4.	STRENGTHEN THE QUALITY OF PATHWAYS BY PROMOTING PEER RELATIONSHIPS AND ENSURING ACCESS TO SUPPORT SERVICES	_ 10
5.	GUARANTEE FULL ACCESS TO FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS: HEALTHCARE AND WELL-BEING	_ 11
6.	PROMOTE SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION THROUGH ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND EFFECTIVE TRAINING PROGRAMMES	_ 12
7.	ENSURE HIGH-QUALITY RECEPTION AND HOUSING SOLUTIONS FOCUSED ON INDEPENDENCE AND THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD	_ 14
8.	PROMOTE ACCESS TO THE LABOUR MARKET AND PATHWAYS TO SOCIAL AND EMPLOYMENT INCLUSION TO FOSTER INDEPENDENCE	_ 16

INTRODUCTION



Ensuring that all **unaccompanied children arriving in Europe are provided with an effective pathway to reception, protection and inclusion** – one that guarantees **effective access to fundamental rights** and fosters the **development of each individual's potential** – is a fundamental responsibility of institutions, as well as a process to be built in partnership with local communities, the private sector and civil society, but above all with the children and youth themselves – children and adolescents involved in migration journeys undertaken without the support of an adult figure of reference. It is essential to highlight how the conditions, quality and modalities of early reception have a decisive impact on children's subsequent inclusion pathways and their transition to adulthood. Timely access to rights, continuity of care, a legal status and relational stability, and the early identification of aspirations and vulnerabilities are **key factors** that significantly influence opportunities for inclusion, autonomy and well-being in the medium and long term.

In this context, the **role of guardians is central to ensuring effective safeguarding of rights and supporting children** on their path to inclusion.

The following recommendations have been developed as part of the **N.E.A.R. to Guardians project**, co-funded by the European Union, Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), with the overall aim of strengthening networking, the **exchange of good practices** and the **sharing of knowledge** among the main actors involved in the safeguarding and inclusion of unaccompanied children in various Member States of the European Union, with particular attention to **key areas such as education, housing and labour market integration**. The project involved organisations from five European Union countries: **Italy, Spain, Greece, Slovenia and Belgium**.

In light of the evidence gathered and the experience gained during the project, this document proposes **a series of recommendations** that take into account the entire pathway of the child, from arrival through to the transition into adulthood, addressed to decision-makers at European, national and local levels, as well as other **key actors involved in the protection and inclusion of unaccompanied children**.

These recommendations aim to promote effective and coordinated safeguarding models capable of guaranteeing **full access to rights and opportunities for growth for children and youth**, while offering concrete **guidance to foster their full autonomy and participation** in the life of local communities.

1.

PLACE STORIES, ASPIRATIONS AND POTENTIAL AT THE CENTRE AND ENSURE A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH AT EVERY STAGE OF THE INCLUSION PROCESS

Unaccompanied children arriving in Europe, like any other child, bring with them complex stories, but also dreams, aspirations, skills and a legitimate need for safeguarding and rights. Just like all their peers, **they do not constitute a uniform group but present a wide range of differences linked** to their geographical backgrounds, the languages they speak, their socio-economic circumstances, family situations, cultures and religions, levels of education and individual experiences. Each of them represents **a unique set of resources, aspirations, skills and talents, which must be recognised, observed and valued** through concrete opportunities for growth and inclusion.

A truly effective path to inclusion enables **children and youth to be involved in decisions that affect them** — from access to education to work, from leisure to social life — ensuring inclusive participation, as enshrined in the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**, including through access to appropriate and understandable information and safe spaces.

Similarly, it is **important that their perspective**, based on unique experiences and testimonies, **is considered by institutions when defining public policies** and awareness-raising campaigns to tackle discriminatory attitudes and promote cultural diversity as a shared value.

Equally important is **access to spaces for participation and dialogue with other adolescents and young people** in the community, as privileged contexts for the exercise of active citizenship, intercultural exchange and the prevention of social exclusion and discrimination, because the path to inclusion can only be achieved through mutual recognition and mutual understanding fostered by living together in welcoming and empowering spaces.



