

ALFACA II

Improving reception and care for unaccompanied children by structurally increasing the quality and quantity of family based care



COUNTRY REPORT BELGIUM

State of the art on family based care
for unaccompanied children

ALFACA II

COUNTRY REPORT BELGIUM

State of the art on family based care for unaccompanied children



© Nidos, Pleegzorg Vlaams-Brabant en Brussel, Mentor-Escale and Minor-Ndako, May 2019
Published by: Stichting Nidos, Maliebaan 99, 3581 CH Utrecht, The Netherlands
Authors: Lenny Trogh & Manuelle Theys
Language review: Mandy Savage

This country report has been published as part of the ALFACA II project (February 2018-July 2019). Its aim is establishing sustainable family based care in Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece and Italy.

The content of this report represents the views of the authors only and is their sole responsibility. The European Commission does not accept any responsibility for use that may be made of the information it contains.

Co-funded by the
REC Programme of
the European Union



TABLE OF CONTENTS

- EXECUTIVE SUMMARY..... 4
- 1. STATE OF THE ART ON FAMILY BASED CARE IN BELGIUM 5**
 - 1.1 Current national context.....5**
 - 1.2 Current regional context.....5**
 - 1.3 SWOT analysis.....7**
 - 1.4 Good practices in Belgium.....9**
 - 1.5 Difficulties in relation to the further implementation of reception in families ...10**
 - 1.6 Practices to be developed11**
 - 1.7 Child participation as part of the situational analysis12**
- 2. RECOMMENDATIONS..... 13**
 - 2.1 National level13**
 - 2.2 Regional level13**
- 3. ACTION PLAN..... 15**
 - 3.1 National level15**
 - 3.2 Regional level15**
- 4. DISSEMINATION PLAN..... 16**
- APPENDIX 17
 - Alfaca training in Belgium17**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This country report gives an overview of the current situation of family based care in the Belgian context. It addresses the organisation of youth care in the country and the differences between youth care in general and care for unaccompanied children in particular. Although there are many differences on an organisational and political (funding) level, there are also many similarities in the qualitative content of the foster care given and the challenges faced by foster care agencies on both sides of the country. The aim of this report is to highlight the similarities, and also to pinpoint the specific differences between the south of Belgium (French and German speaking communities) and the north (Flemish speaking community).

The report starts with facts and figures for both sides of the country that indicate the current state of the art on family based care in Belgium.

Next, a SWOT analysis is presented and elaborated on. Attention is given to good practices (strengths), possible difficulties (weaknesses and threats) and practices to be developed (opportunities). Within each section, the issues are explained for the whole country and for both regions. There is also a description of child participation in this report.

The recommendations are specified on a national level as well as a regional level. The action plan included in the report is based on these recommendations, and this also applies to the dissemination plan.

1. STATE OF THE ART ON FAMILY BASED CARE IN BELGIUM

1.1 Current national context

Most of the unaccompanied children in Belgium are still being accommodated in large reception centres located throughout the country. Since 2016, the Youth Care Service at the Federation Wallonia-Brussels has created 100 places for the most vulnerable unaccompanied children in small residential groups. The Flemish government has created 150 places, in groups of 10 unaccompanied children, since 2017. In 2018, 2,456 children were registered as unaccompanied children in Belgium.

According to the Belgian Guardianship Act, unaccompanied children are under 18 years of age, not accompanied by someone with authority or guardianship over the unaccompanied child, and citizens of a country outside the European Economic Area. In addition, they have either applied for asylum or their stay in Belgium is unauthorised¹. Most of the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in 2016 were boys (87%) aged between 14 and 17. They mainly originated from Afghanistan (79.1%), Guinea (13.9%), Syria (7.5%), Somalia (6.4%), or Eritrea (5.8%)².

On arrival on Belgian territory or at the border, every unaccompanied child is placed for a maximum of 15 days (which can be extended once) in an Observation and Orientation Centre. Each child is appointed a guardian who protects their interests in different areas of life. This includes the search for a stable living environment, e.g. residential care which may or may not be specifically for unaccompanied children, a reception family or supervised independent living.

