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HINTALOVON
Child Rights Foundation



**Universiteit
Antwerpen**

Methodological guidelines for child participation in the INCLUDE project

Hintalovon Child Rights Foundation
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1. Introduction

1.1. About the INCLUDE project

The INCLUDE project aims to offer a set of good practices to legal professionals to improve children's wellbeing when dealing with cases of international child abduction by a parent. Previous research projects (EWELL, VOICE) that were conducted by University of Antwerp and Missing Children Europe led to a set of recommendations on this topic. It is the aim of this current project to put in practice several of these recommendations that can help to enhance the participation and improve the situation of abducted children from the start of the civil proceedings until the enforcement of the decision and immediately after a return.

Therefore, 2 good practice guides will be developed:

1. to improve the daily life of children who are abducted by one parent during the abduction (WP2)
2. to guarantee a more child-friendly enforcement of return decisions (WP3)

Since both good practice guides cover a different stage of the abduction, they might be of use to different professionals.

The INCLUDE project is coordinated by Missing Children Europe, and it is implemented together with other project partners: University of Antwerp (Belgium), Hope For Children (Cyprus), and Hintalovon Child Rights Foundation (Hungary). The methodology of child participation is developed by the multidisciplinary team of Hintalovon, including a psychologist, a lawyer, a drama teacher and a criminologist, and it is enrolled in two countries: Hungary (by Hintalovon) and in Cyprus (by Hope for Children). The two organizations collaborate closely in facilitating this process.

1.2. Problem statement

Previous research projects shed light on various challenges that should be addressed to improve the situation of abducted children. On the one hand, *children* are in an extremely vulnerable situation. They are in a new environment, they have been excluded from the truth and find themselves in a position when once again, their life is in the hand of adults. Lack of attention, information, transparency, feedback, and trust are recurring problems they need to face.

On the other hand, *legal professionals* are also in a difficult situation assessing and considering the best interest of children. They have a difficulty to hear children, finding the right balance in resolving the case and showing a genuine interest in the child. The tension about the necessity of hearing and how to make it meaningful is also motivated by the fear of not being able to support them or to take into account their views due to legal regulations. It would require certain legal, procedural and organizational conditions, and many times the lack of time, information, personal and professional capacities and the limited space to non-return decisions hinders them to act accordingly.

However, research has also shown that better *communication* with children – including both the content of the decision and the way it is communicated– might lead to considerable changes in restoring trust and improving children’s wellbeing, no matter what the decision would be. Clearly, there is a need to provide guidance to legal professionals what safe and meaningful participation means for children in legal settings and how exactly they can facilitate it within their own capacities.

1.3. Objectives

Previously, as part of the [EWELL project](#), children who experienced an abduction by one of their parents were interviewed to gain a better understanding of how the event of an international child abduction is perceived by an affected child/youngster in Belgium, the Netherlands and France. In addition, focus groups discussions were conducted in Antwerp and Ghent as part of the VOICE project about a fictional child abduction scenario with non-affected children aged 15-17 to learn more about their thoughts and feelings.

This current project puts even more emphasis on children’s ideas. Children are recognized as experts of their own life, who are capable of forming and expressing their views on their well-being. Therefore the project moves on from previous researches and decides to:

1. Involve younger children

International child abduction primarily affects young children, the mean age is 6 (T. Kruger, *The inadequacies of law*. 2011, Oxford by Hart), so learning from younger children would be very informative for research purposes. Since the safety of children is a primary consideration, we adopted a gradual approach in reaching out to younger children. It is believed that firstly, the limits of the project and expertise of the project partners enable us to involve children aged 10 to 17 responsibly. Working with 10 to 13 years olds requires different techniques, therefore a mixed method should be used. Later, the engagement of younger children should be considered already from the project planning.

2. Working in collaboration with children both in the research and in other parts of the project

Working in partnership with children can lead to deeper understandings, a more comprehensive approach, and it is usually very inspirational for professionals (Shaw et al, 2011; Laws and Mann, 2004). Therefore, we not just consult children, but also collaborate with them in the project. This means that besides “seeking their views in order to build knowledge and understanding of their lives and experience” (Lansdown, 2001:147), children will be given the opportunity to influence both the processes and outcomes at any stage of the project. On collaboration level, children are enabled to identify what the relevant questions are in a research, encouraged and supported to take on the role of researchers, and they are involved “in discussions about the findings, their interpretation and their implications for future developments” (Lansdown, 2001:147-148). So this time, children can contribute to the project as researchers and participate in the evaluation, representation and dissemination of the results. They can also take part in awareness-

raising and the Steering Committee's work and will be invited to share their feedback on the developed materials.

3. Conduct a more in-depth analysis of children's feelings and needs by addressing underlying issues of international child abduction too

In order to provide practical support for professionals, conclusions from previous research need to be elaborated. We intend to take a closer look at the issues threatening children's well-being in case of an ICA. We look beyond issues of trust, respect and other elusive concepts identified earlier as main areas of concerns, try to unfold and translate them into more precise ideas about what makes abducted children feel more comfortable and respected. This calls attention to the quality and contents of communication, attitudes and deeper psychological contents that influence children's experiences. It implies certain abstraction and encourages an alternative approach both regarding the focus and methods of the research. Once we are interested in children's perspectives before, during and after ICA, listening to their views about decision-making, vulnerable situations or learning about their position towards authority figures can be a great asset.

