

ANNUAL SEMINAR



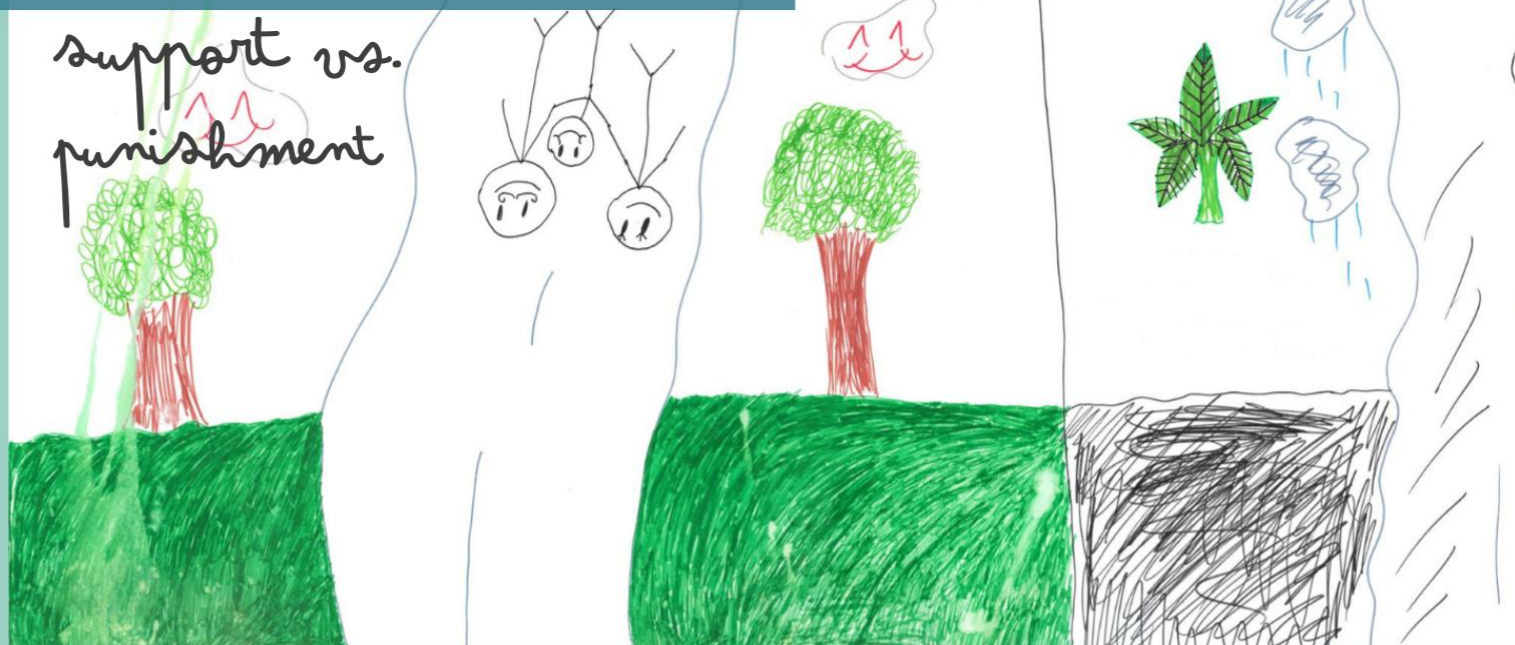
CFJ-EN
Child Friendly Justice
European Network

FINAL REPORT

22 - 24 OCTOBER 2025

ATHENS, GREECE | IN-PERSON

support vs.
punishment



**BRIDGING CHILD PROTECTION AND
CHILD JUSTICE:**
Enhancing collaborations for child-centred justice systems



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Acknowledgments

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About the CFJ-EN

The [Child Friendly Justice European Network](#) (CFJ-EN) was launched in 2019 informally by the Europe sections of Defence for Children International. Thanks to the formalisation of a Framework Partnership Agreement with the European Union, the CFJ-EN has been fully operational since April 2022. The CFJ-EN has, as of July 2026, 44 members in 22 countries in Europe. Its members include civil society organisations, research institutes and individual experts.

The purpose of the CFJ-EN is to bring together organisations across Europe, influence policies and legislations and disseminate information in relation to child-friendly justice at European regional and national levels. The vision for the future is that children in Europe have access to age appropriate, inclusive and diligent services and practitioners equipped to implement child-friendly justice. To implement this vision, it bases its work on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and aims to support the implementation of the Council of Europe Guidelines on child-friendly justice, the European Directives on procedural safeguards and on victim's rights, as well as other key European instruments.

The CFJ-EN aims to:



Strengthen children's agency, by promoting meaningful and inclusive participation of children and young people and making practitioners working with children understand the importance of child participation.



Promote quality of practice, by increasing capacities of legal and non-legal practitioners who work with children and sharing knowledge and expertise across Europe on child-friendly justice.



Ensure accountability, by informing European policy makers and making them aware of inspiring practices and informing national policy makers and making them aware of latest developments in child-friendly justice.



Strengthen the network, by strengthening the capacities of the Network to communicate on and promote child-friendly justice and mobilising support to members and fostering collaborations across Europe towards effective access to justice for children.

Introduction

On 22-24 October 2025, in Athens, Greece, the Child Friendly Justice European Network (CFJ-EN) held its fourth Annual Seminar, co-organised with Defence for Children International Greece (DCI Greece), with the support of the Hellenic Ministry of Justice, and the media support of the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation (EPT and EPT news).

The event gathered a total of 116 participants including child justice and child protection experts, academics, legal professionals, and Young Justice Transformers¹. Discussions focused on strengthening the links between child protection and child justice systems, addressing risks of violence against children, and promoting integrated, child-rights-based responses, with particular attention to children in contact with the justice systems and those in the most vulnerable situations.

Background and context of the seminar

Across Europe and globally, children continue to face high levels of violence, neglect, and rights violations, particularly when coming into contact with justice systems. Children deprived of liberty are at heightened risk of abuse, harmful institutional practices, and social exclusion. Parallel debates around criminal responsibility, use of detention, and the treatment of migrant and marginalised children underline the urgent need for systems that prioritise protection, prevention, rehabilitation, and continuity of care, rather than punitive approaches. Building on international and regional standards – including the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), the [Council of Europe Guidelines on Child-Friendly Justice](#), but also the [European Commission Recommendations on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interests of the child](#) (2024), and the [FRA Report on Towards Integrated Child Protection Systems - Challenges, promising practices and ways forward](#) (2025) – this seminar created a forum to examine how child justice and child protection sectors can work together more effectively and ensure that children’s rights are realised and protected in practice.

Objectives and goals

The overall objective of the fourth CFJ-EN Annual Seminar in 2025 was to promote a shared understanding of the critical links between child protection and child justice systems. The seminar sought to raise awareness of the systemic nature of violence against children, highlight vulnerabilities of children in justice systems, and emphasise the urgent need for integrated, child-rights-based approaches.

More specifically, the seminar aimed to:

- strengthen the capacities and roles of child protection systems, including inter-agency cooperation with justice systems and adequate resource allocation;
- promote child-rights-based responses and gatekeeping mechanisms, prioritising protective and supportive over punitive measures;
- ensure continuity of care, particularly for children transitioning to adulthood or below the minimum age of criminal responsibility;
- spotlight complex cases requiring coordinated responses, including domestic violence, digital risks, transnational cases, family law matters, and situations involving children with imprisoned parents.

¹ The Young Justice Transformers (YJT) are groups of children and young people with lived experience of justice systems across Europe. Supported by the CFJ-EN, they share their perspectives, advocate at European level, meet with European policymakers and practitioners, participate in seminars and events, and contribute to shaping child-friendly justice reforms across Europe.

Through dialogue, exchange of promising practice, and shared reflection, the seminar supported the development of coordinated strategies ensuring that children in contact with the justice system – as victims, witnesses, suspects and/or accused, or parties in civil or administrative proceedings – receive the care, protection, and access to justice to which they are entitled.

Further details are available in the [concept note](#).

