

Strengthening opportunities for accompanied children in reception centres.

Developing a shared set of standards and a training package.

AMIF, Open Call for Proposals 45 Reception, Objective/Action 2D



Policy Brief

# **Accompanied children & families in reception centres in Belgium.**

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**Disclaimer:**

This policy brief came about thanks to the AMIF research project "Strengthening opportunities for assisted children in reception centres", at the request of Fedasil.

This policy brief was fuelled and substantiated by research. In addition to a literature study, we interviewed 149 children, young people, families, social workers and policy staff in nine Belgian reception centres.

The text was written in co-creation with the reception partners in a bilingual Learning Community that met ten times in 2020-2021. The community included delegates of the Flemish and Walloon reception partners of Fedasil, Red Cross, Croix Rouge and Caritas. We also gratefully benefited from the input of the Children's Rights Commission, various experts and the Fedasil steering committee that supervises this project.

This policy brief constitutes the basis for a series of training sessions for staff of the reception network. In the coming months, the policy brief will also be submitted for formal ratification to the management of the reception network partners with a view to further implement its content in daily operations.



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# Why more attention for children and families in reception centres is much needed?

Families with children form a particular and important group of residents of Belgian reception centres. Approximately half of the residents in the reception centres are families. One in three residents is younger than eighteen. They have often experienced threatening situations before and during the flight, sometimes also after arriving. In order to give children and young people the maximum of opportunities, there is much need for a set of shared standards on child and family friendliness in the reception structures.

**Child and family friendly reception centres are places where children feel safe, within their families and in the shelter, where their opportunities for development are maximised. Reception structures should therefore also be places where the resilience of children and their families is fully recognised and promoted.**

This policy statement of Fedasil and the reception partners is based on the International Convention on the Rights of the Child and builds on other leading international texts on children's rights. The policy brief is informed by the AMIF study 'Strengthening opportunities for children in reception centres'.<sup>1</sup>

The policy brief must be seen as a guide for everyone who is part of the reception network: from policymakers and support services to counsellors, educators and reception staff, as well as the families themselves. This document is intended to provide a framework, both for policy in the reception network and for procedures within the reception structures and for the day-to-day practices and actions of reception staff and families. It is about **a shared responsibility**, to which everyone can contribute based on their roles, possibilities and responsibilities in order to strengthen the opportunities of (accompanied) children, youngsters and families in reception centres.

The policy brief starts from a broad view of families and recognises a wide range of family types: in addition to couples with or without children (minors and/or adults), it can also include single parents, extended family relationships, sibling relationships or transnational families.

The policy brief is written for accompanied children and families in collective reception centres. The foundations and standards also apply by extension to Unaccompanied Minors and to families in individual reception structures.

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<sup>1</sup> As a part of this research project, 123 interviews were conducted with 149 persons speaking, including 58 parents, 38 children, 38 staff members of reception centres and 15 experts. The interviews took place between March 2020 and January 2021 in 9 different reception centres of Fedasil, Caritas, Red Cross and Croix Rouge, in Flanders and Wallonia.

# Four foundations of a child and family friendly reception policy

This policy brief starts from four foundations, which together form a framework to guide policy and practice. They are four complementary perspectives to analyse the interests of children in reception centres. It is within these four perspectives that policy and practice are shaped. They provide a framework for naming and discussing areas of tension in policy and daily practices in the reception network and for establishing well-founded practices. They are then translated into eight standards for a child and family friendly reception and two preconditions.

## 1. The best interests of the child are paramount.

**Children and youngsters in reception centres are and remain, first and foremost, children.** In order to optimise their future prospects, it is important to approach them first and foremost as children, rather than as applicants for international protection. In line with international standards, the principle of '**the best interest of the child**' is central, or as stated in article 22bis of the Belgian Constitution: "*The best interest of the child is the first consideration in every decision that concerns the child*". In determining the best interest of the child, the **individual circumstances of each child** are always taken into account. The best interests of the child do not only apply to decisions within the reception centre but also to decisions throughout the asylum procedure and the reception process.

## 2. Every child in reception centres is recognised as a bearer of fundamental, inalienable rights

In 1992, the International Convention on the Rights of the Child was given the force of law in Belgium. Belgium must respect and guarantee all the rights of the Convention on the Rights of the Child for all children under its jurisdiction, including children in reception centres. The Convention on the Rights of the Child not only provides a legal framework; above all, it forms a meaningful and useful frame of reference for guiding policy and practice. The internationally and nationally recognised children's rights are the human rights of children and youngsters. They are fundamental standards that aim to recognize children and youngsters in our society as full-fledged citizens. They aim to realise social justice and human dignity for children and young people and thus constitute a lever to change social relations, both legally and relationally (Lembrechts, 2018).