1.2 Current regional context

Flanders

An increasing number of unaccompanied children are cared for in family foster care in Flanders³. In 2018, 14% of these young asylum seekers (349) were placed in reception families⁴. 296 of them (84%) lived with kinship reception families, while 53 unaccompanied children (16%) went to live with non-kinship reception families.

In the total three-year period between 2016 and 2018, 504 unaccompanied children were placed in reception families. 428 of them (85%) lived with kinship reception families, whereas 76 unaccompanied children (15%) went to live with non-kinship reception families⁵.

French and German speaking communities since 2015

The 2015 migrant crisis led to pilot projects offering alternatives to reception facilities for unaccompanied children, by proposing real family life for children who were unable to adapt to life in a community. Faced with this new reality, the federal agency for the reception for asylum seekers Fedasil emphasised the urgent need for the creation of a project to place unaccompanied children in

¹ Belgian Guardianship Act, 2002.

² Belgian Immigration Office, 2017.

³ Dutch speaking part of Belgium; Foster Care Flanders, 2017

⁴ Fedasil, the federal agency for the reception of asylum seekers, 2018

⁵ Final report 2018 of Geef de wereld een thuis (give the world a home).

foster care. After many negotiations between Fedasil and the Youth Care Service at the Federation Wallonia-Brussels, the latter made budget available to strengthen the new project. This innovative form of reception also involves the families themselves in project implementation so that they can express their own wishes. Reception in foster families gives unaccompanied children the opportunity to grow up in a safe environment, allowing them to fully integrate into Belgian society, i.e. both socially and at school.

These two public bodies entrusted Mentor-Escale with the responsibility of creating and organising the new project. So in January 2016, Mentor-Escale created a methodology to manage all the project phases:

- Family sensitisation and recruitment
- Building the project with the families
- Investigation of unaccompanied children profiles
- Matching
- Placement follow-up
- Management of the last reception phase (age of majority, independence, return to reception facility, family reunification)

In just three years, the project has led to 60 placements, of which 11 are kinship placements, 18 are families who already knew the unaccompanied children, and 31 are the result of matching⁶. Compared to the organisation's Flemish counterpart, Mentor-Escale has organised more placements in families that have no common cultural background nor a biological link with the unaccompanied children. However, there have only been four returns to a reception facility⁷.

Along with the placements achieved as part of the project, Mentor-Escale also cooperates with Famille sur Mesure (FSM), who are specialised in the recruitment and monitoring of placements in 'similar-culture families'. At the beginning of the project, a specific allocation of roles between Mentor-Escale and FSM was established in a cooperation agreement. On the basis of this agreement, FSM is responsible for the recruitment and monitoring of 10 placements per year with the support of Mentor-Escale, who remains responsible for the matching.

⁶ Mentor-Escale 2015 activity report; Mentor-Escale 2016 activity report; Mentor-Escale 2017 activity report.

⁷ Idem.

1.3 SWOT analysis

Note: black fonts = themes common to the whole country, purple fonts = themes specific to the south, Wallonia, blue fonts = themes specific to the north, Flanders

Internal	
Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possibility of recruiting and matching to 'similar-culture families' and Belgian reception families • Participation in European projects • Collaboration with international agencies (the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration IOM, and the Red Cross) • National awareness and a shift in mindset about the positive outcomes of foster care for unaccompanied children • Good working relationships with partners (federated entities, guardians, reception facilities, etc.) • 'Guardianship pool', where there is a positive collaboration on family based care between guardians and Mentor-Escale • High quality methodology recognised by partners and funding authorities • Possibility to stay in family based care until the age of 25 • In cases of family reunification, there is a possibility to continue the foster care placement for a limited period (maximum of six months) to ensure follow-up for the unaccompanied child and their parents • Scientific research • Straightforward placement • Foster care for unaccompanied children is part of the general foster care system and that gives more access to different kinds of support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of foster families • Preparation of unaccompanied children regarding their expectations about foster care needs to be improved • Lack of intensive guidance for unaccompanied children living in foster care • Uncertainty for the future, no long-term perspectives for the project • Loss of federal subsidies • Lack of subsidies • A small team working throughout a large geographical area • No fast-track placements • Guidance and financial support ends when a child reaches the age of 18 (even if the unaccompanied child stays in a family) • Foster care for unaccompanied children is part of the general foster care system, which can mean a lack of specific guidance for the unaccompanied children in reception families