Recommendations:

- **To place the personal profiles** of unaccompanied children and youth at the centre, **taking into account their aspirations, talents and life stories** when developing pathways towards autonomy.
- **To encourage the participation** of unaccompanied children and youth **in shaping the policies that affect them**, ensuring the systematic inclusion of their voices through participatory models to be applied in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and services aimed at them.
- **To promote initiatives to raise public awareness on interculturalism**, the prevention of social exclusion and discrimination, including by directly involving unaccompanied children and youth in their design and by **encouraging the creation and distribution of safe spaces** in which to facilitate encounters and exchanges, both among peers and with the community.

2. ENSURE ACCESS AND RESIDENCE PROCEDURES THAT RESPECT THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH

The availability of **fair, swift and accessible procedures, and access to stable legal status, are fundamental prerequisites for promoting the inclusion** of unaccompanied children and ensuring their smooth transition to adulthood.

Administrative and legal barriers, particularly those relating to obtaining a residence permit and legal status, can severely limit the enjoyment of rights and access to essential services, education, healthcare, housing and employment.

It is essential to **ensure child-friendly entry** and residence procedures capable of promptly identifying unaccompanied children as such, **recognising their vulnerabilities and ensuring full access to protective measures**, such as safeguarding. At the coming of age, a particularly critical phase for every unaccompanied child, it is also **essential to ensure continuity of the process**, starting with the issue of a **valid residence permit**, to prevent the loss of legal status from undermining the inclusion processes achieved up to that point.



Recommendations:

- **To establish rapid, reliable age assessment and identification** procedures that respect children's rights, including timely access to clear and comprehensible legal information, as well as free and qualified legal assistance and the prompt appointment of a guardian.
- **To ensure the rapid issuance of a residence permit and the recognition of legal status** within the territory, including international protection, whilst also **promoting continuity through legal and administrative support** and measures to tackle the risk of irregularity upon reaching the age of majority.
- **To promote relocation as a measure of solidarity** in line with the new rules of the European Pact on Migration and Asylum, **giving priority to unaccompanied children** and vulnerable groups, taking into account their specific needs, and to **guarantee the right to family reunification**, where this is in the best interests of the child, by facilitating and speeding up the procedures.

3. PROMOTE HIGH-QUALITY GUARDIANSHIP SYSTEMS AND SUPPORT THE ROLE OF GUARDIANS

Guardianship systems and guardians, as adult points of reference, **are central elements of the protection system for unaccompanied children**; they are fundamental institutions that guide and support these young people on their path to independence. Regardless of the specific guardianship systems, which vary considerably across EU Member States, **the timely appointment of a guardian is necessary to ensure the minor's legal representation**, the protection of their rights, the promotion of their physical and mental well-being, and the monitoring of their educational and inclusion pathways.

Delays in appointing a guardian, shortcomings in support policies, excessive workloads and inadequate training can undermine the effectiveness of the intervention and negatively impact inclusion pathways, particularly during the transition to adulthood.



Recommendations:

- **To ensure the timely appointment of a guardian**, from the moment the minor arrives in the country, guaranteeing consistency and continuity of guardianship throughout all stages of their journey and **promoting dialogue and collaboration between guardians and other actors in the guardianship system** (such as social services, schools, reception centres, etc.).
- **To allocate adequate resources to support guardians**, including those dedicated to **distribution and promotion of awareness of their role**, as well as reimbursements and work-life balance measures to help reconcile guardianship duties with work, in contexts where guardians are volunteers.
- **To structure and strengthen guardians' skills through continuous and regular training**, ensuring they receive constant and **multidisciplinary support** (legal, psychological and guidance on local services) and promoting peer networking activities and supervision tools.

