

Involving children in case management

Experience and ideas from children and practitioners in Bulgaria

About this publication

Participation is an important way of delivering protection. Involving children in decision-making is a necessary way of understanding their lives and thus protecting them from harm. Moreover, participation is a form of empowerment and that can enable children to make informed choices, giving them confidence to express their views/ wishes and thus better protect themselves. It is arguably even more important that children who have experienced violence are empowered to participate in decisions affecting them.¹

The purpose of this publication is to offer professionals in Barnahus and similar models, food for thought for safe and meaningful child participation in case management. It is intended for professionals who work with children, child victims and witnesses of violence or other crimes against children.

Drawing on consultations with children, practitioners and caregivers in Bulgaria, the publication includes checklists, which propose non-exhaustive, adaptable lists of simple ideas on how participation can be facilitated, stimulated, and enabled in safe and meaningful way.

The overall aim of the checklists is to provide examples on how children and caregivers who come to Barnahus and similar models can be offered safe and meaningful opportunities to influence case management, including planning and implementation of interventions related to their case, including the investigative interview and therapy.

Involving children in different contexts

This publication is best read together with the Promise publication [“Building a Culture of Participation in Barnahus Implementing Children’s Right to Participate in Decision-Making”](#). The results of the Promise [“Mapping child participation in Barnahus in Europe”](#)

¹ [Dr Louise Hill, Professor Laura Lundy & Dr Mary Mitchell \(2021\) : “Building a Culture of Participation in Barnahus Implementing Children’s Right to Participate in Decision-Making”, page 19 \(Council of the Baltic Sea States/Promise\)](#)

can also provide interesting insights into current practice in Barnahus and similar models in Europe.

This publication forms part of a broader movement within the Promise Barnahus Network to promote a participatory culture in Barnahus, in which children are empowered to be involved at a collective and individual level. A willingness to involve children is an important starting point, however, it must be accompanied with a commitment to create an environment and process that is conducive for each individual child.

Case management in Barnahus and similar centres – and therefore by extension child participation in case management – is shaped by the legal, socio-economic, and cultural context in which the Barnahus operates, and may vary between countries and centres. Barnahus mostly develop and practice in systems and contexts that by nature are formal and dominated by adults and professionals, and it may be a challenge to introduce or develop a participatory environment and process, in particular if the system is rigid and bureaucratic.

Case management can for example be influenced by requirements in criminal and legal proceedings, by law, such as data protection laws and by differences in practice in the four rooms, including the scope and flexibility for child centred and trauma informed practices and interventions. There may also be different attitudes, understanding and approaches concerning children's rights in general, and the right to have views given due weight, to receive information and privacy (UNCRC articles 12, 13 and 16) more specifically.

The starting point, trajectory, and approach to building a participatory and empowering culture – or in some cases even introducing very simple means of consulting with children – may therefore look very different in different countries. Some Barnahus may already operate in an enabling environment and process, and be used to working with and alongside children, whereas other Barnahus may find this challenging in their context, and/or be less used to involving children. All Barnahus are encouraged to consider the context it operates in and how it impacts on practice to involve and empower children.

Before using the checklist or engaging with individual children, it is also crucial to consider the specific context of the child, including situations or elements that can make it harder or prevent a child to participate and share views and preferences, including for example fear, control, tension and/or conflicting loyalty and affection. An individual assessment of the context, abilities and potential risks to children can provide an important foundation for involving and empowering the child in case management.

It is also important to note that the checklists are not exhaustive – each Barnahus and similar service are prompted to discuss with children what can be added to their specifically adapted checklist!

Developing the checklist

The checklists were developed based on consultations with children and caregivers² on their participation in all stages of case management in two Protection Zone Centres (Zona ZaKmila) in Bulgaria. The consultations involved children in developing the checklist for child participation in case management. The checklist was later piloted in the centres together with children and caregivers. All participation was done on a voluntary basis, and with informed consent by both children and caregivers.