External

Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensitisation of ethnic/cultural communities about foster care for unaccompanied children • Sensitisation to/raising awareness of family based care (e.g. Parc Maximilien, where citizens voluntarily take care of migrants in their own homes) • Recruiting ethnic/cultural families • Further development of methodology concerning family reunification and culturally sensitive work • Better preparation of unaccompanied children for foster care • Sensitising even more reception facilities, guardians, Fedasil • During guidance: providing trauma-based care • Conducting further scientific research • Creating the possibility of a ‘support family’ for the foster family of the unaccompanied child, so the upbringing can be shared and the foster family can sometimes have a break from the child but still continue to care for them • Creating partnerships with other organisations on the issue of family reunification and a lack of legal documents • Improving/increasing the use of cross-border networking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political change/elections; there may be a change in the willingness of governments (European, national, regional) to accommodate asylum seekers • Lack of foster families • Some funding coming to an end • Lack of specialised trauma-based care during guidance in mental health services • How to manage/deal with former unaccompanied children who are living in foster care and have an illegal status. Right to care versus foreign policy

1.4 Good practices in Belgium

The number of placements of unaccompanied children in foster care has increased substantially. In the southern part of Belgium (French and German speaking communities) there were no placements at all before 2016. Since Mentor-Escale was accredited to organise foster care for unaccompanied children, there have been 60 placements. Before 2016, there were 130 ongoing placements of unaccompanied children in reception families in Flanders, while by the end of 2018, 349 unaccompanied children were staying in reception families.

There is national awareness and a shift in mindset about the positive outcomes of foster care for unaccompanied children and, in general, there are good working relationships with partners like federated entities, guardians and reception facilities.

Many similarities can be seen between the different parts of the country. Flanders Foster Care and Mentor-Escale both have an organised system of foster care for unaccompanied children which is financed by federal and local governments. There are multidisciplinary teams who hold regular intervision and supervision meetings. The foster care agencies have developed specific methodology for family based care, building on existing expertise on unaccompanied children combined with expertise in foster care. These agencies continuously evaluate the procedures followed and the methodology used to meet the needs of the unaccompanied children, their reception families and the foster care workers.

There is also a possibility of recruiting and matching ‘similar-culture families’ and Belgian foster families. Being able to live within a family of the same or similar cultural background can definitely be a protective factor in most cases of unaccompanied children. So cultural background is one of the topics that is taken into account when matching an unaccompanied child to a family. But this is not the only matching criterion.

Belgian foster care agencies participate in European projects (ALFACA, FAB) and collaborate with international agencies (UNHCR, IOM, the Red Cross) to share their experience and expertise in order to improve the concept of family based care throughout Europe and the rest of the world. For example, UNHCR has invited Mentor-Escale to Bangkok to present their foster family project for unaccompanied children.

The French and German speaking communities have a ‘Guardianship pool’ where there is positive collaboration on family based care between guardians and Mentor-Escale. The Mentor-Escale family team invites guardians from the pool to discussions at least twice a year. This is an opportunity to share information on how the project is evolving, and brainstorm on improvements to practices and communication. The qualitative methodology used is recognised by partners and funding authorities. Some of these projects have success rates exceeding 90%⁸.

Another strength is events organised by Mentor-Escale such as ‘families’ day’, where foster parents are trained while unaccompanied children participate in discussion groups and biological children are engaged in another activity. After these sessions, all the families eat together and then take part in other kinds of activities in the afternoon. Another example of an event is the ‘apéro-familles’, an evening at least once every four months where foster parents can share good practices as well as the difficulties experienced in daily life with an unaccompanied child. Last year, Mentor-Escale had the opportunity to invite unaccompanied children for a summer camp.

⁸ Mentor-Escale, 2017 activity report.

Mentor-Escale also participated in the creation of special training about family based care for unaccompanied children within the framework of the European 'Fostering Across Borders' project. This programme will allow families and guardians to be trained to support other families before or during their experience of living with an unaccompanied child.