Overview of participants and key stakeholders

The seminar brought together a diverse and multidisciplinary group of participants. These included members of the Child Friendly Justice European Network, children and young people with lived experience of the justice system, representatives of European and regional institutions, national authorities, and public bodies, as well as other European and international networks, civil society organisations, practitioners and academics, specialising in law, social work, psychology, neuroscience, child protection and justice. This multidisciplinary enriched discussions with comparative perspectives and field experience. To ensure a safe and inclusive environment, all participants were required to comply with the CFJ-EN's Child Safeguarding Policy as part of the registration process, and the CFJ-EN Coordinator outlined the safeguarding measures and procedures at the beginning of the Seminar.

Agenda overview

The seminar took place over one evening and two full days (22-24 October 2025). The programme was designed to be highly interactive, moving beyond traditional conference formats. It included two live podcasts, one keynote speech and one keynote talk, as well as two “circles of inspiration”, human library sessions, poster presentations, and a total of eight thematic workshops that encouraged active participation and peer learning. Networking and informal exchange were further fostered through a networking dinner on the first evening. The programme also featured a cultural event, a mock trial interpreted by and co-created with the Young Justice Transformers, providing an engaging and reflective way to explore the realities faced by children in contact with the justice system.

Further details are available in the [seminar agenda](#) and [list of speakers](#).

Plenary sessions

Opening words

Following the networking dinner and welcoming words on the first evening, the seminar started on the morning of Thursday 23 October, with opening remarks from **Mariama Diallo**, coordinator of the CFJ-EN, **Marie-Cécile Rouillon**, European Commission Coordinator for the Rights of the Child, **Eftychia Katsigaraki**, General Director and Criminologist, General Directorate of Special Legal Affairs, Hellenic Ministry of Justice and **Nantina Tsekeri**, Vice-Chair of the CFJ-EN and director of Defence for Children International Greece.

Speakers warmly welcomed participants to Athens and underlined the value of gathering such a diverse group of professionals, academics, institutions, and young people to reflect together on the intersection between child protection and child justice. They highlighted that many children who come into contact with the justice system have experienced neglect, violence, or exclusion, and that responding to these realities requires approaches that are multidisciplinary, compassionate, and firmly grounded in children's rights.

Across the opening remarks, a strong emphasis was placed on the need to listen actively to children and meaningfully involve them in decisions that affect their lives, as well as the importance of better coordination across sectors to avoid fragmented responses. Speakers stressed the relevance of early intervention, rehabilitation, and alternatives to detention, and referred to European and international standards as key reference points for building systems that are more humane and child-centred. Participants were encouraged to use the days ahead as an opportunity to exchange ideas, be inspired by one another, and collectively advance child-friendly justice.

Overall, the opening session set the tone for the seminar by affirming that achieving child-friendly justice in Europe depends on collaboration, sustained engagement, and keeping children's perspectives and rights at the centre of every discussion.

The opening words were followed by the screening of the [video 'How we see it' - How children perceive the justice system](#), realised by SAPI Bulgaria, with the support of the Child Friendly Justice European Network as part of the FSTP scheme 2024 of the European Union.

Keynote speech - Traumatic brain injury, neurodevelopment, and the path to violence: implications for justice and rehabilitation

The first morning continued with a first keynote address, by **Huw Williams**, Professor of Clinical Neuropsychology & Associate ProVice Chancellor for Global Engagement, Health & Life Faculty at the University of Exeter. He explored the relationship between traumatic brain injury, neurodevelopment, and vulnerability to involvement in the justice system. Drawing on clinical work and research in neuropsychology, he explained that many children and young people who come into conflict with the law experience difficulties with impulse control, planning, problem-solving, and understanding the consequences of their actions. These challenges are closely linked to the way the brain develops, particularly in adolescence, when emotional systems mature earlier than the parts of the brain responsible for complex decision-making under pressure.

Professor Williams emphasised that the brain is shaped by both biology and environment, describing how early trauma, neglect, poverty, and exposure to violence can condition children to be hyper-alert to threat. For some, this leads to a heightened "fight" response that can, over time, develop into patterns of aggressive or risk-taking behaviour. At the same time, he highlighted that these responses are not fixed: caregiving, emotional nurturing, supportive relationships, and targeted interventions can help children "recondition" the brain and build healthier responses.

Professor Williams underlined the scale and neglect of traumatic brain injury in children and young people, noting its wide-ranging effects on memory, language, behaviour, and emotional regulation. He stressed that brain injury is far more prevalent among children in contact with the justice system than in the general population, and that many affected children are unaware of their neurodisability or receive no appropriate support. This reality, he argued, has major implications for justice systems, which too often respond punitively to behaviours rooted in injury and trauma.

He concluded by calling for multi-agency cooperation across health, education, social services, and justice, and for approaches that work with children rather than against them. Listening to children's perspectives, planning for rehabilitation and social reintegration, and supporting them throughout their journeys were presented as essential components of a justice system that recognises the impact of brain injury and neurodevelopment on behaviour.

Live podcast 1 - Spotighting complexity: meeting the needs of children facing specific risks

The first morning was concluded by a first live podcast, on the needs of children facing specific risks. This session was moderated by **Mariama Diallo**, CFJ-EN Coordinator, and brought together **Paula Akyol**, Project Director, Children of prisoners Europe, **Efthymis Antonopoulos**, Junior Policy Manager, Victim Support Europe, **Sandra Jovanović Belotić**, Training & Capacity Building Manager, European Network for the Work with Perpetrators of Domestic Violence, **Miina Kokoi**, expert by experience, Abducted Children Finland NGO Board Member, Missing Children Europe Youth Board Member, and **Maria-Andriani Kostopoulou**, Marangopoulos Foundation for Human Rights and GREVIO, Council of Europe.

The session opened with Mariama Diallo emphasising the critical role of language in shaping children's experiences in justice and protection systems. She highlighted that even subtle distinctions, such as the use of "child" versus "minor," can influence how children are perceived and supported. The discussion aimed to explore how child protection and child-friendly justice could be better integrated to meet the complex needs of children facing specific risks.

Miina Kokoi highlighted the particular vulnerabilities of children who go missing, linking these experiences to adverse childhood events and trauma. She stressed that children taking agency, such as running away, does not imply responsibility, but rather reflects attempts to navigate unsafe circumstances. Trauma-informed approaches and mediation were identified as essential tools to support these children, enabling them to feel understood and not blamed for their situation.

Efthymis Antonopoulos reinforced the importance of victim-centred approaches, explaining that systems must prioritise safety, dignity, and non-judgmental support. He emphasised that children, whether victims or suspect and/or accused, need to feel heard and supported across contexts, including schools and digital spaces. Early education for both children and caregivers on navigating online risks was highlighted as a preventive measure.

Sandra Jovanović Belotić discussed the hidden harms children experience in domestic violence contexts. She illustrated exercises used to help professionals step into the child's perspective, demonstrating that even indirect exposure to violence can severely compromise a child's sense of security. She noted that children often continue to experience trauma long after violence ceases, and stressed that victim-parents must be adequately supported to prevent further harm.

Paula Akyol shared insights from her work with children of imprisoned parents, explaining that trauma often begins with the parent's arrest and continues through imprisonment and reintegration. Projects such as Wales' "[Invisible Walls](#)" initiative allow children to maintain contact with imprisoned parents while remaining engaged in education, providing continuity and support during disruptive periods.

Maria-Andriani Kostopoulou emphasised the importance of precise terminology in policy and legislation, noting that words shape both perception and practice. She pointed out that children's exposure to domestic violence – whether direct, witnessed, or perceived – is inherently traumatic, and that there is no automatic “best interest” that applies universally. Gender dynamics and cultural contexts must be carefully considered when designing interventions.

The role of peer support was highlighted as a vital element by multiple speakers. Paula Akyol emphasised that peer networks offer children opportunities for expression, healing, and mutual understanding, while Miina Kokoi stressed the importance of peer support in reintegration for children who have gone missing. Early intervention and collaboration between civil society organisations and justice systems were identified as crucial to prevent harm before crises escalate.