4. **STRENGTHEN THE QUALITY OF PATHWAYS BY PROMOTING PEER RELATIONSHIPS AND ENSURING ACCESS TO SUPPORT SERVICES**

Strengthening peer relationships between migrant and local children and youth, is essential for **promoting the well-being and active participation** of unaccompanied children and youth in local community life. Effective inclusion pathways also require the **availability of qualified and accessible cultural mediation services** that can respond promptly to their needs.



Recommendations:

- **To foster structured opportunities for interaction and exchange between unaccompanied children and local peers**, to encourage peer relationships, tackle discrimination and strengthen a sense of belonging to local communities.
- **To promote and adopt comprehensive regulatory frameworks** that recognise and **value the profession of intercultural mediator**, ensuring the timely and structured presence of such a figure at **all stages of the child's journey**, from initial reception (for example, in identification and age assessment procedures), to case management (such as interviews with social workers and legal proceedings), through to integration into educational, health and social services.

5. GUARANTEE FULL ACCESS TO FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS: HEALTHCARE AND WELL-BEING

Effective access to the fundamental rights to health and care is an essential condition for ensuring the well-being, protection and development of unaccompanied children, and must be guaranteed from the earliest stages of reception and throughout the entire inclusion pathway, regardless of legal status or the stage of administrative procedures.

Barriers that hinder continuity of care can have significant negative effects on the autonomy and social inclusion of children and youth.



Recommendations:

- **To guarantee effective and free access to the healthcare system** for all children, including at the initial stages of reception, and to ensure continuity of care.
- **To strengthen services dedicated** to child and adolescent mental health, whilst ensuring timely interventions for children and youth with specific needs.

6. PROMOTE SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION THROUGH ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND EFFECTIVE TRAINING PROGRAMMES

Access to education is one of the most effective tools for promoting the social inclusion of unaccompanied children and youth and for fostering their personal, educational and professional development. **Inclusive education systems must offer fair, flexible and meaningful learning opportunities**, which cannot be achieved without overcoming the language barrier.

Despite the universal right to education, difficulties persist in many contexts regarding the recognition of previous educational pathways and timely access to the mainstream education system. These obstacles can result in children being placed in pathways unsuitable for their age or aspirations, leading to limited opportunities for socialisation and the development of a sense of belonging to the school community, as well as significantly shaping their future due to stereotypical or limiting approaches.

An effective **approach to socio-educational inclusion must be multidimensional and child-centred**, ensuring not only access to and completion of formal education, but also the development of transversal skills, the strengthening of social relationships and the promotion of cultural and linguistic identities. In this context, **intercultural education and multilingualism**, as well as cultural, **artistic and sporting extracurricular activities**, represent **fundamental resources** for building inclusive learning environments and fostering peer interaction, **psychological well-being**, the development of social skills and the recovery of fundamental aspects of childhood and adolescence.

Attention must be paid to **strengthening individual skills** and supporting pathways for children and youth empowerment, promoting their **active participation in the educational process** and recognising them as protagonists of their own growth journey, placing their aspirations, aptitudes and skills at the centre.



Recommendations:

- **To ensure timely and equitable access to the mainstream education system** for all unaccompanied children, even at advanced stages of the school year, ensuring placement in **educational pathways** appropriate to their age and **individual skills**, including by facilitating the timely recognition of **educational qualifications and prior learning**, where necessary also using non-formal assessment tools - such as tests and portfolios - to prevent inappropriate school placements.
- **To promote guidance pathways** that take into account the **aspirations, talents and individual skills** of children and youth, avoiding stereotypical or limiting pathways, and foster **inclusive, intercultural and multilingual learning environments**, by strengthening the provision of language and cultural mediation services, the development of **innovative and inclusive teaching models** that foster socialisation between foreign and local students – such as peer tutoring and peer education – and the ongoing training of teachers and school leaders on the topics of intercultural education and multilingualism.
- **To promote free or subsidised participation** by unaccompanied children and youth in extracurricular, **cultural, artistic and sporting activities**, with a view to fostering peer relationships, psychological well-being and a sense of belonging to local communities, including by supporting cooperation between schools, services, civil society organisations and local communities, to build integrated educational networks and promote effective and sustainable pathways to socio-educational inclusion.