For **Flanders**, foster care for unaccompanied children is part of the general foster care system, which gives more access to different kinds of support. There is a possibility to stay in family based care until the age of 25. In cases of family reunification, it is possible to continue the foster care placement for a limited period (maximum of six months) to ensure follow-up for the unaccompanied child and their parents.

At Flemish universities, there are several scientific researchers whose work focuses on foster care for unaccompanied children. There is also a special type of placement, where very young children go to live with a foster family directly after their arrival in Belgium, and these children and the foster families are given intensive guidance. This is called *straightforward placement*, and the guidance in these cases is offered by two agencies: Minor-Ndako and Foster Care Flanders.

1.5 Difficulties in relation to the further implementation of reception in families

The main threat or weakness in general throughout Belgium is the continued lack of foster families. There are always more unaccompanied children who would like to live in a reception family than there are families who are willing to foster an unaccompanied child. This is no different to foster care in general, where there is also a permanent lack of foster families, especially for teenagers. For this group of young people, it is an even greater challenge to find families because of the general difficulties inherent in adolescence. Most unaccompanied children who arrive in Belgium are between 14 and 18 years old.

Belgium is facing challenges regarding the guidance of these placements. First, there is a need for better preparation of the unaccompanied child before they go to a foster family. There is also a need for intensive and specialised guidance for these foster families within the foster care agency, if this is necessary to prevent breakdown (when a foster care placement ends unexpectedly and badly). Foster care agencies are also faced with the difficulties of families fostering a former unaccompanied child with an illegal status. The difference between how foreign affairs sees these children and the help an unaccompanied child needs creates tension and makes the guidance more challenging. Political willingness to invest in the future of these children is also a permanent threat. In addition, in May 2019 there will be elections in Belgium: national, regional and European.

The major threat for the **French and German speaking communities** has already taken effect. Fedasil has informed Mentor-Escale that they have decided to stop funding by the end of 2019. What this implies is that, on the one hand, Mentor-Escale will not be able to make any new placements under this funding and, on the other hand, ongoing placements will no longer be financially supported. This change means that Mentor-Escale will have to find an alternative funder in a short time span. In addition, it will be complicated to arrange kinship placements (this kind of placement always needs special permission from the Youth Care Service) while this was not complicated with Fedasil.

Another issue is that guidance stops when the unaccompanied child reaches the age of majority, even if the child stays in the foster family. A major problem is when a crisis occurs, and the unaccompanied

children no longer have access to a reception facility, a 'local reception initiative'(LRI) or a 'Time-out' location. Because the project is not considered as second phase, Mentor-Escale has to find a solution with guardians (e.g. ask a judge for a mandate – Youth Care Service).

Moreover, some families complain about a lack of stability in the team. This lack of stability is due to various factors, such as many constraints affecting work in the field (e.g. for family guidance many hours are spent on the actual trip between the office and the family home) and no long-term perspectives for the future of the project.

1.6 Practices to be developed

Opportunities for the whole country are directly connected to the lack of foster families in Belgium. Foster care services therefore need to continue raising awareness of family based care within Belgian society in general, and within ethnic cultural communities in particular. This could lead to the recruitment of more foster families, particularly ethnic/cultural families. Further development of methodology concerning family reunification and culturally sensitive work are other focus areas.

For **Flanders**, some aspects of guidance for these placements need to be improved. First of all, foster care agencies should develop a more suitable/different way to prepare unaccompanied children for foster care. In recent months, breakdowns of placements have often occurred because the reality of living in a reception family does not always match the expectations of the child. More trauma-based care will be implemented, with a specific form of guidance for the unaccompanied children and the foster families. The foster care agencies will improve/increase the use of cross-border networking; contacting and involving the biological family of the unaccompanied child is of great value to the guidance. The agencies will also try to create the possibility of a 'support family' for the foster family of the unaccompanied child, so the upbringing can be shared and the foster family can sometimes have a break from the child but still continue to care for them.

There is also the opportunity to sensitise even more reception facilities, guardians, other stakeholders and governmental agencies to family based care so that more unaccompanied children can be given foster care and support. Creating partnerships with other organisations on the issue of family reunification and a lack of legal documents is another opportunity for the coming period. The continuation of scientific research on family based care is of great value for improving the quality of the support or guidance offered by foster care agencies.