The discussion also addressed institutionalisation. Sandra Jovanović Belotić highlighted the fact that children are often placed in institutions due to systemic failures, with victim-parents unfairly held accountable for the harm caused by abusive adults. Both she and Maria-Andriani Kostopoulou stressed that professionals must be carefully trained to avoid perpetuating these cycles, and that specialised, evidence-based approaches are necessary to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Throughout the session, participants reflected on the need for systemic change. Paula Akyol noted that meaningful reform begins with shifts in the mindset of individuals, particularly regarding language and perception. Sandra Jovanović Belotić reinforced that all children exposed to violence experience harm, and Maria-Andriani Kostopoulou emphasised the necessity of sustained financial, technical, and human resources. Efthymis Antonopoulos highlighted the importance of embedding child-friendly practices across all systems, while Miina Kokoi reminded the audience that children are not simply “cases” and that legal resolution does not resolve their experiences and trauma. The collective conclusion underscored that systemic change is essential to create environments where children's rights, dignity, and wellbeing are genuinely upheld.

Keynote talk - Telling a different story: media, stigma, and children's rights

The first day was wrapped up with a keynote talk, between **Angeliki Kardara**, PhD, Author, Instructor, and Trainer, Centre for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (KEDIVIM), National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, and **Nantina Tsekeri**, Vice-Chair, Child Friendly Justice European Network, and director of Defence for Children International Greece. The discussion focused on the powerful role of media in shaping public perceptions of children in conflict with the law, and the resulting impacts on children's rights, identity, and future opportunities. Angeliki Kardara highlighted that media portrayals in Greece and beyond often present a one-sided image of young people as threats to public safety, focusing on sensationalist terms like “violent minors on the rise” or “youth gangs spread fear.” Positive stories about young people, examples of resilience, contribution to communities, or personal growth, are, on the contrary, rarely shared. This framing reinforces the stereotype that youth equal trouble and heightens public fear, making reintegration into society far more difficult for children who have come into contact with the justice system.

Angeliki Kardara emphasised that media narratives frequently place responsibility solely on children and their families, ignoring broader social, economic, and institutional factors that shape behaviour. Stories of children in conflict with the law are rarely contextualised within experiences of abuse, neglect, poverty, or systemic failure. As a result, punitive responses are prioritised over understanding, support, and rehabilitation, which limits opportunities for positive development and perpetuates stigma.

The discussion also addressed the impact of media coverage on child victims. Angeliki Kardara explained that children are often re-victimised through the exposure of personal details – such as names, addresses, schools, and family information – in news stories, which may be shared not only by

journalists but also inadvertently by professionals, including lawyers. Such exposure can lead to marginalisation at school, social withdrawal, and long-term disruptions in the child's life. In one example from Greece, a victim refused to attend school after details about her case were publicised, further compounding trauma.

Kardara argued for a shift towards responsible, constructive reporting that balances freedom of expression with children's rights. Key measures suggested included mandatory training for journalists on ethical reporting with minors, education for parents on social media risks, and the development of a standardised glossary of terms to avoid fear-based language. Additionally, schools can play a vital role through educational programs on children's rights, media literacy, and trauma-informed reporting. Highlighting systemic factors behind incidents, as well as positive follow-up stories of youth overcoming challenges, can help reshape public narratives and support reintegration.

Throughout the session, Angeliki Kardara repeatedly stressed the human dimension behind headlines. She noted: "If we solely place responsibility on the child and their family and don't frame this responsibility without asking 'have we taken all the appropriate measures?', we are missing something." She also warned of the long-term consequences of re-victimisation: "These [re-victimised] children often experience long term disruptions in their lives, and are marginalised even further at school which can lead to social withdrawal which brings many more problems." Ultimately, she concluded with a call to action: "We can help to build a media environment that sees young people as human beings with potential, not just headlines!"

This keynote talk highlighted the urgent need for media, professionals, and policymakers to adopt child-centred approaches that recognise the complexity of children's experiences, reduce stigma, and protect their rights, dignity, and opportunities for growth.

Live podcast 2 - Continuity of care across the life course: from early childhood to adulthood

Following the human libraries described later in the report, the second day continued with a second live podcast, moderated by **Manu Krishan**, Global Study Programme Coordinator, Global Campus of Human Rights, bringing together a panel of experts, including **Donna McEwan**, Practice Development Adviser, Children & Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ), **Jane Mulcahy**, Founder of the Heart Centre, researcher, speaker and trainer, **George Nikolaidis**, Head of Department of Mental Health and Social Welfare, Institute of Child Health, and **Huw Williams**, Professor of Clinical Neuropsychology & Associate ProVice Chancellor for Global Engagement, Health & Life Faculty, University of Exeter, to discuss continuity of care across the life course, from early childhood to adulthood. The discussion was structured in three parts, covering early interventions and foundations of care, continuity of care, and the transition to adulthood.

In the first part, the conversation focused on early interventions and the foundations of care. Jane Mulcahy introduced the concept of the 'threat of care,' highlighting how children who have never experienced safety or affection can perceive care and attention as threatening because it is unfamiliar. She emphasised the importance of investing in maternal and early childhood support, noting that when children enter care, much of the damage has already been done. Huw Williams highlighted the significance of understanding maternal risk factors, such as anxiety, fear of social judgement, and postnatal depression, particularly in environments where women may feel unsupported or at risk of failing.

Jane Mulcahy stressed the importance of addressing emotional neglect, noting that societal norms often prevent girls from expressing anger and boys from showing tenderness. Providing children with a language to express their emotions, and reinforcing that dysregulation is not a sign of being 'broken,'

is central to preventing future violence and fostering healthy development. Donna McEwan described the Scottish approach of involving children in shaping services, ensuring that policy translates into practice in ways that truly meet their needs. George Nikolaidis added that cultural and social contexts influence how children express and internalise distress, with common misdiagnosis when children from deprived backgrounds enter care.

The discussion then explored how care and connection can be embedded within systems often constrained by conservative priorities and limited resources. Jane Mulcahy advocated for a relational approach, emphasising that simply being present and listening can calm the nervous system and build trust, even within overwhelmed systems. Huw Williams noted that a needs-led approach in therapeutic environments can enhance resilience and reduce risks such as exclusion from school, while Donna McEwan highlighted that care, compassion, and respect for dignity should form the core of professional practice, even when expressions of love may be constrained by boundaries. George Nikolaidis cautioned that professionals must navigate complex social and institutional pressures while striving to avoid revictimising the most deprived.

The second part of the discussion addressed continuity of care. Jane Mulcahy highlighted the problems caused by isolated services, using the example of children with dual diagnoses being referred between mental health and substance misuse services in a fragmented manner. She argued for a holistic, person-centred approach, documenting relational practices and pooling resources to address the whole person rather than isolated problems. Donna McEwan emphasised the importance of meaningful inclusion of children and young people in decisions about their care, and ensuring professionals support each other to provide continuity. Huw Williams described the role of link workers in the UK, who act as advocates and intermediaries, facilitating effective communication and relationship-building between children, families, and services. George Nikolaidis stressed the need to challenge misinformed narratives about children in conflict with the law and to ensure interventions focus on supporting those facing multiple adversities.

The final part of the live podcast explored the transition to adulthood. Donna McEwan argued that services must be flexible and responsive, avoiding artificial age-based interruptions. Jane Mulcahy pointed out that while privileged young people often receive familial support well into their mid-twenties, care systems frequently withdraw support at 18, despite ongoing brain development. She called for multidisciplinary collaboration to provide continuity and compassion, helping young people manage their emotions and build resilience. Huw Williams highlighted the importance of opportunities in employment and education, including apprenticeships, during the critical 16-24 age period. George Nikolaidis emphasised the need to design services around the needs of the individual rather than arbitrary age categories, noting that children often experience the absence of reciprocal care as deeply damaging, and that validating their worth can be transformative.

Overall, the discussion underscored the necessity of a multi-disciplinary, holistic approach that sees children as whole individuals rather than a series of isolated problems. Continuity of care beyond childhood, particularly during the transition to adulthood, is vital, with flexible, needs-led services and opportunities for engagement forming the foundation for better life outcomes. As Jane Mulcahy observed, “We play hot potatoes with people in this system,” highlighting the systemic fragmentation that must be addressed through relational, compassionate, and evidence-informed practice.