In the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 4Ps are central guiding principles.

1. Children have '**Provision Rights**' or **rights to services**: these services (such as education, leisure, care, etc.) give children the opportunity to develop.
2. Children have '**Protection Rights**'. These rights aim to protect children from dangers and risks, such as the right to protection from abuse, exploitation and violence.
3. Children have '**Participation Rights**'. These rights grant children agency by listening to them, informing them and involving them, according to their age and maturity, in the decisions that affect them.
4. Finally, children also have '**Prevention Rights**'. Everyone working for and with children has a duty to deliberately anticipate risk factors for children's well-being, health and safety.

### 3. The welfare and well-being of children in reception centres is closely linked to that of their families.

Developing policy for child friendly shelters is inseparable from developing ideas about the rights and responsibilities of parents and families in shelters. Families in reception centres are recognised and supported in their role as primary independent care systems. The (transnational) family context is also recognised and supported. Parents have parental authority and primary responsibility for the upbringing and safety of their children. However, the experiences before and during the flight, the stay in a collective reception structure and the unfamiliarity with the Belgian society ensure that not all parents are able to fully assume this role. For this reason, the reception structures play a supporting role, whereby they supervise the safety and growth opportunities of children together with their families, while respecting their autonomy. In doing so, there is attention for the broad context (family, socio-economic, psychological, institutional, duration of the procedure....) that influences the reality of families.

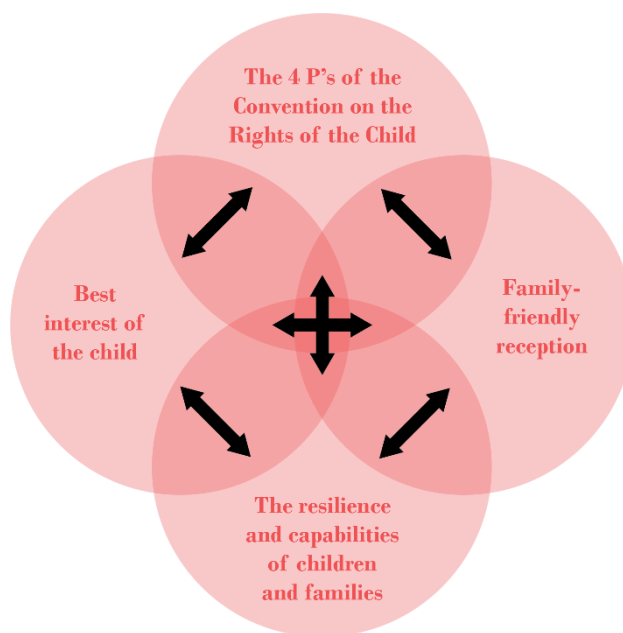
### 4. Recognise children and families in reception centres as resilient actors.

We want to appeal to the resilience of children and their families in reception centres. This means paying attention to the resilient actions of children and families.

Increasing the chances of children and families in reception starts from **a strength-based approach**. Children and their families in reception structures have often experienced dangerous, violent and traumatic situations, both in their country of origin, during the migration route and in the country of residence. All these events can make children and families vulnerable and increase their burden. In order to recognise the resilience of refugee families as well as their vulnerability, we need to be aware of the many ways in which resilience is expressed in the everyday actions and experiences of children and their families.

The resilient actions of children and their families form the basis for a strengths-based approach to families in reception. This resilience is partly personal, but is to a large extent influenced by the reception context in which they end up after their flight and by the relationships that are formed in this new context with reception staff, social workers, teachers and other stakeholders. Attention to the institutional and structural factors that can promote or hinder these resilient actions is therefore crucial. Positive (care) relations and policy frameworks support the resilient actions and attitudes of family members.

## Four complementary foundations as a basis for action frameworks



These four foundations are complementary. They complement and reinforce each other, without fully coinciding. Together they form a framework for action both in policy-making and in the daily practice of reception centres. They are also in line with the "**Professional Standards for Protection Activities**"<sup>2</sup> adopted by a large number of human rights organisations and humanitarian actors.<sup>3</sup>

When translating these foundations into a framework for action and decision-making, we draw attention to:

- Areas of tension that can arise within and between these foundations: between the different rights of children, between the interests of children and the interests of the family, or between the rights of children and their agency.
- Areas of tension between these foundations and the current possibilities and capacities of the reception network, which has to fulfil these foundations within the current policy and financial frameworks and with the capacities of the employees.

The realisation of this policy brief therefore requires a continuous reflection process.