For the **French and German speaking communities**, the general context of the loss and lack of funding does provide new opportunities for adapting the methodology to maintain good quality guidance for unaccompanied children and their foster families, while working efficiently and ensuring the continuity of the project.

Opportunities:

1. Unified methodology

Until the end of 2019, the project will be working under a federal and a Federation Wallonia-Brussels convention. This double convention involves different requirements, an administrative system specific to each convention, and methodological adjustments. Working under a single convention will enable harmonisation of every level of the project (methodological, administrative, follow-up, etc).

2. Fairer judgement of foster care situations

There were disparities concerning certain benefits that the families could claim, as these depended on the convention. Family welfare, for example, was systematically allocated to families under the Federation Wallonia-Brussels convention, while not all families under the federal convention received them.

3. International outreach

Participation of Mentor-Escale (foster care project) in the AMIF2020 project (submitted to the EU) supervised by IOM.

1.7 Child participation as part of the situational analysis

Mentor-Escale conducted interviews with two unaccompanied children to obtain testimonies about their experience of the reception system and, more specifically, their experience in reception facilities and in foster families. The transcription of those testimonies confirms the various issues described in the SWOT analysis.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 National level

On a national level, there is an ongoing need for reception families for unaccompanied children. The foster care agencies therefore recommend continuous awareness-raising activities to inform Belgian citizens about family based care for unaccompanied children. Recruiting more reception families is the most important recommendation.

Another shared recommendation is the need to prepare unaccompanied children in a more appropriate way for what living in a reception family actually entails.

2.2 Regional level

Flanders

For Flanders, there is a strong recommendation to implement more trauma-based care, creating a specific form of guidance for the unaccompanied children and the foster families. The use of cross-border networking should be improved and increased; contacting and involving the biological family of the child is of great value to the guidance. The agencies also need to create the possibility of a 'support family' for the foster family of the unaccompanied child, so the upbringing can be shared and the foster family can sometimes have a break from the child but still continue to care for them. A continuation of scientific research on this subject is recommended.

French and German speaking communities

Reception in foster families gives unaccompanied children the opportunity to grow up in a safe environment, allowing them to fully integrate into Belgian society, which is recommended by article 20 of the International of Children's Rights (signed by Belgium on 16 December 1991). Moreover, some of these projects have success rates exceeding 90%. It is therefore regrettable that, despite these advantages, the programmes cannot benefit from secured funding nor structural agreements. Yet these are paramount for the continued monitoring of foster families by professional organisations trained in the specific issues of exile and foster care.

The Mentor-Escale recommendations for politicians would therefore be the following:

- Strengthen and secure the pilot initiatives through agreements and financing (3-5 year duration) at a federal and federated level (Fedasil and the Federation Wallonia- Brussels). This would enable synergies between different government levels
- Seamless integration of the foster family model with the unaccompanied children's trajectory up to the second phase of reception (to be integrated into the reception law)
- Ensure that development and anchoring of the projects continue to be implemented by organisations in the field who have great expertise in support for unaccompanied children
- Secure the necessary means for identification and investigation of unaccompanied children, responsible selection of families, multidisciplinary monitoring of foster situations as well as recruitment of foster families
- Secure Fedasil placements by the Federation Wallonia-Brussels for 2020

Following three years of experience in the field, Mentor-Escale's proposal is to improve and develop its methodology:

- Investigation of profiles of unaccompanied children
- Building the project with families that already know the children
- Matching meetings
- Improving the methodology to build the project with new families
- Extra staff for the administrative centre
- Training selected families with the Fostering Across Borders manual

3. ACTION PLAN

3.1 National level

- Raise the awareness of family based care for unaccompanied children on a political and institutional level and among the general population
- Foster care agencies will send the country report to national and regional authorities in June/July 2019
- The foster care agencies will organise information sessions four times a year in 2019-2020 for citizens who might be interested in welcoming an unaccompanied child into their family
- In 2019-2020, the foster agencies will improve their methodology to better prepare unaccompanied children for family based care