The checklists were developed based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment 12, the Promise publication [“Building a Culture of Participation in Barnahus Implementing Children’s Right to Participate in Decision-Making”](#) and the results of the Promise [“Mapping child participation in Barnahus in Europe”](#).

Importantly, they embrace the four elements of child participation promoted by the Lundy Model³: Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence, and elaborated for Barnahus in more detail in [“Building a Culture of Participation in Barnahus Implementing Children’s Right to Participate in Decision-Making”](#).

The Lundy Model – A framework for child participation in case management in Barnahus⁴

SPACE in Barnahus

A space is created in Barnahus for individual children and young people to express their views. This involves actively creating the opportunity for children to communicate their views in a space that is safe from fear of rebuke and reprisals.

VOICE in Barnahus

The child is supported to speak freely where possible. For a child to be able to make an informed choice to participate and to speak freely, without fear or reprisal, child-friendly

² The consultations with children and caregivers took place in December 2021 – January 2022 in two Protection Zone Centres (Zona ZaKmila), the Barnahus-type model in Bulgaria. Over this period, 15 child clients (8 girls and 7 boys), between the age of 10 and 17 years old, were interviewed by professionals from the Centres, with the written consent by their parents. Eleven parents (7 fathers and 4 mothers) were also interviewed. The Child Advocacy and Support Centre “Zona ZaKmila” an integrated service under one roof. The centres assists child victims of violence and abuse and their families by providing multidisciplinary and interagency services: forensic hearing and legal counseling, psychological support and therapy, social services and child-friendly procedures and environment. The piloting of the services is implemented in partnership with UNICEF, the Ministry of Interior, the Social Assistance Agency, the municipal administrations of Montana and Shoumen, the Social Activities and Practices Institute. The funding of the activities is provided by the donation funds mainly of UNICEF. In September 2016 the working methods of the Zones were officially recognized by the state by issuing a license. For more information please visit www.sapibg.org For a video describing the service, visit: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_HuOmS9wos&index=1&list=PLONPOrfAcK_I4MI_bRk5m62qHY0VKai7c

³ For more information, including a detailed explanation of the model, see Lundy, L. (2007). “Voice’ is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.” *British Educational Research Journal*, 33: 927-942. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033> . Also available to download at <https://childhub.org/en/child-protection-online-library/lundy-model-child-participation>

⁴ This section draws on [“Building a Culture of Participation in Barnahus Implementing Children’s Right to Participate in Decision-Making”](#), page 19 (Council of the Baltic Sea States/Promise)