<sup>2</sup> Standards professionnels pour les activités de protection, 2018, CICR, p.12

<sup>3</sup> "The concept of protection includes (...) all activities aimed at ensuring full respect for human rights, in accordance with the letter and spirit of the applicable law, i.e. international human rights law, international humanitarian law and refugee law (...)". The basic standards require:

- (1) respect for the principles of humanity, impartiality and non-discrimination
- (2) the prevention of adverse effects
- (3) putting the affected populations, communities and individuals at the centre of protection activities

# Two preconditions and eight standards for child and family friendly reception centres

The four foundations together form the guiding principles for the management of the reception network, but also for the professional attitude of all those involved with children during their stay in the reception network.

They translate into two transversal basic conditions and eight standards, which build on international research.<sup>4</sup> We always refer to the articles from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) that underpin these standards. The eight standards also bear a high degree of similarity to the ten capabilities developed by Martha Nussbaum, which form the basis of Fedasil's approach to well-being.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the standards are strongly interrelated such that the realisation of (one of) the basic conditions or of one or more of the standards leads to a (partial) fulfilment of the others.

## Two preconditions for child and family friendly reception centres

### 1. High-quality counselling from a child and family friendly professional attitude

- *Article 26 CRC: Right to social benefits*
- *See also Articles 22 and 27 of the CRC.*
- *Central capability: independence*

**The daily supervision and interactions in the reception centres have an enormous impact on the well-being and development opportunities of the children and families. A child friendly and strength oriented professional attitude of aid workers and reception staff is crucial for the quality of the guidance.**

To this end, all those who work with children receive appropriate training and support. These courses focus, among other things, on the development opportunities and dynamics of children, their needs and rights and the development of power oriented communication skills with children and parents.

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<sup>4</sup> For the concretization of these guiding principles into policy recommendations and action frameworks, and their translation into a supportive training and support offer for staff and volunteers in the reception network, see Fournier et al, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> The 10 capabilities are safety, health, integrity, meaning, security, independence, belonging, relaxation, participation and experiencing nature. The vision text 'Well-being in Asylum Reception' developed by Fedasil is based on these ten capabilities.



Reception staff and families work together in a relationship based on equality, shared responsibility and mutual respect. Aid workers support (where necessary and requested by families) children in their growth, independence and development.

In counselling, attention is paid to the needs of children across all areas of life (a holistic approach). Decisions concerning children are made taking into account the best interests and long term well-being of the child. Solutions are concrete, safe and sustainable. Family members are (pro-)actively and constructively involved in this process. Working on a relationship of trust with the parents and children is central. The staff invests in the maintenance of good relationships within the family, between residents and also with the reception staff based on the principles of restorative justice.

## **2. A safe & appropriate infrastructure is a basic prerequisite for development opportunities.**

- *Article 16 CRC: Protection of privacy*
- *Article 27 CRC: Right to a standard of living adequate for the child's development*
- *See also articles 22 and 26 of the CRC.*
- *Central capability: integrity*

**Child and family friendly reception centres require a child and family friendly infrastructure. The quality of the reception infrastructure has a fundamental impact on the residents' well-being and way of life.**

Child and family friendliness should be a priority in the choice and development of new reception centres, the renovation of existing ones and in the allocation policy. Mobility possibilities, easy access to adapted education, care and leisure activities are important points of attention. It is fundamental to involve the wider community, individuals as well as organisations and institutions, in the daily life of the centre and its residents.

Being able to prepare meals and eat together are important for family dynamics and for the recognition of family roles. Therefore families must have the opportunity to cook for themselves.

Ensuring safety and integrity in reception centres requires appropriate infrastructure. Safe access to sanitary facilities and privacy of children, families and household members must be guaranteed. Families, both parents and children, are regularly asked for feedback on places and spaces in reception.

## Eight standards for child and family friendly reception

### 1. Ensuring family life

- *Article 16 CRC: Right to privacy and family life; no unlawful interference.*
- *Article 18 CRC: Primary responsibility of parents for upbringing in the child's best interest; government supports.*
- *See also Articles 5, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 19 of the CRC.*
- *Central capability: security*

**A family life is crucial for the development of children in reception.** Therefore, giving children opportunities starts with supporting this family life. According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is also the responsibility of the state to provide parents with the necessary support so that they can assume their responsibilities towards their children.

**Reception staff support family members in their (parental) role and help create spaces for positive family dynamics.** The support of parents and family members in reception can take various forms, from information to material and socio-emotional support. The support is offered tailored to the families, starting from their (help) requests. Open and constructive communication takes place with the parents and/or family members about their duties and responsibilities in meeting the needs of their children. Practices that promote autonomy and privacy are central. Mutual expectations and shared responsibilities are discussed with family members. Children are recognised as agentive actors.