Closing Plenary

To wrap up the second day, and to conclude the seminar, the closing plenary, moderated by **Nuala Mole**, Senior Lawyer, the AIRE Centre, brought the conference to a reflective and forward-looking conclusion, emphasising the centrality of respect, care, and compassion in delivering justice for children. Speakers included **Ton Liefwaard**, Professor of Children's Rights and Head of the Department of Child Law and

Health Law - UNICEF Chair in Children's Rights, Leiden University, **Benoit Van Keirsbilck**, Chair of the CFJ-EN, director of Defence for Children International Belgium and member of the UN Committee on the Right of the Child, and **Iraklis**, Young Justice Transformer from Greece.

A powerful testimony from Iraklis illustrated the human impact of supportive interventions. He explained that he was feeling completely lost upon first encountering the justice system, describing it as “like a bad dream.” The guidance and presence of his probation officer, however, gave him hope and a sense that people genuinely cared for children and their rights. This story underscored the importance of relational, attentive support within justice systems.

Ton Liefwaard reflected on the alignment between children's rights and the recognition of care, as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. He noted that systems often fail children due to fragmentation and a narrow focus on procedure rather than holistic wellbeing. Professor Liefwaard emphasised the need for a radical shift from traditional narratives of justice to approaches that centre children's experiences, respect their rights, and acknowledge the role of supportive relationships. While recognising that significant progress has been made over the last three decades, he highlighted that operationalising these principles in practice remains a key challenge.

Benoit Van Keirsbilck reinforced the idea that there is no perfect solution, as the work involves real human beings and complex circumstances. He outlined the concept of child-friendly justice as one that prioritises the individual needs of the child, integrates social protection, and addresses the systemic violence that children, often from minority or marginalised backgrounds, may face. He read a statement from a young participant, that was shared in the discussion that followed the cultural event, reminding participants that many children come into conflict with the law due to their circumstances and background, rather than inherent wrongdoing, and that recognising their humanity is essential to offering genuine opportunities for change.

In summing up, Nuala Mole highlighted a key take-away: delivering justice for children requires respect, care, compassion, and a clear sense of responsibility to improve conditions and outcomes for young people. The plenary reinforced the overarching message of the seminar, that children's rights must be operationalised in ways that are relational, holistic, and attentive to the lived realities of those most affected.

Circles of inspiration

One of the key interactive formats of the CFJ-EN Annual Seminar 2025 was the ‘circle of inspiration’. These circles were designed as large-group dialogues where leading voices explore the key themes shaping child protection and justice. Rather than formal panel sessions, each circle brought together inspiring speakers and participants to exchange ideas, share practices, and collectively imagine better, more responsive systems for children. The format encouraged openness, participation and reflection, creating space for learning not only from experts but also from practitioners and participants in the room. Two circles took place simultaneously on the Thursday morning, and participants were free to choose the circle they wanted to attend, or to follow parts of both.

Strengthen the capacities and the roles of child protection systems in Europe

One of the circles of inspiration focused on how child protection systems across Europe can be strengthened, better coordinated, and made more genuinely centred on children's rights and needs. The discussion was moderated by **Maria-Andriani Kostopoulou**, Marangopoulos Foundation for Human Rights, and GREVIO, Council of Europe, and the speakers forming the original circle included **Marie-Cécile Rouillon**, Coordinator for the Rights of the Child, European Commission, **Sandra Aigner-Accardo**, Project Manager, Equality, Inclusion and Sustainability Unit, European Union Agency for Fundamental

Rights, **Ally Dunhill**, Director of policy, advocacy and communications, Eurochild, **Isaura Castillo**, Lawyer, Office for the Defence of the Rights of the Child, **Axel Le Hô**, EU Project Assistant, Validity foundation, and **Shawna von Blixen-Finecke**, Deputy Secretary General, Barnahus Network.

The conversation began at the EU level. Marie-Cécile Rouillon brought the perspective of the European Commission, reflecting on the gap that often exists between legal frameworks and the lived reality of children. She highlighted the recent work on the [Directive on violence against women and domestic violence](#), which for the first time recognises children who witness domestic violence as victims and considers the long-term consequences this may have. Marie-Cécile Rouillon stressed that protection cannot be delivered by the justice system alone. Effective responses require coordinated work among social services, health professionals, educators and child protection authorities, ideally through national plans that enable structured cooperation across sectors and levels of governance. She acknowledged that resources and staffing remain real constraints, but emphasised the need to learn from inspiring practices and adapt what works to different national contexts.

Building on this, Sandra Aigner-Accardo described the work of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights in [mapping child protection systems across all EU Member States](#). FRA collects data, conducts socio-legal research and works in close partnership with national authorities and civil society. She explained that child protection systems across Europe are highly diverse and complex, but common trends and recurring challenges are visible. Their comparative research has identified promising practices that can inspire others, even though there is no single model or quick fix that can simply be transplanted from one country to another.

The discussion then turned to what integrated systems look like in practice. Drawing on experience from the UK, Ally Dunhill explained that integration cannot be achieved simply by forcing several services to work together. Professionals often come with different missions, languages, and cultures of practice, and joint training is therefore essential. She used to train and collaborate with future social workers, nurses and criminologists, this helped to make them learn about each other's roles and to see the child as a whole person rather than through the lens of a single profession. In these approaches, each child had a designated lead professional based on their primary need, who coordinated the broader network of support. For Ally Dunhill, understanding child development and respecting children's dignity are foundational to any effective system.

Isaura Castillo brought experience from Mexico, where child-friendly courtrooms have been developed to better support children giving testimony. She explained that children speak with trained psychologists in adapted environments rather than directly to judges, while judicial actors listen from another room. Testimonies are recorded so that children do not have to repeat their stories multiple times, and they are also given the opportunity to meet the judge so that they understand the process they have participated in. This approach is centred on adapting the system to children rather than expecting children to adapt to adult procedures.

Axel Le Hô highlighted the situation of children with disabilities, stressing that their perspectives must be considered before, during and after court proceedings. He pointed out that legal provisions are often vague and unevenly applied in practice, creating barriers and inequities. Court environments can be especially traumatic for children with disabilities, and access to communication intermediaries such as speech therapists or psychologists is crucial to ensure that children both understand and are understood in justice processes.

The Barnahus model was discussed as a widely recognised example of integrated practice. Shawna von Blixen-Finecke explained that Barnahus is not a residential facility but a child-friendly centre where professionals from justice, health and child protection work together in a neutral setting. Interviews with children are recorded and admissible in court, reducing repeated questioning and re-

traumatisation. She reflected on challenges of information sharing and mutual trust among agencies, noting that historical mistrust can have a lasting impact and must be actively addressed through time, training and relationship-building. She emphasised that Barnahus must be adapted to national contexts, anchored in local ownership, and embedded in wider systems rather than treated as a standalone solution.

Contributions from participants from Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Cyprus and Greece illustrated how these ideas translate into practice. Some described long paths toward establishing Barnahus-type centres and child-friendly interview rooms; others shared rapid developments through strong cooperation agreements across sectors. Common themes emerged: professionals working under enormous caseload pressure, systems that feel “trapped” by lack of capacity, and the risk that children who were first victims become further harmed by institutional responses. Participants stressed the importance of supporting children on the move, children with disabilities, and children who do not trust the system enough to seek help.

Benoît van Keirsbilck underlined that even the best judicial systems are difficult for children to access without social and legal support. He spoke about the need for someone to accompany the child, hold their hand metaphorically, and help them navigate procedures while respecting their pace and needs. Several participants returned to the importance of having one professional who stays with the child and family throughout the process, ensuring continuity, trust and clear communication.

In the final reflections, speakers converged on several core messages. Child protection and child-friendly justice must be built around children’s rights, participation, and dignity. Integration requires training, shared language and mutual understanding across professions rather than structural reform alone. Barnahus and other promising models show what is possible, but must always be adapted to local reality. Special attention is needed for children facing intersecting forms of disadvantage, including disability, migration, poverty and prior victimisation. Above all, participants stressed that systems should not treat children as small adults; they should be designed with a full understanding of child development and the complexity of children’s lives.

The circle closed with a strong sense of collective purpose. While challenges remain substantial, participants expressed motivation to continue learning from one another, adapting promising practices, and working toward child protection and justice systems in Europe that are coherent, compassionate and truly centred on the best interests of every child.