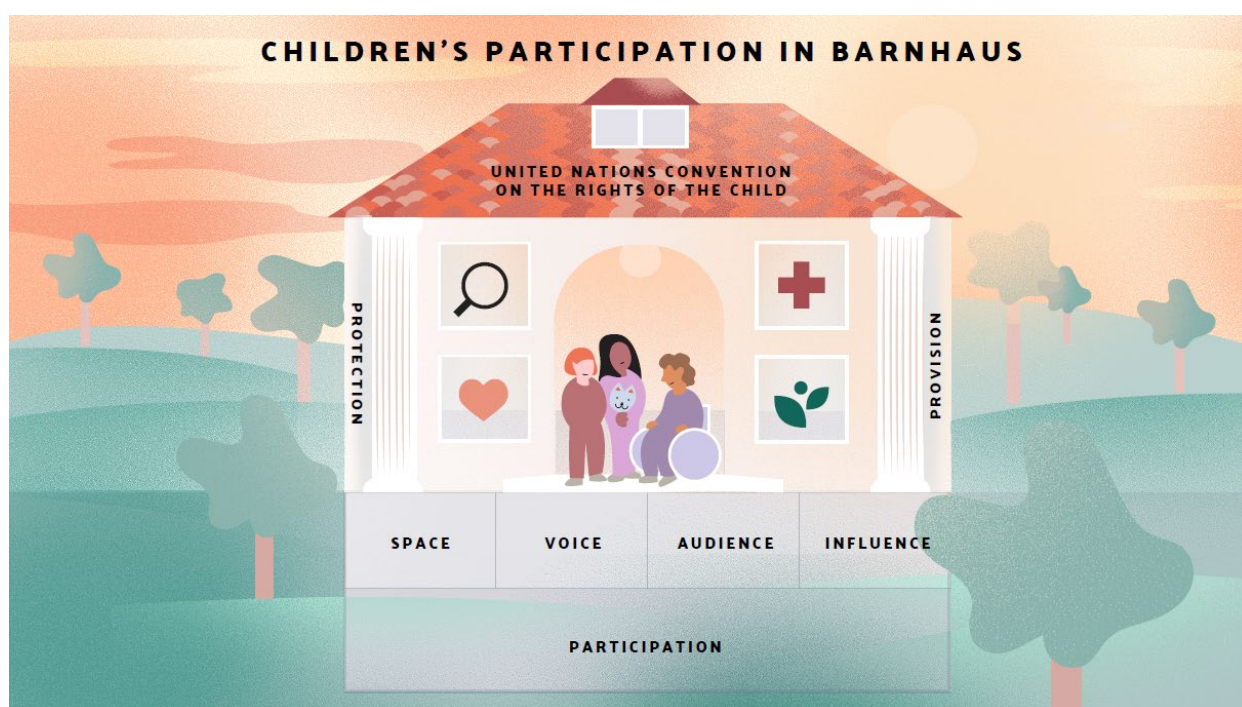
information needs to be provided about all aspects of Barnahus as part of the preparation for visiting a Barnahus in line with the child's right in Article 13 of the CRC.

AUDIENCE in Barnahus

Children and young people's views are communicated to professionals in Barnahus, who have a responsibility to listen.

INFLUENCE in Barnahus

The professionals in Barnahus take children's views seriously and are open to be influenced by them. Children receive feedback explaining what has happened to their views and why.



Safe and Ethical Child Participation

- Child participation should never cause (re)traumatisation or victimise children. Special measures need to be put in place to determine the best interests of the child, including in the context of participation.
- Participation should always be voluntary and based on informed consent. This implies making sure that the child and caregivers receive information about the purpose, process, and potential outcomes of their participation.
- Staff should receive special training in ethical and meaningful participation, including safeguarding, and in communicating with children.
- Participation should always take place in a safe and respectful environment. Confidentiality should always be respected.
- Children and caregivers should be offered different means of participation, adapted to their specific needs.

Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence in case management

“At the Zone I first met with the head of the place; she introduced herself. I was together with my Mum. The lady explained that there would be meetings at which we were going to talk and discuss. She explained to me that every child was assigned their own social worker and I was going to be sharing things with them only. I liked this and this put me at ease. Then, when I started visiting more often, I asked the social worker too. They told me they were going to ask me about myself, so that they can get to know me and then we will define together what I want to change. They asked me if I had my objectives, in terms of school, my family and for my future. Then we decided step by step how to achieve these. There was nothing I failed to understand, or nothing hidden from me. They talked to Mum too. I know the Centre’s team. They know me too. I can say they have always welcomed me. They ask me how I am, how school and sport are. I feel good, like at home – cosy and nice. This is why I sometimes I come here even now. They have made sure I feel good and not worried.” (A 16-year-old boy)

The practice proposed in this section is inspired by the generous contributions of children, caregivers and professionals who were involved in consultations organised in the context of Promise (barnahus.eu).

The findings from these consultations have helped develop a few ideas on how we can ensure that children are provided space, voice, audience, and influence in their own case management, including four overall recommendations :

- Help us feel comfortable and safe in Barnahus !
- Make sure we have all the information we want and need !
- Involve us in planning our visit to Barnahus and what happens next !
- Take our views into account !

Help us feel comfortable and safe in Barnahus!