The formal and informal support and resources in Belgium and in the country of origin are identified and activated together with the family members. Families are recognised in their transnational identity and reality. **Structural or practice-related barriers that limit the autonomy and resilience of the families are eliminated wherever possible.**

Stability and predictability are crucial for children. Therefore, it is important that decisions on possible transfers (between reception centres) take into account the language, the interests of the children and the family. The duration of the stay in shelter is taken into account when assisting children and families. Research shows that the longer a child and its family are in shelters, the more their resilience is affected and the more likely it is that families will develop additional support needs.

In order to strengthen families in the long run, parents are supported in their development by creating opportunities to follow (language) lessons and by offering guidance towards employment. Day-care is provided for the children of (single) parents to make this possible. Parents are prepared for life after the centre.

## 2. Creating a safe environment

- *Article 19 CRC: Protection from abuse and neglect.*
- *Article 22 CRC: Special protection for minor refugees and asylum seekers.*
- *See also articles 16, 20, 27, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39 and 40 of the CRC.*
- *Central capability: security*

**To develop to their full potential, a sense of security is fundamental for children.** A centre that feels safe and secure for children is a common goal and a joint responsibility for all staff and residents. Rules for peaceful coexistence are established and shared with children in a child friendly way.

A safe environment gives children and youngsters the feeling that they are welcome and that they can connect with the reception staff and with their environment. Each reception structure proactively works to reduce factors that can lead to tensions within the reception structure. The positive coexistence between residents (and staff members) is strengthened. All decisions and actions, both individual and collective, are based on **a prevention-oriented and restorative justice perspective.**

**Each reception structure shall have a child and family safety policy,** which shall ensure the safety of children, family members and all other residents. This safety policy includes clear procedures for prevention, detection, support and follow-up of aggression, violence and other forms of transgressive behaviour, especially for incidents involving children. All residents are informed of this. Child friendly information is available for children.

Each centre has **a child friendly and accessible disclosure office** for all situations where the safety or integrity of children or other residents is threatened. Parents and family members are actively informed and involved in the protection of children and youngsters. All residents and staff members try to detect and prevent risks in advance as much as possible. Specific attention is paid to family, gender related and sexual violence. To guarantee the safety of children, the reception structures set up specialised partnerships to ensure appropriate follow-up and referral (where necessary).

### 3. Support education for all children

- *Article 28 CRC: Right to education.*
- *See also Articles 17, 27, 29, 30 and 31 of the CRC.*
- *Central capability: meaning*

**Access to education is fundamental to children's social, emotional and cognitive development.** It is therefore also one of the fundamental rights of children.

Families and children are supported in their smooth transition to appropriate education. Parents and children are actively informed about the school system. Reception structures support the involvement of parents with school, and vice versa. Parents are encouraged to follow and, where possible, participate in the children's school development. The reception staff facilitates direct and constructive communication between the parents and the school. Every child has access to homework support, either internally or through external partnerships. Access to computer material and the Internet is guaranteed.

The reception structures maintain an active dialogue with schools in order to increase the well-being and welfare of children in the centres and to prevent bullying. Parents and family members are actively involved.

The continuity of the educational career of children in the same language role is central to decisions on the allocation of reception places and possible transfers.

### 4. Attention to physical and mental health

- *Article 24 CRC: Right to health (care).*
- *Article 27 CRC: Right to a standard of living adequate for the child's development.*
- *Central capability: health*

**Good physical and mental health is a prerequisite for children to develop to their full potential.**

**Children and families have effective access to preventive and curative (medical and psychological) care and aftercare,** both within the reception structures and in external medical and care facilities. Particular attention is given to their physical and mental health, taking into account previous physical hardships and health impairments, as well as the psychological effects of violence, trauma and loss.

**Psycho-education** is used in the shelter. Sensitization is proactively and divers-sensitively used to reduce resistance and/or distrust towards mental health care. Special care is provided for all children with additional needs (e.g. learning and development difficulties, disabilities). Family members receive specific help if their physical and/or mental health situation has a negative impact on the way they fulfil their role in the family. In order to guarantee this right, reception structures develop partnerships with specialised services and work towards a 'warm referral'.

**Early Childhood Education and Care is crucial.** Investing in the first years of life (the so-called first '1000 days') promotes physical, social, emotional, cognitive development as well as school performance in the short and long term. Good nutrition, secure attachment, and stimulation through interaction are the three building blocks (for the entire duration of childhood). Parents receive support when they encounter challenges related to children's attachment. Children and their parents are given physical and mental space for positive interaction. The aid workers provide information about this and discuss it with the (future) parents.