Promote child rights-based responses and gatekeeping mechanisms to protect children in contact with the justice system

The second circle of inspiration focused on promoting child rights-based responses and gatekeeping mechanisms to protect children in contact with the justice system. This circle was moderated by **Cédric Foussard**, Child Justice expert, and brought together practitioners and researchers working in different national contexts and systems, including **Leen Ackaert**, Secretary of the Supervisory Committee for Youth Institutions, Flemish Office of the Children’s Rights Commissioner in Belgium, **Gelly Aroni**, Head of the Unit for Integration and Support of UAMs, General Secretariat for Vulnerable Persons and Institutional Protection, Ministry of Migration and Asylum of Greece, **Maartje Berger**, Children’s rights expert and mediator, Restorative Justice Nederland, **Els Dumortier**, Professor, Department of Criminology, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, **Cecilia Popa**, Cyber and Criminal Justice specialist, **Silvia Randazzo**, Independent Child Justice Expert, and **Annemieke Wolthuis**, Children’s rights consultant, senior researcher and Mediator, Restorative Justice Nederland.

The overarching concern expressed throughout the discussion was that many children still do not receive an appropriate response because child protection, migration, education, social services, and

justice systems do not communicate effectively or work together in a coordinated way. Participants reflected on what is needed to ensure that all children, regardless of their pathway into systems, have real access to protection rather than being pushed from service to service without continuity or care.

Gelly Aroni spoke about her work in Greece with unaccompanied minors and stressed how much of it revolves around access to school. She explained that her team works very closely with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health and with local authorities to make sure guardians are connected to educators and responsibilities are properly handed over. She described the network of fifty-nine shelters across Greece and how challenges differ from region to region. She spends a lot of time in the field, meeting mayors, regional teams and schools, and said that policy in her unit is genuinely informed by what she sees on the ground. For her, collaboration with NGOs is essential, and integration also means cultural participation, including events like the one taking place that day, where children are visible, heard and actively involved.

Leen Ackaert then told the story behind the creation of the Flemish volunteer inspection system for youth institutions in Belgium. She recalled that around 2018, research showed that closed youth institutions were not being inspected in terms of children's rights, only financial audits were taking place. With colleagues, they proposed a model similar to adult prisons, where external people enter regularly and observe conditions. After long political debate, and with the support of one member of parliament, it took more than nine years before a decree was finally adopted. For eight years now, volunteers with a strong legal mandate have been visiting twenty-four private institutions and others once a month. They speak with children, eat with them, and even talk to them when they are placed in isolation. They are not professionals, but they receive training twice a year and write reports after every visit. These reports are shared both with the institutions themselves and compiled annually for parliament. Leen Ackaert emphasised that the biggest achievement has been transparency and a more reflective attitude among staff, as well as legal protection for volunteers and children. She acknowledged that a lot of work remains, particularly in the private sector, but spoke of "positive risk-taking" as a way to give children chances beyond institutional walls. She also mentioned that volunteers are appointed for three-year mandates, allowing trust and relationships with the young people to grow.

The idea of involving minors as volunteers also came up. When Leen Ackaert was asked if they already had young volunteers, she said they did not, but she thought it would be a very good development. Gelly Aroni then added that she is working on a project in Greece precisely to involve minor volunteers supporting other minors.

The discussion then shifted towards restorative justice. Annemieke Wolthuis reflected on how restorative approaches can work across systems, from schools to detention to communities. She pointed out that volunteers are active not only in prisons, but also with children of detained parents, and argued that restorative ideas can strengthen prevention long before a child reaches court. She referred to diversion practices in the Netherlands, where young people are sometimes offered learning schemes rather than immediately being pulled into the criminal justice system, with an emphasis on repairing harm in their own environment. She also spoke about family group conferencing, where families themselves are supported to take responsibility and prevent escalation. Annemieke Wolthuis described four layers of restoration: of the self, the network, the victim and wider society.

Maartje Berger added that restorative justice can also be embedded within the youth care system. For her, it is about working with young people rather than on them, empowering them and making them part of the solution. She acknowledged that lawyers are sometimes hesitant about restorative approaches, but explained that as professionals become more specialised in children's rights, they increasingly recognise the benefits.

Several speakers highlighted the importance of trauma-sensitive practice. Jane Mulcahy, from the Heart Centre, warned against purely cognitive questions such as “what were you thinking?” in moments where actions may have been driven by trauma and impulse. Huw Williams emphasised that before responding to an offence, we need to understand why a child is acting now – why are they stealing, using substances or lashing out. He argued for proper formulations and therapeutic approaches for frontline workers, alongside the funding necessary to create supportive environments that prevent children entering the system in the first place.

The conversation then turned to LGBTQIA+ children. Els Dumortier pointed out that research on this group in the youth justice context is still very limited and that many children do not feel safe approaching the police or courts because of fear of mockery or discrimination. She described how trans children are sometimes placed in institutions that do not match their identity, including trans girls in boys’ facilities, creating traumatic experiences in binary structures. She questioned whether communities and professionals are really ready to support LGBTQIA+ children and whether restorative justice can help when systems themselves are not inclusive.

Silvia Randazzo spoke about her work on a paper addressing LGBTI+ children, noting that in 2022 almost nothing existed on this topic. She described reluctance within systems even to name the issue, despite the fact that sexual orientation and gender identity are central to children’s development. For her, the first step is taking these children out of invisibility and genuinely listening to them. Ludmila Andade added that bullying and discrimination in detention often comes from boys hiding vulnerability, becoming aggressors to avoid appearing weak. She argued that boys, including straight boys, need to feel safe being sensitive.

Cecilia Popa then brought in the digital dimension. She asked how prepared systems really are to deal with children’s online lives and questioned the tendency to criminalise young people for what they say on the internet. She spoke about “cyber hygiene” and stressed that if adults themselves lack healthy online habits, it is unrealistic to expect children to manage perfectly. She argued for victim-centred approaches online, amnesty spaces where children can speak up, and technologies developed with children’s participation, such as chatbots helping them navigate the justice system. Cecilia Popa listed a range of online risks, grooming, trafficking, extortion, systemic exposure to harmful content and cyberbullying, and reminded the group that adults often underestimate the intensity of growing up entirely in digital environments.

Throughout the session, Cédric Foussard kept returning to the same concern: progress in child justice in the offline world risks being lost once interactions move online. The circle repeatedly came back to the same conclusion: genuine protection depends on coordination, on listening to children, on restorative and trauma-informed responses, and on systems that are prepared to change rather than forcing children to fit into existing structures.

Workshop sessions

On the Thursday afternoon, participants were invited to take part in workshop sessions. These interactive sessions were designed for experts to guide participants through real challenges and solutions in child protection and justice. With two rounds of four parallel workshops, participants had the chance to join discussions, exchange experiences, and bolster their knowledge and skills in a small group setting.

Workshop 1 - Sorry, we are closed! Detention for young children in conflict with the law?

Helmut Sax, Senior Researcher, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Fundamental and Human Rights & **Atis Comanita**, Legal advisor, Children's and Youth Advocate of the City of Vienna, Austria

This workshop addressed the complex and challenging issue of preventing the detention of young children in conflict with the law. The discussion brought together perspectives from across Europe, providing a comparative view of how different countries manage children who come into repeated contact with justice and welfare systems.

The workshop began by framing the issue within the context of fundamental rights, emphasising that children, like adults, should not be deprived of their liberty without clear justification. A case study from Austria highlighted the difficulties faced by children under the age of criminal responsibility who repeatedly come into conflict with the law. In Austria, while the minimum age of criminal responsibility is 14, authorities are increasingly encountering children already at 12 or 13 years committing high numbers of offences, sometimes as many as 200 per month. These younger children, often described as 'system breakers', frequently escape from care, and the child welfare system has struggled to find appropriate responses. Current legal frameworks in Austria discourage closed institutions, and while there are three pilot projects aimed at providing more intensive support and education in smaller care homes, these are still in their early stages and their effectiveness remains uncertain.