- *Children must be given the space to express their emotions and experiences in safe way. Support children to express their feelings and emotions.*
- *Make sure that children are properly welcomed to the Barnahus - children feel more relaxed and respected when staff at Barnahus take special time to welcome them.*
- *Make sure children know what the purpose and benefits of coming to the Barnahus are. It is important that children can distinguish between the different professionals and their role in Barnahus, and what is expected of them when they meet that professional.*
- *Be attentive and respectful of how the child feels and reacts, adapt your behaviour accordingly. Ask children how they feel, what they are experiencing, the opportunity to express their feelings is important to them.*
- *Sometimes it is necessary to discuss without the presence of parents and other adults.*

- *Give the professionals who work in Barnahus training and tools to ensure child friendly, ethical, meaningful and structured child participation.*
- *Give children opportunities to provide feedback on their experience in Barnahus, including if they felt comfortable and safe.*

Checklist

- Introduce yourself to the child, tell the child who you are, what your name is, what you do.
- Show the child the place, show the child around the different rooms, explain how you work with children in the rooms, introduce the child to your colleagues.
- Be attentive to the child's emotional state, when you see that the child is anxious and ashamed, first calm the child and then proceed with the presentation.
- Discuss the child's experiences in one-to-one meetings without the presence of caregivers or other adults if necessary. Agree what information you can share with caregivers and be very clear on what type of information you must share with caregivers.
- Carefully explain the role of each professional, and their role and keeping the child safe. Explain what is expected of the child.
- Tell the child that it is safe to express feelings in Barnahus.
- Explain which interventions are voluntary, and that can be refused by the child.
- Carefully explain all the precautions that are taken to protect the child by each professional, and in each intervention. Ask children about their views and consider their ideas on what might make them feel comfortable and safe, bearing the best interests of the child in mind.
- Reassure children that they will not encounter people who harm children, including the presumed perpetrator in their case, in Barnahus.
- Give children an opportunity to share their perspectives on their visit to Barnahus, for example through feedback forms and other means of consultation. Use the feedback you get to improve your service!
- Discuss with children who come to your Barnahus what they think should be added to this list!

What children, caregivers and professionals said about feeling comfortable and safe in Barnahus

"It is important that children know that they are safe when they go to the Krill Zone." (Child)

"I would have found it useful if they had told me that the psychologist is not someone to be afraid of and that they are not a doctor who gives you a check-up." (Child)

"I didn't know what to expect. If they had explained to me what this Centre was like, what the psychologist did, I would have felt less nervous." (Child)

"The lady told us we were here because we had been referred by the CPD and we should meet once a week. She had a smile on her face and asked me my name. I was so shy that I only held onto my Mum's hand. They saw I was shy, and they showed me a jigsaw puzzle. I love them [jigsaw puzzles] very much. We sat and started to put together the

jigsaw puzzle. Then I calmed down. The gentleman explained that a lot of children come here and there was nothing to be ashamed of or worried about.” (Child)

“When I have a session with my therapist I talk with ease and we are always either putting a jigsaw puzzle together or drawing. When we have a joint meeting involving Mum I feel embarrassed to talk in front of the others. When I am alone with the therapist I can speak openly. For example, when it is just the two of us, we talk about the nightmares I’m having, we discuss them and this calms me down. When we have a joint meeting with Mum I don’t talk about these things.” (Child)

“Children become calmer when you specifically explain that they [the professionals] will help you to calm down, not to dream nightmares.” (Professional)

“Drafting of feedback forms and mechanisms ... to be completed from time to time by the children themselves, giving them as much time as they need.” (Proposal from professionals)

“The child was very relaxed, I thought that she would be nervous but the team managed to make her feel at ease. While we were talking, she was listening very attentively. She was asking questions.” (Parent)

“There [is a] difference in the emotional state [of the child] (more tense or calmer), in what they tell (more about what happened and more about themselves) if children know that coming for support is voluntary, this is important to them.” (Parent)

“... what she finds most important is that whatever she shares with the professional is not communicated to the parents. In other words, when she is at the Centre, she can talk to you about things she cannot or is unwilling to share with us.” (Parent)



Make sure we have all the information we want and need!