For this reason, we adopt a comprehensive approach that addresses ICA both directly and indirectly. Our psychological and behavioural patterns (working models, motivational and coping strategies, conflict resolution, etc.) are independent of the context. Schema therapy, trauma and abuse literature, gestalt psychology teach us that our mental contents (cognition, emotion, desire, fear, intentions) are closely interrelated and situational responding is just the outer layer of our consciousness, just like in case of an onion. A concrete situation gives only the framework for our response, but they activate general psychological contents, patterns of thought and behaviour. In fact, psychotherapy holds that change of focus enables moving forward in a meaningful way, and using symbolic contents is one of the most common methods with children. (

Structuring of lower-order ecological features by identifying specific underlying mechanisms driving chronosystem associations and defining proximal events are supported by research methodology literature (references). The analysis of situations that are closer to everyday life of children promotes reliability of the results, supports the participation of non-affected children and helps formulate concrete recommendations in the best practice guides.

4. Use drama techniques

Drama mobilizes children's feelings, genuine reactions and goes deeper than using only cognitive tasks. Younger children are primarily empirical persons and cognitive functions become dominant only in adolescence. Hence, art, plays and drama techniques are good tools to work with a younger age group and help reveal children's ideas. Theatrical activities, games, role plays are informal, indirect ways for engaging children in research. Creative methods are suggested to elicit the views of younger children for whom more formal, cognitive or language-based activities may be less appropriate. Drama is a projective technique, therefore drama-based research is not an objective measure, participants and the researchers ascribe meaning to play.

Drama holds plenty of benefits, but it should be used carefully. ICA unites sensitive issues of divorce, separation from parents, loyalty conflicts, formal proceedings, new language environment, etc., and playing out situations of ICA with children can violate the principle of 'do no harm' and it is found ethically insupportable. Therefore, drama is only used in analogue but less sensitive and more relevant scenarios to non-affected children. These techniques still require special attention that is detailed later.

2. Research

Children participate both in the research and in representation and awareness-raising activities. Section 2 presents the methodology of the research, and Section 3 introduces their involvement in other activities.

2.1. Research methodology

2.1.1. Research questions

In order to formulate the research questions, the most current literature on ICA was reviewed (Freeman, 2014, Lembrechts et al, 2019, Lowe and Stephens, 2018), with special focus on the conclusions and recommendations of previous research of the project team (EWELL, VOICE focus groups). Based on these findings, a comprehensive list was made about the needs and challenges of legal professionals and those of children. Next, relevant issues were selected by separating those in which children have competence (e.g. lack of trust, separation from parents, breaking bad news) from those in which they do not (e.g. access to trainings, or better cooperation among legal professionals). Having analysed the selected issues, some topics emerged what we call here '*underlying themes*'. Using a child-centred approach, the complex topic of international child abduction was divided into smaller elements, that affect children's wellbeing, and highlighted the main psychological events during various stages of international child abduction – while children are confronted with their situation, during the civil proceedings, at the announcement of the court decision, during the enforcement and immediately after a return (*Table 1*¹). We reviewed the literature once again to make sure we listed all the relevant issues, combined some overlapping ones and streamlined the list of underlying themes. Lastly, we formulated the questions to each theme (*Table 2*), and finalized the research questions and sub-questions (*Table 3*).

As a result, the following research questions were developed:

1. What does safe and meaningful child participation mean in formal settings?
 - What do children need to feel respected and taken seriously?
 - What do children need to be able to speak up?
 - Who / where would children turn to with their questions?
 - What would help children to find out about important decisions?
 - What do children need to feel safe and feel better?
2. What would make you feel more comfortable in court hearings?

¹ *Before (ICA)*: the period before the procedure begins, when the child is taken from the home country, separated from one parent/friends/family, finds him/herself in a new situation

During (procedure): the legal procedure, referring to issues related to child-friendly justice

Decision (return or non-return): part of the procedure, but focuses on how the return/non-return decision is made and it is announced to/shared with the child

After (enforcement): after the procedure ends, when the child needs to face the consequences

The scope of the research is therefore narrowed down to the issues in which children have competency and relevant knowledge, but it also means a shift in the focus and looks into questions that children can relate to in settings other than ICA.

Table 1: Underlying themes behind international child abduction, according to its different stages

UNDERLYING THEMES	before (ICA)	during (procedure)	decision (return or non-return)	after (enforcement)
Something unexpected happens to children	x			x
Children have no say in something	x	x		x
Children feel betrayed, trust is damaged	x		x	x
Children are hesitant about speaking up		x		
Children are in a vulnerable situation and know that their future depends on others		x		
Children do not understand what is happening, remain alone with questions	x	x	x	
Children are informed about significant decisions			x	
Children are getting separated, they need to accommodate	x			x

Table 2: Underlying themes behind international child abduction and the corresponding research sub-questions

UNDERLYING THEMES	RESEARCH SUB-QUESTIONS
Something unexpected happens to children	What do you need to feel safe or feel better?
Children have no say in something	What do children need to feel respected and taken seriously?
Children feel betrayed, trust is damaged	What do you need to feel safe or feel better? What do children need to feel respected and taken seriously?
Children are hesitant about speaking up	What do you need to be able to speak up? What do you need to feel safe or feel better?
Children are in a vulnerable situation and know that their future depends on others	What do children need to feel respected and taken seriously? What do you need to feel safe or feel better?
Children do not understand what is happening, remain alone with questions	Who/ where would children turn to with their questions?

Children are informed about significant decisions	What would help you to find out important decisions?
Children are getting separated, need to accommodate	What do you need to feel safe or feel better? What do you need to be able to speak up?

Table 3: Research sub-questions, according to the different stages of international child abduction

Research sub-questions	before (ICA)	during (procedure)	decision (return or non-return)	after (enforcement)
What do children need to be able to speak up?		x		x
What do children need to feel respected and taken seriously?		x	x	x
Who / where would children turn to with their questions?	x	x		x
What would help children to find out about important decisions?	x		x	x
What do children need to feel safe or feel better?	x	x	x	x

2.1.2. Research design

Children will be given the opportunity to reflect on situations that are the most problematic in cases of ICA, and will work towards concrete recommendations and ideas for good practices.