3.2 Regional level

Flanders

- During 2019, foster care agencies will set up an awareness and recruitment campaign through social and other media
- During 2019 the foster agency will make detailed plans for trauma-based guidance for unaccompanied children and reception families
- During 2019 and ongoing, there will be continuous attention for improving the guidance given to these placements, based on scientific research and experience in the field

French and German speaking communities

At the political level:

- Regarding the coming elections, the foster care agency will probably be faced with new political stakeholders. And those new stakeholders will need to be sensitised to the project and the necessity to benefit from secured and long-term funding. This sensitising should begin in May 2019 and focus on the reality and needs in the field

At the foster agency level:

- In June 2019, start setting up a unit to investigate the situation of unaccompanied children. The aim is to shorten delays and to enable field workers to focus on their mission with unaccompanied children and foster families
- Improve the methodology for families who already know the unaccompanied children (but are not kinship carers) before the end of 2019
- Organise more matching meetings. This will be done as soon as a foster family is ready, so that families and unaccompanied children do not wait too long
- Take on extra staff for the administrative centre between June and October 2019 so that now and in the future field workers are readily available for unaccompanied children and their foster families
- From April 2019, selected families and guardians will be trained using the Fostering Across Borders manual to support other families that have less experience in fostering unaccompanied children

4. DISSEMINATION PLAN

This country report will be given to all relevant stakeholders in the Belgian national context: federal government (Fedasil), the national guardianship service (Dienst Voogdij – Service des tutelles), the platform Mineurs en exil (minors in exile) and the Red Cross.

For **Flanders**, the report will be given to the Flemish government, the Department of Youth Care, management teams of the five provincial foster care agencies, foster care workers who are involved in the reception of unaccompanied children in reception families, reception facilities who offer specialised shelter for unaccompanied children in Flanders, NGOs who work with refugees, such as Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, and the specialised trauma-based centre Solentra. There will also be a new campaign in social and other media to recruit more reception families, and the country report will be mentioned – where possible – within these media articles.

The **French and German speaking communities** will take similar action to Flanders, giving the country report to the Citizen's Platform for Refugee Support, the Youth Care Service, the foster care agencies at the Youth Care Service, various field services that give psychological support (Exil, Ulysse, etc.) and services that give support for family reunification and seeking accommodation (Convivial, Caritas international, etc). At the international level, Mentor-Escale will send the country report to IOM, UNHCR and our partners from the ECETT project.

APPENDIX

Alfaca training in Belgium

The ALFACA training took place on 28 February and 1 March 2019 in Brussels. The participants were all foster care workers involved in family based care for unaccompanied children within their regions. Workers from Mentor-Escale, Minor-Ndako and Flemish foster care agencies participated in the ALFACA⁹ training.

Because the ALFACA training had already been given in the Belgian national context, and implementation of family based care is now at a further stage of development, this ALFACA training focused on sharing expertise and knowledge rather than explaining the ALFACA methodology.

The content of the ALFACA training was used to structure these training sessions, but the main focus points were:

- Family reunification and the psychosocial challenges this 'new' theme brings for foster carers as well as for the foster care workers
- Unaccompanied children who do not get a permit to stay in Belgium. How to handle this challenge? What are the consequences of living with an illegal status?

Most of the participants were satisfied with the training, and the most useful point mentioned by all participants was the possibility to exchange good practices and expertise. Exchanging these good practices and trying to find better, more suitable solutions for some difficulties that foster carers and foster care workers face improves the quality of care offered to unaccompanied children and their carers.

The positive outcomes of family based care in reception families has meant that this kind of care is now welcomed and supported by the Flemish government. So Flemish foster care is shifting from the 'political' sustainability of family based care to the day-to-day sustainability of these placements.

⁹ Within the first ALFACA-project, Nidos (the Netherlands) in cooperation with Minor-Ndako (Belgium), Jugendhilfe Süd-Niedersachsen (Germany), OPU (Czech Republic), the Danish Red Cross and KIJA (Austria) developed training for professionals working with reception families that take care of unaccompanied children. The goal of the project was to further develop and improve the reception of unaccompanied children in families by providing professionals with the tools needed for this and teaching them how to use these tools. The project implementation period was 1 October 2015 to 1 April 2017 and the project was co-funded by the European Commission.