- *Children and parents need detailed information before coming to Barnahus!*
- *Children and their parents need to know where they are going, and what will happen when they come to Barnahus.*
- *Children need to be given detailed information about the work of the different professionals at Barnahus.*
- *Give as much and as varied information as possible about the Barnahus to Child Protection Services and the police, so they can help explain to the children and caregivers.*
- *Make sure that professionals are equipped to provide information in a child friendly and structured way by introducing training and protocol for providing information.*
- *Make sure children have ample opportunities to ask questions, and make sure you know that they have understood everything, if they have concerns and what they think about going to Barnahus.*

Checklist

- Prepare brochures, videos about Barnahus, suitable for children of different ages, as well as for parents. Ensure that these materials are available in child protection departments, the police, the emergency room and elsewhere where children who have experienced violence go.
- Explain to the children who they will meet, what the different people working in Barnahus do and how they can help.
- Make sure that children can differentiate between different professionals, their role and why it is important that the child meets them.
- Explain that all professional in Barnahus are there to take assist, help and listen to children in their situation.
- Explain what will happen when they come to Barnahus, and how the different interventions are carried out.
- Make sure children and caregivers have access to information all the time, not just when they come to Barnahus the first time.
- Ask children what they think, if they understand, if they have questions!
- Discuss with children who come to your Barnahus what they think should be added to this list!

What children, caregivers and professionals said about being informed about Barnahus

“Children should be explained in advance about this Centre, what it is and what they do there so that children are not afraid and uncomfortable. They can display photos and

provide information about the people working there, leaflets". (Suggestion made by children involved in the consultation)

"Information should be provided in advance about this Centre and what they do there so that children who visit are not tense and they feel more at ease, because I was tense the first time and this could have been avoided." (Suggestion made by child involved in the consultation)

"Children can find out more about the place in advance by seeing photos of it and the rooms. This will help them feel relaxed and not tense like I was when I visited for the first time." (Suggestion made by child involved in the consultation)

"We were at home, and we had a visit from the CPD. Mum talked to the staff. I was in the other room and didn't wish to join. A woman came to me and asked me something, but I was very shy and walked out into the yard. Finally, they left, and Mum told me that we would be going to a place, Protection Zone, where it was very nice." (Child)

"When we ask children, the answers often are: "I didn't understand, I don't remember, I was very worried". (Professional)

"It would be useful to have a protocol in place to be followed when providing information about the service, just as the one applied in the case of a criminal interview." (Proposal from professional)

"What the CPD social workers say in different ways is that they [the children] will go to the Zona zaKmila centre, which works with children like them, and that a psychologist will work with them, with whom they will be able to talk about their problems. For children, this is not enough information, they feel anxious and worried." (Professional)

"He explained to the girl that she will be visiting a professional at the Protection Zone where she can speak about what happened to her and get support so that she can overcome the way she feels about it. The girl shared that she would find it interesting to get more information about the Centre in advance, on paper, for example, in the form of a brochure." (Professional sharing what a child said)

"She told me after the very first few visits that she was feeling very well and relaxed in the Centre. And every time, after coming back from the counselling sessions, she was telling me that it would be good for me also to visit the service... Our family, the three of us, had a meeting with the team at the Zone. She was asking the social workers a whole lot of questions. "Which one of you will my dad be working with?", "Will we be coming for counselling on one and the same day?", "Which room will the professional have the meetings with me?", "How do counselling sessions with parents go?", "I wonder what they do?", "What will they be talking about?". She was given answers in a manner understandable for her. (Parent)

"I don't remember my first time at the Zone. I was very upset, worried, shattered. I didn't know what this place was and what was going to happen. Here, however, I received understanding and consideration. My first meeting was with a social worker from the Centre who explained to me what legal proceedings would follow and how they as professionals could support my child." (Parent)

Involve us in planning our visit to Barnahus and what happens next!