The research uses a non-conventional approach with mixed methods.

- Drama is used to consult younger children and gain a better understanding of their needs in situations that reflect the 'underlying themes' of ICA. The activities address ICA in a decontextualized way to find out what children need in general in difficult or vulnerable situations.
- Older children become part of the research team. They will be observers in the drama sessions, whose learnings will be analysed and linked to ICA together. They help adults to understand younger children's perspectives better, and their views about children's needs in situations of ICA will be also included in the research report.

The structure of the research is outlined in *Table 4*.

Table 4: Research design

Project element	Aim		Hungary		Cyprus	
			CRA (14-17y)	Group 1 (10-13y)	CRA (14-17y)	Group (10-13y)
Call	Recruiting children	session 0	x	x	x	
Research (2020 Q3)	Introduction	session 1	x		x	
		session 2	x		x	
	Drama sessions	session 3	x	x	x	x
		session 4	x	x	x	x
		session 5	x	x	x	x
	Evaluation and further discussions	session 6	x		x	
		session 7	x		x	
	Review of the draft report, closing	session 8	x		x	

2.1.3. Child participants

The research is carried out with children who have not been directly affected by international child abduction. Children participate in the research from two different age groups, at different levels of involvement. We work with a closed group, so where the same members continue working together from the first session to the last one.

Children will be involved in the research in two main forms:

- as participants of drama sessions (children aged 10-13)
- as co-researchers (children aged 14-17)

Table 5: Child participants

	Drama group	Child Rights Ambassadors (CRA)
age	10- to 13-year-olds (the youngest possible based on availability)	14- to 17-year-olds
involvement	consultation level	consultation + collaboration level
number of children	8 to 12 persons per group	2 to 6 persons - max 2 observers per drama sessions - min 2 participants in the SC

addressing ICA	indirectly	directly
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The selection of participants relies on the practices of child participation in Hintalovon and Hope for Children Cyprus.

Child Rights Ambassadors

Both Hintalovon and Hope for Children Cyprus work with child volunteers regularly. They are called Child Rights Ambassadors who have a contract with the organizations and are protected by their Child Safeguarding Policies.

a) Hintalovon

Since its establishment in 2016, Hintalovon has been working with volunteers aged 14 to 17, who –as young colleagues– participate in the advocacy, research and awareness-raising activities of the Foundation.² Child Rights Ambassadors aim to help adults (including the Foundation’s colleagues, parents and other professionals working with children) to understand children’s perspectives better and help their peers to know their rights better. Hintalovon is working with 10 to 15 children weekly: a third of the group joined in 2018 autumn, two third of them joined in 2020, after applying for an open call to take part in a long-run volunteer program. Child Rights Ambassadors sign up for projects voluntarily, based on their interests and availability, where they are working in smaller groups. The established and trusted relationship with these secondary school children, as well as their commitment supported the idea to select children to the INCLUDE project from them. They have not had any specific knowledge and experiences that could have influenced their participation unwantedly.

b) Hope for Children

To introduce the project, a child-friendly project description is prepared in English, Hungarian and Cypriot, detailing its purpose, timing, children’s possible roles, the number of children needed (see Annex III). The details of the project are also discussed with children personally, and they are given specified time to consider and consent to their involvement. If more than 8 children apply, the division of the groups, gender and age balance should be considered, and it should be addressed at an organizational level, because it affects the group dynamics. After the research, children can decide to go on and take part in the representation of the results and in the Steering Committee meeting or not.

Drama group

Participants of the drama sessions are selected with an open call that is shared in the network of the project partners (primarily adults). The representatives of drama groups and other formations of children (e.g. scouts) are addressed who have regular meetings as part of their extracurricular or freetime activities. Working with already formed groups has some

² Child Rights Ambassadors –as young colleagues of Hintalovon– have gained experience in research, international human rights monitoring, awareness-raising materials and representing children’s rights. Learn more: <https://hintalovon.hu/en/child-rights-ambassadors>

advantages. Children might open up in an already formed group easier which also decreases drop-out rate.

The call contains a specification for the gender balance, but nothing else is controlled. Children learn about the research through their parents or adults, who can then contact us with their intent of interest. Separate information sheets and consent forms are prepared for children and adults. Before their enrolment, we visit children to introduce ourselves and the project, which offers a chance to children to confirm their involvement.

2.1.4. Facilitators

Hintalovon and Hope for Children Cyprus select their colleagues who will carry out this methodology. These groups of people are responsible for child participation throughout the whole project, from the selection and involvement of children, coordination, preparation and implementation of the Sessions to drafting the research report as well as the evaluation of child participation.

Having a background in the facilitation of child participation in projects is a great benefit for both partners, but it should be noted that the proposed methodology requires a **multidisciplinary team and approach**. The facilitators should be trained and experienced in various fields: facilitation of group work, working with children, facilitation of drama activities, conducting qualitative research and international child abduction.

The success of the research depends on the facilitators of Sessions greatly. Two facilitators and at least one observer are recommended for each session. In addition, 2 child observers participate in drama sessions. The *facilitators* are responsible for facilitating the activities, the discussions and for the safety of the participants. The *observers'* primary role is to take notes of children's views, verbal and non-verbal communication alike. Data analysis requires a well-documented output of the focus groups, capturing meta information, observing the dynamics of the group and the emotional climate. The observers manage the audio recording equipment.

Firstly, the facilitators have a complex role in **facilitating group work** both in the drama and other sessions. The facilitators have influence on the dynamics of the group by leading the discussion and also have a responsibility to control the situations which may generate stress or distress for the participants. (See Ethical Consideration and Annex II.) They should create a secure and comfortable environment for children and keep the group discussion focused on the topic at the same time. Patience, warmth, humour, respect, active listening and flexibility are skills found to be particularly useful. Being non-judgmental and adaptable are also qualities that will promote participants' trust in the facilitators and increase the chance of an open and interactive dialogue (Gibson, 2012).