7. ENSURE HIGH-QUALITY RECEPTION AND HOUSING SOLUTIONS FOCUSED ON INDEPENDENCE AND THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

Appropriate reception systems and housing solutions are fundamental elements in ensuring the **protection, well-being and social inclusion** of unaccompanied children and youth.

An effective **inclusion pathway** requires **adequate reception** from the moment of arrival, in facilities suitable for children and with a **proportionate number of trained operators**, including **linguistic and cultural mediators** capable of ensuring the right to be heard and to participate. It also requires access to all essential services, such as **legal support** throughout all procedures, **healthcare and psychological support, and language learning**.

Subsequently, access to widespread and locally rooted reception systems is a key factor in promoting **social inclusion, language learning and participation in the life of local communities**, supporting gradual and personalised pathways towards housing and social independence.

Finally, **access to independent housing solutions** during the transition to adulthood represents one of the main challenges for youth leaving the reception system, particularly due to economic, administrative and social barriers.

Maintaining continuity of support even beyond the age of majority, where necessary, **is essential to prevent sudden interruptions** in the path to inclusion and to support the psychosocial well-being of young people as they transition towards independence.

In this context, **access to independent housing solutions** — which provide **transitional stages between reception and full independence**, thereby fostering the gradual development of personal skills and the acquisition of responsibility — appears to be of particular importance and should be **integrated with educational and vocational pathways**, promoting solutions that enable young people to balance training, work and independent living.

Experimenting innovative housing models based on shared living, educational support and social support can provide an effective response to the needs of unaccompanied youth and local communities.



Recommendations:

- **To guarantee adequate reception conditions**, ensuring the presence of trained operators and timely access to essential services, including linguistic and cultural mediation, healthcare and psychological support, information on rights and guidance on available services, and **promote widespread**, locally rooted reception systems that are well integrated with the educational, social and healthcare services in the area.
- **To develop and support gradual and transitional housing solutions**, providing intermediate stages between **reception and full independence** for young people as they reach the age of majority, promoting **innovative and flexible housing models**, including **shared accommodation schemes and temporary housing linked to educational and employment projects**, to support youth independence and prevent situations of housing insecurity, including by ensuring the continuity of psychosocial support.
- **To strengthen coordination between local authorities**, social services, private-sector organisations, landlords and civil society organisations, **to develop integrated and sustainable housing strategies** over time.

8. PROMOTE ACCESS TO THE LABOUR MARKET AND PATHWAYS TO SOCIAL AND EMPLOYMENT INCLUSION TO FOSTER INDEPENDENCE

Access to the labour market is a key factor in promoting the independence and social inclusion of youth who have recently come of age. The opportunity to secure regular and stable employment enables them not only to achieve economic independence, but also to **build social relationships**, develop skills and actively participate in the life of local communities.

Effective pathways to social and labour market inclusion must provide for a **gradual transition into the world of work**, which **recognises young people's formal and informal skills** and supports the development of awareness of their own abilities, aspirations and life plans.

In this context, **collaboration between public institutions, third sector organisations, employment services and businesses is essential** for creating quality job opportunities and preventing the risk of labour exploitation and entry into informal labour markets.



Recommendations:

- **To promote personalised guidance, skills assessments and mentoring**, aimed at enhancing youth technical and soft skills and encouraging informed choices regarding their educational and career goals.
- **To encourage the formation of local partnerships between institutions, social services, training providers, employment services, private companies and civil society organisations**, with a view to developing integrated training and employment pathways, including high-quality work placements and apprenticeship opportunities, whilst promoting the active involvement of employers, including through the provision of financial incentives for the recruitment of unaccompanied youth.
- **To integrate pathways to employment with other key aspects of self-sufficiency**, such as access to **housing, training and social support services**, with a view to promoting pathways to inclusion that are sustainable in the long term.