- *Children feel more relaxed, listened to and respected when staff at Barnahus involve them and “negotiate” the time and terms of their visit to Barnahus, their assessments and the next steps!*
- *Children’s views should be considered in planning through a formal process so that it becomes routine.*
- *Children and caregivers should be included in the preparation of all documents that concern their case and have access to all documents at all times.*
- *Make sure that children understand the planning process and how they can be involved.*
- *Give children enough information to form an opinion and ask questions about the plans, different options and what will happen next.*
- *Ask children how they want to be involved and how they best can be supported in planning.*
- *Give children time to get used to the idea of being involved in planning and sharing their views – never rush or force children to participate.*

Checklist

- Establish a formal process for involving children in planning so that it becomes routine.
- To prepare, explain to children and their caregiver(s) why the child is coming to Barnahus and for whom it is important. Explain what will happen, such as interviews and assessments, and why they are important: to understand the situation of the child, to plan and to decide what needs to be done to help the child.
- Explain why and how planning happens, and for whom it is important.
- Invite children and caregivers to document and access information and plans together with the professionals. Explain to the child that a file is being kept on their case, which collects all the information about the case, including the plans that they will be part of developing. Explain how the child and caregiver can access the file.
- Ask children what kind of support they need to be involved in planning and how they would prefer to be involved.
- Make sure that the child understands and can express itself - adapt information, planning formats (including meetings) to the individual needs of the child, including for example development, language, and special needs.
- If you organise planning meetings - tell children that a meeting will be held between professionals to discuss their case. Explain the purpose of the meeting and get their opinion on whether they want to participate.
- Ask children what kind of support they need to participate in a planning meeting, and to express their views in the meeting. It should be OK to come to the meeting and just listen, and to share views on what was said at a later stage.

- Ensure that children also can suggest that a meeting is held when they want and need to talk.
- Discuss with children who come to your Barnahus what they think should be added to this list!

What children, caregivers and professionals said about engaging in planning

“It is good for the children to be engaged in the meetings where decisions affecting them are taken so that they can share their personal opinion and desire – If I attend, I would share my desire.” (Suggestion made by children)

“More frequent meetings when the child wants and needs to talk.” (Suggestion made by children involved in the consultation)

“I’m not sure children should be present at meetings of adults. But it makes sense to hear their views too, when decisions concerning them are taken. If the child has no concerns about it – let them be there or let them be asked their opinion in advance. I know there have been such meetings in relation to my case.” (Child)

“I had no information about the Centre. We were at the CPD and Mum and Dad talked to the staff there. I was not at the meeting; I waited for them outside the room. They invited me to join my Mum and Dad and told me I would be visiting a psychologist. I was not asked if I wanted to, only if I agreed. What could I possibly tell them? I agreed.” (Child)

“It was explained to me from the outset by staff that I had a file which kept records of my appointments. The therapist told me that I could see this file if I wished. But I’m not interested in that, I know my drawings that I drew are kept there and that was the most important thing to me.” (Child)

“Children [...] have not participated in decision-making meetings related to protection measures, legal proceedings and recovery measures. The children are not sure that they should take part in such meetings, but they think that they should be informed about what happened there.” (Professional)

“Engaging children in discussion meetings, taking into account the case specifics and children’s desires and preparation of the participants in the meeting for the child’s role, the issues that will be discussed” (Proposal from professionals)

“Children understand what assessment is when it is explained to them in an accessible and understandable way.” (Professional)

“The first meetings to discuss the assistance provided took place at the Zone. I had information in advance about the purpose of these meetings, when they were scheduled for – date and timing. [...] We discussed what work had been planned to be done with me and the child. We were given an opportunity to share also our opinion about the assessment and the work plan. I think that these meetings of the professionals with the family are very important because this way we also know who does what.” (Parent)

Take our views into account!