Secondly, facilitators should be experienced in **working with children**. Children's competence to participate in the research does not mean that the same research methods would be appropriate as with adults. Although children are not fundamentally different to adults, they think, speak, and interact with others differently. (Gibson, 2012) In order to create a child-friendly environment, facilitators have to connect with children easily, they need a greater sensitivity to their reactions, feelings and they should be able to reflect on their views in a meaningful way.

Thirdly, the facilitation of **drama activities** requires special attention and experience. The follow-up discussions are as important as the actual play. Drama should be used responsibly, because it mobilizes children's emotions and might put children in vulnerable situations (see below). One of the facilitators is a drama teacher in both countries.

Fourthly, facilitators should be experienced in conducting qualitative **research**. During the sessions, they should be conscious about their aims with each activity that they introduce and be mindful of the research questions, because they are responsible for transforming children's views about a specific situation into answering the research questions. They should be involved in writing the research report, too. Drama techniques are often used for educational purposes or sensibilization and rarely in research but learning about children's experiences and opinions should always be a primary consideration.

Lastly, facilitators have to study the literature of **international child abduction** and consult project partners prior to the sessions if necessary, keeping in mind that the research report should feed into the best practice guides (project deliverables). However, it is not the responsibility of facilitators and researchers to formulate specific recommendations for legal professionals involved in international child abduction cases.

Preparation is crucial. Every facilitator should be aware of the risks of the research and carry out a **risk assessment** before the research together, and they should review it regularly. This process is supported by the risk assessment tool (Annex III) and the Child Safeguarding Policies (Annex I). Project partners should cooperate on identifying risks and finding out how to avoid, mitigate or handle it. They are also responsible for consulting external experts if necessary.

2.1.5. Ethical considerations

Child participation in the research should be conducted with due regard for ethical and safeguarding principles. The research methodology is built on the provisions of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the ethical standards of UNCRC General Comment No. 12 (2009), and the Child Safeguarding Policies of the project partners.³ The child-rights approach holds that children's voices should be heard in all matters affecting them. This applies to research too – children should not be just their objects but should be involved as experts of their own life, seeking for their views, experiences, suggestions. Special consideration should be made though to make their participation safe and meaningful. Beyond meeting the classical requirements of research ethics (like informed consent, data protection and the principle of 'do no harm'), children should be involved in issues that are relevant to their knowledge, in a child-friendly way that is sensitive to risks. The research should be inclusive and non-discriminatory, and everything that children share should be accountable.

³ The Child Safeguarding Policies of Hintalovon is available in original and in child-friendly versions at hintalovon.hu/en, the Child Protection Policy of Hope for Children is available [here](#). Both are in line with the UNCRC and Keeping Children's Safe standards.

According to Sim and Waterfield (2019) **consent** is a central ethical concern in research, that have four essential elements: disclosure (the adequacy of the information given by the researcher); comprehension (the extent to which this information is understood by the participant); competence (the participant's cognitive or emotional capacity to give or withhold agreement); and voluntariness (the absence of inducement of coercion). These principles are also reflected in the Child Safeguarding Policies (see Annex I) and have to be guaranteed by the signature of the consent form by the child and the parents.

Below, we highlight the most important measures that are taken to ensure these standards, based on the ethical principles of child participation in general (UNCRC, 2009), and in primary research specifically (Laws and Mann, 2004).

Ethical Principle	How do we ensure it?
Avoiding harm to participants <i>(Child participation is safe and sensitive to risk)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Child safeguarding policies are developed and shared with children and parents (see Annex for more details) ● A signalling mechanism takes place, which ensures that children can report any harm also anonymously, every reported case is taken seriously, and support is provided to child participants. ● Discussions and drama sessions are conducted by trained professionals ● The sensitive topic of separation from the parents is abstracted in drama in order to minimize distress ● Special considerations are made to use drama responsibly (see below) ● Participation level is based on the free decision of the child ● A risk management is made by project partners before the start of the research
Informed consent <i>(Transparent, informative and voluntary child participation)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Adequate information is provided on the purpose of the project, the research and the method of children’s involvement both to participants and their parents (including children’s role, timing, and how it is taken into account) ● Information is shared in written (see Annex III) and also discussed personally with children, and they are given some time to consider their involvement ● A focal point is designated to answer the questions of children during the project ● Dedicated consent forms are signed by participants and their parents, which declare the volunteerism, the possibility of withdrawal and the confidentiality (See Annex IV) ● Participants and their parents contribute to making audio recordings
Confidentiality <i>(Safe and sensitive to risk)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Focus group professionals have a duty of confidentiality; no one can identify the groups’ experience based on their opinion ● Changed names or code names will be used participant 1, etc.) in the research report ● The audio recordings are confidential, just known to the writers of the research report ● Data management is regulated by the data protection protocol of the project partners ● Children also understand the meaning of confidentiality and respect others’ privacy
Respectful and relevant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Children’s opinion is fully accepted at every stage of their participation and given due weight

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The role of children is based on their abilities, experiences and knowledge ● Special effort is made to create a democratic, respectful and safe atmosphere ● The project respects the special needs of children
Relevant	
Supported trainings by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Project partners collaborate closely, work in multidisciplinary teams, and make sure that everyone involved in the project is trained ● Children receive support to be observers and undertake representative roles responsibly
Child-friendly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Child-friendly information sheet is prepared ● The sessions take place in a time and place that is suitable for children and respect their school time and leisure time ● The sessions take place in a comfortable, friendly atmosphere
An inclusive approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Participation is open to a wide age group (10-17) in two countries ● Non-affected children are involved ● Children can apply based on an open call ● Children can participate on two levels: consultation level and collaboration level ● Lack of prejudice when considering the views of children.
Fair return for participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Children from the younger age group are offered smaller recompenses for their participation at the end of the last drama session. ● Child Rights Ambassadors take part in a comprehensive volunteer program, and offering a recompense should be decided at an organizational level, considering whether it affects the whole group or bring about conflicts between those who participated and those who did not
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The research report, together with the methodology will be made accessible to everyone ● The results will be returned to the participants