The workshop explored the practical challenges of protection for these children. In Vienna, care homes often exceed the recommended size, housing up to twelve children with varying levels of need, including those with no prior contact with the justice system alongside children who have repeatedly offended. Age group divisions are limited, and educational measures are vaguely defined in law, meaning that in practice, children often receive minimal structured support. Participants discussed approaches aimed at fostering connection, such as closer supervision, orientation help for frequent offenders, and temporary placements to provide stability.

Comparative perspectives highlighted diverse practices across countries. In the Netherlands, institutions with educational supervision are planned to close by 2030, but concerns were raised that this may simply shift deprivation of liberty from one setting to another, leaving children without ongoing support once they leave care. In Australia, children as young as ten can be placed in detention, with indigenous children disproportionately affected and federal-state inconsistencies creating further complications. Belgium and Scotland illustrated contrasting models, with larger institutions sometimes better resourced to uphold children's rights, but smaller, more open arrangements offering gradual reintegration and family contact. Education in closed institutions was noted as minimal in many countries, with Scotland requiring only two hours per week, raising questions about how children are prepared for life outside.

Participants also reflected on the broader social consequences of detention. In Romania and Albania, children leaving institutions often return due to a lack of family or social support, with some experiencing homelessness before receiving any follow-up assistance. While restorative and

diversionary measures exist in some jurisdictions, they are frequently undermined by weak social services, insufficient staffing, and limited resources exacerbated by the post-COVID environment.

A consistent theme was the lack of children's perspectives in shaping these interventions. Despite principles enshrined in child protection law, children are rarely consulted about decisions that profoundly affect their lives. Helmut Sax emphasised that any deprivation of liberty must be demonstrably justified, and alternatives must be considered first and trialled to ensure that children's human rights are upheld.

Workshop 2 - Taking a child rights-based approach in complex transnational cases involving unaccompanied and separated children from Ukraine

Elisa Pothée, Programs Coordinator, Kids in Need of Defense Europe, France & **Jyothi Kanics**, Director of Policy and Advocacy, Europe, KIND, Switzerland

This workshop focused on taking a child rights-based approach to complex transnational cases involving unaccompanied and separated children from Ukraine. The discussion highlighted the challenges of ensuring the rights, protection, and wellbeing of children navigating multiple jurisdictions, often in situations of displacement, family separation, and uncertainty about their future.

The workshop opened by outlining the work of KIND Europe, which has been operating in Europe since 2016 with a holistic, trauma-informed, and inclusive approach. The organisation seeks to coordinate actors involved in a child's life, including legal, social, and psychosocial services, to ensure that all interventions prioritise the child's best interests. Particular attention is given to psychosocial support, planning for the transition to adulthood, and supporting children with special needs, emphasising that children should be heard and included in decisions affecting their lives.

Transnational case management was identified as particularly challenging due to inconsistent legal frameworks, lack of certainty in children's protection status, and difficulties in maintaining continuity of care across borders. Many children, particularly those with temporary residence, face ambiguity about their legal status, which affects their freedom of movement and access to services. Data gaps exacerbate these challenges, with many children unregistered or otherwise invisible to authorities. The workshop highlighted practical examples, such as children moving between Poland, Sweden, and Ukraine, where uncertainty about guardianship or care arrangements creates additional risks. Participants also discussed tensions over decision-making, particularly when national and local authorities share responsibility, and the political pressures that can influence child protection outcomes.

Access to services for children from Ukraine was another central focus. The facilitators stressed that children must be recognised first and foremost as children, with the right to education, play, mental health support, and social inclusion. Language barriers, bullying, and a lack of future planning contribute to social isolation and stress, particularly for children transitioning to adulthood at different ages depending on the host country. Workshop participants noted that trusted institutions are often lacking, and emphasised the importance of listening to children and including them centrally in all processes to build trust and a sense of agency.

Best practices identified included ensuring that children are introduced to services in ways that reflect their prior experiences, mapping and aligning new services with those familiar to them in Ukraine, and maintaining a non-discriminatory approach in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Participants highlighted that children fare better under child protection legislation rather than purely asylum-based frameworks, provided that their legal status and protection pathways are stable. Voluntary return to Ukraine was also discussed as a sensitive area requiring careful planning and support.

Overall, the workshop underscored that transnational child protection requires coordination, continuity, and a child-centred perspective. Listening to children, maintaining stable legal and care arrangements, and ensuring access to education, social, and mental health services are essential to uphold their rights and promote wellbeing, even amidst the complex realities of displacement and cross-border movement.

Workshop 3 - From Voice to Dialogue – Rapid Skills Lab on Parent-Teen Mediation

Robin Brzobohatý, Deputy Director & **Martina Cirbusová**, Director, Mediation and Education Centre Brno, Czech Republic

This workshop explored parent-teen mediation through a rapid skills lab focused on translating a child's voice into dialogue. The session was grounded in practical learning, emphasising a "learn by doing" approach that encouraged participants to engage directly with the principles and techniques of mediation.

The facilitators began by reflecting on their experience piloting parent-teen mediation two years ago. While their earlier work focused on child-inclusive mediation, they recognised that supporting communication between parents and teenagers required a distinct approach. This led to the development of a mediation model that prioritises dialogue and understanding rather than therapeutic intervention, with the goal of helping families navigate everyday conflicts and coexist more harmoniously.

Four key principles underpinned the workshop. Firstly, the distinction between child-inclusive mediation and youth-parent mediation was highlighted, stressing that giving voice to the child is necessary but not sufficient without fostering reciprocal communication. Secondly, restorative principles such as trust and relational repair form the foundation of effective mediation. Thirdly, the facilitators emphasised deliberate practice, noting that mediation skills are developed through repeated, reflective engagement rather than through years of experience alone. Finally, they contrasted traditional learning methods with micro-focused and deliberate practice.

Participants engaged in exercises in small groups, taking turns as mediator, parent, and teenager while others observed. Two illustrative videos highlighted common communication challenges. In one, a father attributed household disagreements to his son's ADHD, which immediately blocked the dialogue. The facilitators emphasised the importance of attending to non-verbal signal, recognising when a teen withdraws, and creating space for them to speak. In another scenario, discussions about scheduling conflicts illustrated how both parent-first and teen-first approaches can struggle without careful attention to the dynamics of conversation.

Key take-aways from the session included the importance of concision and clarity in communication, risk awareness for teenagers, and careful observation of non-verbal signals. The workshop reinforced that mediation is a practical skill that benefits from deliberate, experiential learning, where success is measured by the ability to foster dialogue and mutual understanding rather than achieving immediate resolution.

Workshop 4 - Continuity of Care in Fragmented Systems: Learning from SHiFT's Relational Model in the UK

Ella Armstrong, Learning and Insights Lead & **Sam Fern**, Head of Practices, SHiFT UK

This workshop addressed continuity of care in fragmented youth justice systems, drawing on the organisation's relational model. SHiFT focuses on building trust-based, long-term relationships between skilled practitioners (SHiFT Guides) and young people, as well as their families. The approach

emphasises consistent engagement and seeks to involve the whole family whenever possible, recognising that support is most effective when sustained and relational rather than procedural.

The facilitators opened by highlighting the challenges inherent in fragmented systems, where professionals often follow procedural requirements rather than listening to the needs of families. Heavy caseloads and inconsistent training further undermine continuity of care, leaving vulnerable young people at risk of falling through the gaps. Participants were invited to reflect on two questions: what continuity of care means in their context, and where young people are most likely to be lost within systems.

Discussion revealed several shared insights. Continuity of care was understood as the ability to share expertise and information across systems, ensure trusted adults remain consistently involved, and maintain stable professional support. This continuity fails when young people were seen to fall through gaps when services focused narrowly on a single vulnerability, when transitions from childhood to adulthood were poorly managed, particularly around the ages of 17 to 18, and when access to services fluctuated due to geography, funding, or other systemic limitations. Examples were drawn from the Netherlands, where preventative cognitive assessments for young people under 25 aim to reduce institutionalisation and support children before problems escalate.

The SHiFT model itself seeks to mitigate these issues by maintaining a smaller, consistent network of professionals around the child. SHiFT Guides remain involved for extended periods, reducing the need for children to repeat their experiences to multiple professionals and fostering trust. Central to the model are the principles of tailoring interventions to the child, investing in relationships, identifying individual motivations, and persisting over time. Practitioners adapt their skills and tools to meet the unique needs of each child, aiming to break cycles of disadvantage and support positive development.