Children and parents are sensitised about health-promoting eating habits. Residents are given access to healthy food, taking into account cultural differences in dietary patterns.

## 5. Leisure and child friendly spaces as levers for development

- *Article 31 CRC: Right to rest, play, leisure and cultural activities.*
- *See also Articles 2, 3, 6, 12, 15, 16 and 27 of the CRC.*
- *Central capability: accessories*

**Leisure, play and sport are crucial for children's development.** Reception structures provide opportunities for play, sport and exercise appropriate to the age of the children. Family members are encouraged to participate, to organise or to take initiatives themselves. Children and parents are actively informed about the possibilities of joining regular youth work, youth sports or culture.

**Child friendly spaces** are essential for children to rebuild their lives and create a sense of confidence. All centres have child friendly indoor and outdoor spaces for different age groups, where children can play and/or participate in (organised) activities in a protected environment to develop their senses and motor skills, socialise, learn and express themselves. Music can play a supporting role in this.

The relationship to and with nature is supported. Time and space are given to parents to build positive interactions with their child(ren).

## 6. Legal guidance with a specific focus on children

- *Article 12 CRC: Right to be heard*
- *Article 13 CRC: Freedom of expression and right to information.*
- *See also Articles 16, 17, 22 and 39 of the CRC.*

**Understanding the procedures and access to legal guidance are fundamental for families seeking protection in Belgium.**

The reception structures direct families towards quality legal assistance to represent them. In addition, reception structures provide **quality information on the course of the procedure** and adequate information on the rights of children during the procedure. All family members, including children, can ask their questions about the procedure within the reception structure. If children or youngsters ask questions about sensitive elements of the procedure, there is coordination with the parents about what information can be provided. Children and youngsters who have made an application for international protection themselves receive specific guidance. If there are conflicting interests between the parents and the child, the child's best interest is the primary consideration.

## 7. Promoting identity development

- *Article 12 CRC: Right to be heard*
- *Article 13 CRC: Freedom of expression and right to information.*
- *See also Articles 16, 17, 22 and 39 of the CRC.*

**Throughout childhood, the emotional growth and development of children and youngsters is very important.** In the reception centres, there is room, time and space for children to get to know and express their thoughts, feelings and sensations.

**To promote resilience, being recognised in one's own identity is an important factor.** Children and families can maintain links with their religion and culture, of which the mother tongue is an important pillar.

**Coping with difference** is crucial in the superdiverse context of the reception centre and the wider society. Children and families are supported in their ability to function in a superdiverse environment and society. Children are helped by their parents and, if necessary, by the reception staff, to enter into social interactions and to deal positively with (intercultural) differences. Specific attention is paid to the dynamics between children. Together with the parents, centres take action in the case of bullying behaviour and/or violence between children.

## 8. Child friendly information and participation

- *Article 12 CRC: Right to be heard in matters concerning the child.*
- *Article 17 of the CRC: Right to information and access to the media*
- *See also articles 13, 14, 15 of the CRC.*
- *Central capability: participation*

**Child friendly information and participation are preconditions for children's empowerment.** Children are informed in a child friendly way, in a language they understand, about their life in the centre and at school, about their rights, about all matters that concern them and about the persons and services where they can get support. They are also given information about their responsibilities (according to their age and maturity) and the behaviour that is expected of them. This information is given shortly after their arrival in the centre and is followed up during their stay. Each child knows where he or she can ask questions or share needs. Children are encouraged to voice their opinions, concerns and complaints.

Reception structures focus on meaningful participation of children, in accordance with their age and maturity. Cultural factors and language barriers to participation are addressed. Access to interpreters is guaranteed. Children do not, in principle, act as interpreters in conversations with parents.

Reception centres have a clear framework on **privacy and confidentiality with specific attention to children.** This framework describes how confidentiality for children is guaranteed, what can or must be shared with parents, how children are informed about this, when there is (shared) professional secrecy and how the informed consent of the child is obtained. Attention is paid to the age and maturity of the child.

## **A policy of child- and family friendly reception centres as a shared commitment for children and families**

From the above foundations, basic conditions and standards, all partners in the reception network are committed to maximising the opportunities of children and families in reception centres at all levels of their operation.

The continuous pursuit of child and family friendly reception is an important ambition of the reception policy, in which parents and residents are also actively involved. The reception policy therefore incorporates safeguarding and practices to ensure that this child and family friendliness is maximised in the future.



## Short reference list

*The list below contains a selection of the sources we used to compile this vision text. For a more complete list of sources, please refer to the literature review in:*

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