Special considerations

Finding the **relevant questions** is fundamental in making child participation in a research meaningful. This ethical principle requires that children are involved in issues in which they can draw on their knowledge, skills and abilities, build on their personal knowledge – the information and insights that they have about their own lives. As researchers, there is a great responsibility in asking questions that are ‘answerable’. Consideration needs to be given to the fact that children might need support and information in forming their views. Child-friendly working methods adapt to children’s capacities. These capacities are not

only about age and maturity, but they also depend on available information, skills and involvement. Educating children can bias the research, hence supporting children, informing them and seeking for their views should be balanced and done carefully. In addition, forming an informed view requires motivation to learn and a 'being able' to is not equal to 'being willing' to. However, when children feel that they have valid experience and views to contribute, it boosts their motivation. Forming and expressing one's own views might be even more challenging in a sociocultural context that discourages children to do so. Research ethic also suggests that we do not raise questions that we already know the answer to from previous research. We do research with children neither to sensitize professionals, nor to illustrate, decorate our advocacy materials with their quotes. But to learn their views and genuinely understand their perspective on what they go through. This requires the selection of relevant issues.

From a research perspective, introducing a situation that is far from children's everyday experiences increases the risk of receiving a less valid or more general answer. This is a dilemma of **balancing reliability and validity**. We might measure international child abduction if we stay with this topic only explicitly, but we compromise reliability.

When we ask children how they would feel, behave or what they would need in an imagined situation of child abduction, real-life experiences drive their answer. This human quality is turned to a benefit here. In drama, we address situations that children have realized and can connect to more easily. This is important because both our research topic is distant from children's life, and our research questions are deep and difficult to answer. 'How do you feel', 'what do you need' – these are complicated questions on their own. Limitations should be addressed at all times and attention should be given to ecological validity. Therefore, it is important that we put these findings with Child Rights Ambassadors in the context of the ICA.

Moreover, when children are involved in **drama activities**, special attention should be made to emotional wellbeing and safety. They easily get involved emotionally and identify themselves with the characters, but international child abduction cases as a whole and many aspects of it – especially divorce, separation from parents, friends – can be traumatizing and emotionally very stressful. Addressing these topics directly with drama may pose a risk to harm children. The underlying factors of international child abduction – such as feeling oneself betrayed or powerless, the worry and insecurity about the future, the state of being vulnerable and exposed to others, the lack of trust, the weight of expressing their opinions, when they do not understand what is going on around them – are present on a smaller scale, in everyday life. If we make abstraction of this burdensome topic and divide it into smaller parts, the risk of exposing children to harm and stressful situations in drama can be minimized. In this way, we address the issue at stake in a more indirect way, to avoid trauma and emotional stress. Therefore, in this research, drama is only used with everyday situations or with less complicated scenarios that have a resemblance in nature to international child abduction, but they are less unsettling. Analogue situations mobilize relevant feelings and needs, but at the same time, they create distance from emotionally draining family matters. The different situations will cover different aspects of these complex cases, allowing children to reckon on specific elements of their wellbeing, and letting us narrow the focus that is necessary to formulate examples of good practices.

Drama always holds a greater risk than cognitive tasks. Facilitation and finding the right balance between proximity and distance to the issues requires specific skills, sensitivity and preparation, so it is important to read this guideline and involve professionals if necessary.

2.2. Activities

2.2.1. Introduction

Aim:

To give an introduction to international child abduction (Session 1) for Child Rights Ambassadors and prepare them for their role as observers in the drama sessions (Session 2).

Preparation:

- Prepare a template for observers that highlights the main focuses⁴

Activities:

Session 1:

- introduction to ICA: discussion about its definition, legal background, human aspect, effect for the children and family
- main facilitator: lawyer

Session 2:

- children's first reflection about ICA
- discussing the research questions and the methodological approach
- preparation for the drama sessions: activities, focus of the observation

Expected outcome for the research:

- Children are familiar with basic concepts of ICA, the research questions and the course of the research
- Children understand their role, and are prepared for observe the drama sessions
- The research team is complete

2.2.2. Drama Sessions

Aim:

The drama sessions (Session 3 to 5) aim to seek the views of children aged 10 to 13 about what makes them feel safe and respected by adults in vulnerable situations that reflect the underlying themes of ICA.

Preparation:

- Detailed session plan and their discussion
- Risk assessment

⁴ The template is shared with project partners in a separate document.

- Template for the observation
- Accessories, tools and logistics
- Consent forms

Activities:

The drama sessions are based on the methods of *theatre in education (TIE)*. This type of applied theatre practice is usually used for educational purposes, in which drama teachers or a theatre company are performing for children and involve the audience in interactive, performative and reflective activities. Throughout the sessions, the story of a single character unfolds, that is elaborated together with the audience. This approach helps children build a closer connection with the characters and relate to their needs and feelings.

The sessions present a story of an adolescent and its family. Vik is a 14-year-old boy in his first year of secondary school. Vik moved with the family from a smaller place to Budapest a few months ago, after her/his mom got a new job in the capital. It is better because it will be easier to meet Dad (who works in Austria). He has an older brother, Mark, who is 17. They started their new life. The change is a little bit easier for Vik, Mark struggles more. The scenarios reflect the underlying themes of ICA through analogue situations that children might have experienced in their own life directly or indirectly.