A practical exercise helped participants understand continuity of care through a case study of a child navigating multiple systems. Gaps were identified in school support, frequent changes in foster placements, and the rotation of social workers, while opportunities for continuity were highlighted in education, family support, and coordinated professional mapping. The facilitators stressed that interventions are often introduced once crises have occurred; SHiFT's goal is to provide support earlier, understanding the roots behind a child's situation and maintaining consistent engagement to demonstrate genuine care and impact.

Workshop 5 - Challenges, best practices and the role of NGOs in continuity of care

Ludmila Andrade, *International Coordinator, Young Perspectives, The Netherlands*

This workshop explored the challenges, best practices, and role of NGOs in ensuring continuity of care for children and young people in contact with the justice system. The session began with an exercise designed to centre empathy and lived experience: participants shared personal stories of moments in childhood when they felt seen and safe. This grounding in individual experience emphasised the importance of relational trust and recognition as foundational to continuity of care.

Ludmila then guided participants through four key stages of continuity of care: contact with the care or justice system, detention or other measures, probation, and adulthood, encouraging reflection on both positive and negative experiences within each. Participants used sticky notes to record observations and collectively explore the strengths and gaps of existing systems.

The first stage, contact with the care or justice system, highlighted systemic challenges such as uneven training of social workers, language barriers, and inconsistent access to skilled professionals. Early interactions with police or the justice system can be intimidating, often setting a tone of fear, though positive developments, such as child-friendly courtrooms and improved professional training, were

noted. Needs and risk assessments were seen as both supportive tools and potential sources of stigma, while preventative interventions outside of institutionalisation were viewed as valuable.

The second stage, detention or measures, illustrated both risks and benefits. Detention can provide routine, stability, and access to food and basic care, yet post-detention homelessness, disruptions to healthcare, and abrupt transitions after the age of 18 pose significant challenges.

Probation and community-based support offered opportunities for continuity, but participants emphasised that expectations of perfect compliance often fail to recognise children's lived realities. Examples from Scotland demonstrated that continuity of care post-18, including mentoring, can support smoother transitions to adulthood. Similarly, adulthood-focused support, including stable housing and mentorship, was highlighted as critical to integrating young people into society. In Mexico, initiatives supporting individuals over 18 through structured reintegration programmes illustrated the potential benefits of planned, consistent support.

Throughout the workshop, Ludmila Andrade emphasised the role of NGOs in maintaining a "continuity of feeling" rather than attempting to be present in every interaction. YOPE's model builds trust across the organisation so that, regardless of which staff member a child interacts with, there is a consistent experience of empathy, expectation, and care. This relational continuity fosters a sense of safety and support, ensuring that young people feel seen, valued, and guided through complex systems.

Workshop 6 - Best national Child-friendly justice practices in Greece

Eftychia Katsigaraki, General Director, Criminologist, General Directorate of Special Legal Affairs, Hellenic Ministry of Justice, Greece

This workshop examined best national practices in child-friendly justice in Greece, highlighting innovative initiatives aimed at rehabilitative engagement and moral development. The session emphasised the importance of storytelling and experiential learning as tools for helping young people reflect on their behaviour and make positive choices.

Katsigaraki introduced the RE:MIND programme, which focuses on moral insight and personal reflection. A key component of the programme is encouraging young people to step outside cycles of reactive behaviour, exemplified through philosophical allegories such as those of Plato. The workshop illustrated practical approaches through video material showcasing anger management interventions, demonstrating how narrative and role-play can support emotional regulation and behavioural change.

The session also highlighted the mock trial programme piloted in the regions of Chania and Lasithi. This initiative brings together local schools, institutions, and youth in contact with the justice system, combining education with practical collaboration. The mock trials serve multiple purposes: they enhance understanding of legal processes, provide an experiential learning environment, and contribute to a fairer, more accessible justice system. The programme has engaged young people across age groups, from those aged 13-17 navigating ongoing justice involvement to young adults aged 18-24 participating in psycho-educational and experimental seminars.

As part of the child-friendly justice initiative, the programme is in development stages but aims to be both comprehensive and accessible, integrating educational, rehabilitative, and experiential components. To support wider engagement, the Hellenic Ministry of Justice has produced multimedia materials, including one video and ten podcasts, which are publicly available on the Ministry's website. These resources serve to extend the reach of child-friendly justice principles and demonstrate the value of combining practical learning with reflective, moral, and rehabilitative approaches.

Workshop 7 - Protection of child victims of trafficking

Efthymis Antonopoulos, Junior Policy Manager & **Chrysanthi Materi**, Policy Intern, Victim Support Europe, Belgium

This workshop focused on the protection of child victims of trafficking, highlighting the importance of early intervention, victim-centred approaches, and multi-agency collaboration. The session used case studies to explore the practical challenges of safeguarding children and emphasised how vulnerabilities such as age, gender, and financial circumstances are exploited by traffickers.

The workshop began by identifying early warning signs for intervention. Participants considered scenarios in which grooming occurred via social media, the victim was isolated from communication with family, and distress and withdrawal were observable to teachers. The discussion highlighted how a lack of parental consent, inadequate information, and unqualified professionals can contribute to secondary victimisation.

A comparative approach was presented, contrasting traditional practices with victim-centred methods. In the latter, professionals use age-appropriate language, validate the child's courage, and ensure that a trusted adult is present. Key principles include providing reflection time before interviews, limiting the number of interviews, and involving professionals who are appropriate for the child's gender and needs. Tools such as Barnahus one-stop centres were emphasised as a means of reducing trauma by centralising services and minimising repeated questioning.

Workshop participants explored the broader needs of victims, including physical safety, psychological support, and careful handling of forensic evidence. A multidisciplinary approach was deemed essential, not only for the child but for the family and wider system, recognising that the responsibility for protection cannot rest solely on the victim. Educating legal guardians, schools, and communities on risk awareness and social skills was highlighted as a preventative measure, alongside the mainstreaming of child rights in education.

Key principles of re-integration were discussed, stressing that recovery requires sustained effort, collaboration, and the creation of safe, supportive spaces. Access to education and vocational training, continuous monitoring by social workers, and ensuring the child's voice is genuinely heard were presented as vital components. Importantly, the workshop underscored that professionals must never doubt the child's account and must communicate transparently about how the child's information is used, explaining why certain suggestions cannot be implemented.

Workshop 8 - Linking Child Protection with Child Justice: Policy and Practice towards a Coordinated Response

Dóra Kiss, Access to Justice Regional Coordinator Europe, **Albana Izeti & Fjolla Hoxha**, Access to Justice Program Managers in Albania & Kosovo, Terre des hommes, Hungary, Albania & Kosovo

This workshop explored the crucial link between child protection and child justice, emphasising the need for coordinated, multidisciplinary approaches to support children in conflict with the law. The session examined practical experiences in Albania and Kosovo, highlighting the importance of reintegration as both a family- and community-level process, and the centrality of child participation in designing effective pathways.

The discussion began with the introduction of reintegration as a concept and its overarching aim: to ensure that children who have experienced conflict with the law, or other vulnerabilities, can return to their communities safely, supported in their development, and with meaningful opportunities to live fulfilling lives. The speakers illustrated this through case studies, such as Dita in Kosovo, where gaps

between schools, law enforcement, and other institutions made it clear that interdisciplinary collaboration is essential. By evaluating Dita's situation and considering her needs and aspirations, the programme was able to support her transition into adulthood, securing employment and family stability.

In Albania, the example of Linda and her children highlighted the complexities of reintegration following repatriation. The case demonstrated the necessity of a coordinated approach involving multiple actors, including civil society, government agencies, and local institutions. The discussion also touched upon children affected by extremism, particularly in conflict zones such as Syria. Rather than separating children from parents, the speakers stressed the importance of conducting needs assessments and developing intervention plans focused on trauma healing, medical and psychological support, and legal guidance. This holistic methodology, the presenters argued, can serve as a model for broader child protection practices beyond these specific cases, though it requires adequate resources and sustained engagement.