- *Children feel respected when staff and other adults listen to them and act on what they say.*
- *Make sure that a common goal for the respective interventions has been established and agreed with the child.*
- *Involve children and caregivers in decision-making about all interventions. Make sure that children feel safe and have been enabled to contribute to discussions and have all the information they need to make informed decisions.*
- *Explain the decision made to the child and how it relates to, and considers, their opinion and the best interests of the child.*

Checklist

- Make sure that children have an opportunity to raise their own topics and problems, to be heard, understood, and that their opinions have an impact on plans, meetings, investigative interviews, medical examinations and treatment, and therapeutic treatments.
- Listen very carefully to children and their opinions. Make sure that you have fully understood the child. Discuss options, potential decisions and desired outcomes!
- Ask the child about their opinion on decisions. Respect the opinion and renegotiate decisions if needed and possible. If decisions cannot be changed, explain why and seek the child's opinion on where to go from there.
- Explain the principle of the best interests of the child and how it might impact on plans, interventions, and decisions. Involve children in best interests assessments concerning them.
- Use diverse tools, such as feedback forms, to receive feedback on interventions and decisions. Make sure that the child is enabled to use the tool, and carefully consider the feedback you receive in the continued work with the child.
- Follow up on discussions and decisions – always provide opportunities for negotiation, discussion, feedback and evaluation.
- Discuss with children who come to your Barnahus what they think should be added to this list!

What children, caregivers and professionals said about taking children's views into account

"My specialist has always asked me how I feel, what I want to happen and what I think about an issue." (Child)

"I always had the opportunity to ask when something was not clear. My opinion has always been heard. When we've commented on why I think this way, what makes me react this way, then I've often really thought about why. The social has listened to me patiently and dutifully, even when I talked to her about completely stupid things." (Child)

“He says that in the Blue Room he has been more nervous and the questions have been more numerous, whilst at the meetings with the professional assigned to him he has felt calmer and could share his feelings and concerns and be heard and understood. He has been asked about his expectations and the counselling sessions have reflected his wishes.” (Professional giving an account of what a child said in the consultation)

“The children are pleased that at the meetings with their specialist they had the opportunity to share what they think, how they feel, ask about their expectations.” (Professional)

“The first meetings to discuss the provision of assistance have taken place at the Zone. The wife was present then. After I also decided to visit the Centre, the team organised such a meeting again, agreeing a date and time in advance. I was informed of the purpose of the meeting. There was a discussion with the whole family on what was being planned. We were given an opportunity, including the child, to express an opinion and make recommendations on the work planning.” (Parent)

“Currently, the procedures at the Centre are clear – children participate in meetings, their opinion is taken into account, their views and beliefs are discussed with them. I consider that children should also participate in meetings with other institutions, unlike the current situation.” (Parent)

P R O M I S E

Implementing the Barnahus Quality Standards throughout Europe

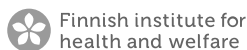
PROMISE is supporting Europe to adopt the Barnahus model as a standard practice for providing child victims and witnesses of violence rapid access to justice and care. We undertake this work to fulfil the PROMISE vision: a Europe where the human rights of children to protection from violence, support and to be heard are fulfilled.

A Barnahus provides multi-disciplinary and interagency collaboration to ensure that child victims and witnesses of violence benefit from a child-friendly, professional and effective response in a safe environment which prevents (re)traumatisation. With the formal support from national authorities, PROMISE provides opportunities to translate national commitment into action and engage internationally in the process. In addition, regular networking and strategic communications continually activate our growing network of professionals and stakeholders who are committed to introducing and expanding Barnahus services nationally.

The first PROMISE project (2015-2017) set European standards and engaged a broad network of professionals. The second PROMISE project (2017-2019) promoted national level progress towards meeting the standards and formalised the PROMISE Barnahus Network. The current project (2020-2022) is expand these activities to include University training, case management tools, with a view to establishing a European Competence Centre for Barnahus and laying the groundwork for an accreditation system for Barnahus.

PROMISE is managed by the Children at Risk Unit at the Council of the Baltic Sea States Secretariat in close collaboration with Child Circle.

Access the PROMISE tools and learn more at www.barnahus.eu



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