The group plays various activities that help them connect with deeper mental contents and then they reflect on these. Sensitization and verbal reflection vary throughout the sessions, which allows us to observe and analyse situations from different angles and at different levels.

Detailed session plans are prepared for the facilitators⁵, including instructions, timeframes, aims of each activity and references to the underlying themes and research questions. In the beginning, emphasis is put on forming the group, building the characters. Later, typical drama activities such as still images, hot seats, the mantle of the expert, improvisation, forum theatre, and rainbow of desires are used to seek for children's views. Primarily, the reflections in between these activities provide the main sources of information to the research. The sessions are audio-recorded.

Expected outcome for the research:

- Information about children's needs, perspectives about the underlying themes of ICA
- completed observation sheets

2.2.3. Evaluation and further discussion, closing

Aim:

The follow-up sessions (Session 6 and 7) aim to summarize and discuss the results of the drama sessions with Child Rights Ambassadors, link them to ICA, and learn children's views and further recommendations. Session 8 aims to review the main points of the research report and give feedback about the research and previous sessions.

⁵ The detailed session plans are shared with project partners in a separate document. Researchers can access it by contacting barbara.nemeth@hintalovon.hu.

Preparation:

- listen to the audio-recordings from drama sessions and complete the observation sheets if necessary
- discussion of project partners (Hintalovon and Hope for Children)

Activities:

- Sharing the feedback of the observers
- Organize the results according to the underlying themes and research questions
- The group can be divided based on the research sub-questions

Expected outcome for the research:

- Synthesised and comprehensive list of the findings, according to the research questions
- Feedback on the identified main points, priorities, quotes
- Learning children's ideas for further review
- Input for drafting the research report

2.3. Research report

Hope for Children and Hintalovon will write separate research reports that summarize the findings based on the research questions. These papers will bring together the small pieces that have been created to make the complexity of international child abduction more manageable for child participation. They should present the reactions, thoughts and experiences of children in specific situations and topics, as well as the evaluation and observations of the facilitators, illustrated by many quotes from children.

The input from child participation will lead to a set of ideas for good practices. They will be brought before a Steering Committee of legal professionals who deal with international child abduction cases in their daily practice.

3. Child participation in other parts of the project

Project element	Aim		Cyprus	
			session 10	CRA (14-17y) CRA (14-17y)
Representation (2021 Q1-Q2)	Preparation for the SC mtg	session 11	x	x
	SC mtg	session 12	x	x
	Planning the awareness-raising video	session 13	x	
	Shooting the video	session 14	x	
	Preparation for the Closing conference	session 15	x	
	Closing conference	session 16,	x	
Feedback (2021 Q1-Q2)	Discussing the best practice guide	session 17	x	x
	Evaluation of the project	session 18	x	x

Child Rights Ambassadors participate in the Steering Committee (SC) meeting and in the final conference, where they present their research, and discuss their experiences with professionals. They develop an awareness-raising video for professionals that present the project and calls attention to abducted children's situation and participation.

4. Annex

ANNEX I: Child Safeguarding Policies

Hintalovon Child Rights Foundation and Hope for Children Cyprus (hereinafter: project partners) adopted their own Child Safeguarding Policies that encompass the principles and measures to ensure the safety and protection of children in any way in contact with them and to detect, adequately handle and follow up on every cases if there is a suspicion of abuse or endangerment of children's rights.

Project partners condemn and find unacceptable not only all forms of child abuse and maltreatment, but the violation of the ethical principles of meaningful participation. According to the General Comment No.12. of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, all processes in which a child or children are heard and participate, must be transparent and informative, voluntary, respectful, relevant, child-friendly, inclusive, supported by training, safe and sensitive to risk, accountable.

In line with the Child Safeguarding Policy of Hintalovon and with the ethical considerations set out in the research methodology for child participation in the INCLUDE project, project partners adopt the following special guidelines and measures.

The Child Safeguarding Policy and this guideline should be signed and understood by everyone who is involved in the INCLUDE project.

- I. Preparation
 - **Devotion**

Project partners are devoted to creating the material, personal and time requirements for the true and meaningful participation of children. Everyone involved in the research has to be prepared to ensure real participation of children, thus, they are to receive the necessary support and training to be able to do so.

- **Recruitment**

Children may join the research via open invitation. The process and aspects of participation shall be transparent. No one may be subjected to discrimination and specific steps have to be taken to ensure that participation in the research is inclusive for all children.

- **Informing the legal representatives**

The project partners make sure that the legal representatives of child participants receive proper information in advance, covering the scope and framework of the cooperation, including the role and participation of the child, the Child Safeguarding Policy, means of communication, data protection, photo taking, as well as the responsibility of the legal representative. The child participants sign an Informed Consent form or a Volunteer agreement to express their approval for joining the research.

The Foundation shall ensure that it receives information from the legal representative on the special needs, dietary needs and health of the child prior to the cooperation.

- **Joining the research**

Children may be involved in programmes that are relevant to them and build on the knowledge and experiences of the child participants.

Participation in the research shall be based on voluntary and informed consent. Children may at any time interrupt or terminate their participation. Children shall be informed in advance on the aims, means and use of their participation in a manner that is appropriate for their age and maturity.

The Foundation shall ensure that children receive all relevant information and support for their participation in advance.

It shall be ensured that all materials and descriptions are developed to be suitable for the children. These materials shall be made easily available for all participants.

The cooperation is preceded by a preparatory session to introduce the project and the project team to the child participants, as well as the participants to each other and to prepare for the project work.

Child volunteers receive regular trainings and support to ensure their responsible, confident and safe participation in the project.

II. Participation

● Means of participation

The transparency of decision-making shall be ensured, so that children may participate to the best of their capacities. Initiatives by children have to be given a growing priority.

Child participants must be granted the opportunity to freely express their opinion in all circumstances. The opinion of children shall be respected.