The workshop underscored that reintegration is an ongoing process rather than a finite event. The transition from institutional care to family and community life can face obstacles, but success is measured in the child's ability to resume normal developmental activities, such as completing studies, engaging with peers, and pursuing personal interests. Speakers emphasised that trauma may resurface unexpectedly, necessitating flexible and responsive systems that can re-engage support when needed. Ultimately, the workshop conveyed that child participation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and a sustained focus on individual needs are key to creating functional pathways for children in vulnerable situations.

Human libraries

On Friday morning, the seminar featured Human Library sessions, designed to encourage direct, personal exchange between participants and the "living books", individuals who generously shared their experiences, professional insights, and personal journeys. Participants could move freely around the space, engage in open conversation, ask questions, and reflect on different perspectives relating to child protection and child-friendly justice. This format promoted informal learning, empathy, and dialogue in a safe and respectful environment.

Human Library contributors included:

- **How we see it** – Lora Petrova, Social Pedagogist and Coordinator of CFJ sub-Grant, & Zvezdica Kovacheva, Executive Director, SAPI, Bulgaria
- **Responses to the risks of serious harm posed by aspects of a child's behaviour within a child protection approach** – Donna McEwan, Practice Development Advisor, & Ranald McTaggart, Deputy Director, Children & Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ), Scotland
- **Korydallos Prison Theatre** – Aikaterini Papageorgiou, Artistic Director, Teatro Bellos, Athens & Director and Facilitator, Korydallos Prison Theatre Workshop, Greece
- **Children in Court and psycho-educational tool** – Ioanna Drousiotou, Children's House Coordinator & Clinical Psychologist, Hope for Children CRC Policy Centre, Cyprus
- **Legisland Game** – Teodora Rebeja, Programme Manager, Terre des hommes Moldova; Jaloba Madalina and Cirlan Daniela, members of Terre des hommes Moldova Children and Youth Advisory Board (CYAB), Moldova
- **The Heart Centre** – Jane Mulcahy, Founder of the Heart Centre, researcher, speaker and trainer, Ireland
- **Child Rights Education** – Fanni Mátyók, Founder, WellBee – You and your future, Hungary
- **Young Justice Transformer** – April van Preen, Young Perspectives, The Netherlands

- **Storybook on Child-Friendly Justice** – Stefania Kulaj, Coordinator Assistant, Child Friendly Justice European Network, Belgium

Poster presentations

All throughout the event, a dedicated area of the venue was reserved for poster presentations, showcasing ongoing projects, research, tools, and initiatives related to child protection and child-friendly justice. Participants were invited to browse the posters, engage in informal conversations with presenters, exchange ideas, and build connections across countries and sectors. The space also provided an opportunity for organisations to present their work and innovations in a visual and accessible way.

Posters presented included:

- **Every child has a voice – Making Space through representation** – SWPS University in Warsaw, Poland & University of Bristol, UK.
- **The impact of YOPE Experts** – Young Perspectives, The Netherlands
- **Threads of Protection: A PROMISE to deliver justice for child victims across borders and systems** – Child Circle, Belgium
- **Reimagining Justice** – Children & Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ), Scotland
- **Rights-based responses to criminal exploitation of children** – Children & Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ), Scotland
- **Bridging Child Protection and Child Justice through Restorative Approaches: Insights from Georgia and European Practice** – European Forum for Restorative Justice, Georgia
- **Participation as a Cross-Cutting Principle: Empowering Children and Youth for Protection and Decision-Making** – Defence for Children International Greece
- **Global Innovations on Youth Violence, Safety & Justice** – Salzburg Global, Austria
- **Incredible Me: Integrating Mental Health and Psychosocial Support into Child-Centred Justice** – Defence for Children International Lebanon
- **The Global Working Group on SDG 16+ Justice for Children: 2026–2030** – Cédric Foussard, Child Justice Expert, France
- **Meaningful participation in child-friendly justice** – Child Friendly Justice European Network, Belgium
- **Child-Friendly Justice in Action!** – Child Friendly Justice European Network, Belgium

Mock trial with the Young Justice Transformers

The CFJ-EN Annual Seminar always features a cultural event. This year a powerful theatre performance was led by **Aikaterini Papageorgiou**, Artistic Director of Theatro Bellos and director of the theatre workshop at Korydallos men's prison, at the Theatro Bellos in Athens, Greece.

Under Aikaterini's direction, the performance took the form of a mock trial theatre piece, created collaboratively with **Christos Tsoukalis** and the **Young Justice Transformers** and, who also were the actors. Drawing inspiration from real-life experiences of children in contact with justice systems across Europe, the piece explored the challenges of navigating justice as a child, blending storytelling, courtroom debate, and creative expression.

The performance was followed by a discussion between the director, the script writer, the Young Justice Transformers and the audience, on key themes including justice, rehabilitation, and children's rights. By combining artistic expression with a broader reflection, the performance provided a unique,

immersive insight into the perspectives of children within the justice system, highlighting both the human impact of legal processes and the transformative power of participatory arts.

Key takeaways and future directions

The fourth CFJ-EN Annual Seminar demonstrated strong consensus that genuine child-friendly justice systems cannot exist in isolation from child protection structures. Participants emphasised the need for coherence between systems, rather than parallel or competing approaches, and highlighted the importance of continuous professional dialogue to make rights realities in practice. The discussions showed that effective responses to children in contact with the law depend on collaboration across sectors, clear communication channels, and shared responsibilities between agencies.

Across live podcasts, workshops, circles of inspiration, and various exchanges, recurrent themes emerged: investing in capacity-building, promoting meaningful child participation, mapping and transferring good practices, and ensuring that support systems protect children from re-traumatisation. Particular attention has to be paid to resource constraints and structural barriers, with participants recognising that systemic change requires sustained investment, and not only goodwill.

The seminar also underlined that legal frameworks alone are not enough. What matters most is what is happening in practice, and how systems operate in the children's lives – whether professionals have the necessary tools, skills, and connections to deliver coordinated responses.

Key Messages

1. Child justice and child protection are interdependent systems, requiring structured cooperation, based on a common understanding of child development and its impact on services and policy development.
2. Children's participation must be meaningful and safe, informing both practice and policy.
3. Practical cross-sector cooperation, dialogue and shared learning are essential to move from principles to implementation, with effective rights-based monitoring of progress.
4. Capacity-building and multidisciplinary training are critical to ensure professionals can respond to children's needs in a child-right-centred and trauma-informed way.
5. Exchanging, mapping, and transferring promising practices helps avoid fragmentation and strengthens implementation across countries.
6. Sustainable progress requires adequate resources, not only political commitment.

Looking ahead, future directions identified by participants include strengthening bridges between child protection and justice systems, establishing clear referral pathways and cooperation protocols, and reinforcing networking at national and European levels. Continued investment in training, data collection, and practical tools was highlighted as necessary to support coordinated, holistic responses that minimise re-traumatisation and improve outcomes for children in contact with the law. The CFJ-EN will take its part in supporting this work by facilitating exchange, promoting shared learning, encouraging the transfer of effective models across contexts, and advocating for smarter financing of child-friendly justice and integrated responses.

Recommendations - Bridging Child Protection and Child Justice Systems

1. **Strengthen bridges between child protection and justice systems** – Building on a common understanding of the impact of child development, create structured cooperation mechanisms, joint protocols, and clear referral pathways to ensure coordinated responses rather than parallel processes.
2. **Embed meaningful child participation** - Develop safe, ethical ways for children and young people to influence procedures, services, and policy design, ensuring their experiences and perspectives shape reforms.
3. **Promote regular, cross-sector professional dialogue** - Support ongoing exchanges between judges, lawyers, social workers, police, psychologists, and civil society organisations to build trust, shared understanding, and coherent practice, supported by comprehensive evaluation and monitoring.
4. **Invest in capacity-building and training** - Prioritise multidisciplinary training on child-friendly justice, trauma-informed practice, and children's rights for professionals to feel equipped to apply standards in practice.
5. **Map and share promising practices across countries and sectors** - Systematically identify, document, and disseminate models that work in practice to support transferability and innovation.
6. **Ensure sustainable resources and funding** - Advocate for adequate budgets at national and European levels to support implementation, coordination mechanisms, and specialist services for children.

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