All steps shall be taken to create and maintain a safe and comfortable environment for children.

The participation of children cannot violate their right to education and the right to leisure and free time.

● Internal meetings

During meetings held with the participation of children at least 2 members of the project partners have to be mutually present. Adults shall not (except for sudden emergency or other extraordinary circumstances) be alone with a child. If the presence of 2 employees cannot be provided, the child has to be met at a public place or be taken there.

The schedule of meetings has to be told to the child volunteers beforehand.

A physical environment comfortable for children has to be facilitated. Getting to the meetings shall be the parent's responsibility.

The safety of electrical devices used by child participants have to be ensured and provided with firewalls.

● External activities

Specific attention must be paid that the provisions of this Policy are also upheld during external activities. This applies to public appearances such as the Steering Committee meeting or video making.

It must be ensured that participation during external activities is in line with the current Policy and external partners have to be supported to inform of the requirements for ethical and meaningful participation of children.

If the above is not guaranteed, the possibly dangerous situation must be abandoned immediately.

Participation in external activities shall be based on transparent, equitable and inclusive selection.

Efforts shall be made to ensure that the date and time of these activities do not compromise child participants' right to leisure and free time or their mandatory education. Participation in events held during school hours shall be the responsibility of the legal representative, nonetheless, the project partners shall make sure beforehand that the legal representative signed the necessary documents to justify the absence from school. Travelling to external activities is agreed on a case-by-case basis and it is the responsibility of the parent.

The child volunteers may give feedback on the cooperation and their experiences after every meeting. The round-up of any project shall include joint evaluation and anonymous feedback should also be made possible. The child volunteers give feedback on their experience every half a year. Children shall be informed of the result of their participation and how the results will be interpreted and used.

III. Safety

- **Risk assessment**

Project partners carry out risk management before involving children in the research, and if needed, consult professionals responsible for the execution of their own Policy. Project partners work to make the methodology of risk assessment and child participation available to all.

- **Emergency**

In case of emergency the legal representatives of the child shall be contacted without delay, and if needed, the emergency services as well. In case of a medical emergency immediate medical help shall be provided. The information received from the legal representative beforehand and the volunteering agreement shall be taken into account. If the child does not show up to an agreed meeting even after 30 minutes of being late, the legal representative has to be notified.

- **Complaint mechanisms**

The child participants shall be informed of the complaint mechanisms of the project partners in a manner appropriate for the age and maturity, and they shall be supported to be able to use it effectively.

Restoration of the wrongs or harm done to the child volunteers shall be promoted.

IV. Communication

- **Keeping contact**

Contact with the child volunteers shall always comply with child protection rules and respect the child's right to privacy. To guarantee so, online communication on behalf of the Foundation shall be done via the official e-mail addresses provided by the Foundation in a way that at least 2 adults have access. Calls shall also be made only in a way that ensures that at least 2 adult employees of the Foundation may be witness to it (e.g. online group or from the office).

The Foundation shall not initiate online or phone communication before 7 a.m. or after 8 p.m. with the child participants, excluding extraordinary circumstances.

- **Privacy and data protection**

The legal representative's written permission is required in advance for any photo, video or sound recording of the child participants. This is regulated by the child participants consent form or volunteering agreement. The use of such recordings requires additional specified permission from the legal representative.

The project partner uses in its external communication the full name of the child volunteers (first and last name), nevertheless, upon request by the child the communications may be done using only the first name, the initials or a fictional name for the child. The Foundation makes no reference to the social media profiles or to other personal data of the child volunteers.

ANNEX II: Risk assessment

We distinguished three types of risks which demand preparation from the facilitators and other project members. Risk assessment and management should build on the ethical principles and the instructions of the Child Safeguarding Policy.

	Risks	Prevention, reconciliation
Risks to the success of the research	High drop-out rate or absenteeism of participants.	
Risks to the conduction of focus groups	Children are reluctant to get involved in the activities or discussion.	
	Passive or shy participant: A child does not join the discussions, remain passive and silent, or refuse to participate in activities.	
	The participants talk about irrelevant things.	
	One or a few children dominates the Sessions.	
	A participant behaves disrespectfully, judging, or disagreement leads to a conflict.	
	Children lose focus.	
Risks to the children	Fear of anonymity being violated: Participants worry about what they have shared.	
	The situations cause stress or distress: The raised topics and the used methods may bring about strong emotions, including fear, anxiety, sorrow.	
	The situations cause strong emotional reactions such as crying or anger.	

ANNEX III: Information sheets

1) Call for 14–17-year-olds

Are you interested in participating in an international project? Do you want to help professionals treat children better?

What is our goal?

We want to help professionals better take care of children when one parent takes their child to another country without permission and separates him or her from the other parent. We ask for your help in finding out what children need in these situations.

Who are we working with?

We work with Belgian and Cypriot partners, supported by the European Union. In addition to you, we will work with a group of 10–13-year-olds.

What are we going to do?

- *Researching the views of younger children:* We organize 3 drama sessions with 10- to 13-year-olds, and ask you to participate in these as observers. They will perform situations where adults decide without the involvement of children or situations that are unexpected (for example, they move to another city because of the mother's new job). We talk about what makes them feel safe and how they feel respected by adults.
- *Evaluate the findings and discussing your views:* We will evaluate these sessions with you and draw conclusions to the situation of the children who have been separated from their parents without the permission of the other parent. We will also address what it takes to feel safe in a court or in an office, and of course we are also interested in your opinion about the issues that came up during these sessions.
 - ↳ These will be summarized by the Foundation in a research report that our partners use to develop recommendations for professionals.
- *Represent children's perspective:* Later, we can make a video for the adults to call attention to children's views and you will have the opportunity to discuss the results at a professional meeting.

How long does the project last?

- We will have 8 meetings approximately, but we choose the exact dates together. We are currently expecting a maximum of 4 applicants for the period until September 2020.
- Later, we will then have 3 more meetings with those who would like to be involved in representing the results.

- In October 2020 there will be a professional meeting in Budapest where several professionals from Europe will come and present the results.

Why should you participate?

- You can help improve the situation of vulnerable children.
- You can help lawyers, judges to support the best interests of children and to respect them.
- You can take part in an international research project that ends with an international conference in Budapest.

Why this name?

- It refers to involving children, because we would like to develop a handbook based on children's views.

2) Call for 10-13 year olds

Do you want to help adults understand children better?

Do you like to play different roles with other kids?

What is our goal?

We want to help professionals better take care of children when one parent takes their child to another country without permission and separates him or her from the other parent. We ask for your help in finding what you need in general in difficult or vulnerable situations.

Who are we working with?

We work with Belgian and Cypriot/Hungarian partners, supported by the European Union. In addition to you, we work with a group of 14–17-year-olds, who are our colleagues in the research.

What are we going to do?

- Through everyday situations, we talk about what makes you feel safe and how you feel respected by adults. We are going to act out/ perform situations where adults decide without the involvement of children or situations that are unexpected (for example, they move to another city because of the mother's new job).
 - ↳ This experience is summarized by the Foundation in a research report that our partners use to develop recommendations for professionals.
- We will have 3, 60- to 90-minute-long meetings in September 2020, but we choose the exact dates together.
- We are currently expecting min. 8, max. 12 applicants, boys and girls alike.

Why should you participate?

- You can help improve the situation of vulnerable children.
- You can help lawyers, judges to support children and to respect them.

Why this name?

- It refers to involving children, because we would like to develop a handbook based on children's views.

3) Information for parents

Information about the INCLUDE project

The goal of the project

The aim of the INCLUDE project is to offer a set of good practices to legal professionals to improve children's wellbeing when dealing with cases of international child abduction by a parent. Children 10-17 years of age are involved to find out what children need in general in difficult or vulnerable situations. The research report will support our project partners to draft recommendations to professionals to work in a more child-friendly manner.

Partners

Hintalovon Child Rights Foundation, Hungary
HFC Hope for Children Policy Center, Cyprus
University of Antwerp, Belgium

The INCLUDE project is supported by the European Union under the name INCLUDE: 'Including children for a better and more child-friendly case-handling, procedure and enforcement of decision in cross-border family disputes' project (ref. INCLUDE-JUST-AG-2018/JUST JCOO-AG-2018-831587)

Duration of the project

The research takes place from August to October 2020 and includes approximately 8 meetings with the participants. The exact dates will be chosen with the children. An international Steering Committee meeting will be held in October 2020 in Budapest/online to present the results of the research.

The process of the research

During the focus group discussions through everyday situations, we talk about what makes children feel safe and how they feel respected by adults. We are going to perform situations where adults decide without the involvement of children or situations that are unexpected (for example, they move to another city because of the mother's new job). We also deal with what it takes to feel safe in a court or in an office.

Focus group conversations are audio recorded, which is used exclusively for the preparation of the research report.

We also create an awareness video with the children who want to be involved in the representation of the results and attend a professional meeting.

Child Safeguarding Principles /Ethical considerations

Children's participation in the research is guided by the project partners' Child Safeguarding Policies, which are in line with the ethical principles set out in General Comment No. 12 of the UN Commission on the Rights of the Child. They guarantee the protection of the children and that no child becomes a tool for the interests of others and their rights are not violated. The research is to be approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Antwerp.

ANNEX IV: Consent form

1) Acceptance Form (Children)

Date: _____

I, _____ (name), accept that:

1. I have been informed about the project in all dimensions, intentions and activities and have understood what the objectives are and what it intends to achieve.
2. My participation is entirely voluntary, and I can withdraw from the project at any time, as well as to request for my personal data to be deleted from the 'Hope For Children' CRC Policy Center/ Hintalovon record.
3. I contribute to the recording of group conversations.
4. My name and other personal data collected and processed for the purposes of the project will not be published nor shared with anyone who is not part of the research team.
5. Personal data related to and declared by me, is stored in accordance with legal requirements.
6. The data generated during the research will only be used to determine the results of the research, which is intended to provide professionals with recommendations on what to look for when working with children.
7. I agree to participate in the project for the development/implementation of the project INCLUDE.

Location: _____

Signature

2) Consent Form (Legal representative)

Date: _____

I, _____ (name) declare responsibly that:

1. I have been informed about the project in all dimensions, intentions and activities and have understood what the objectives are and what it intends to achieve.
2. I am the parent/legal guardian of _____ (minor's name). He/She is participating in the project entirely voluntarily and with my consent and he/she can withdraw from the project at any time, as well as to request either he/she or me for his/her personal data to be deleted from the 'Hope For Children' CRC Policy Center/ Hintalovon record.

3. I contribute to the recording of focus group conversations.
4. His/Her name and other personal data collected and processed for the purposes of the project will not be published nor shared with anyone who is not part of the research team.
5. Personal data related to and declared by me or the kid, will be kept in a file which is subject to lawful processing within the meaning and provisions of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016/679 and the national laws of the Republic of Cyprus.
6. Personal data will only be used for the purposes of 'INCLUDE: Including children for a better and more child-friendly case-handling, procedure and enforcement of decision in cross-border family disputes.' (ref. INCLUDE-JUST-AG-2018/JUST-JCOO-AG-2018-831587).
7. I agree to the minor's participation in the project for the development/implementation of the project INCLUDE.

Location: _____

Signature

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[Ethical issues in research with children and young people](#)

[Research with children: ethics, safety and avoiding harm](#)

[A CHILD PARTICIPATION TOOLBOX](#)

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