

# Reinforce Educators Empower Children



## **Report on program’s successes, lessons learnt and recommendations for enhancing child protection in educational settings in Greece**

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## **1. Summary**

This report aims to point out some of the most important outcomes of the REEC project, to discuss lessons learned, identified by the project team, from its implementation and to share proposals for reinforcing child protection in the country's educational contexts that emerged from the context of the project's implementation and in collaboration with the professionals who participated in its various activities.

To understand the importance of the results of the project, a brief review of the challenges of child protection in Greece was made and it was explained why the educational contexts seem to be the most suitable places to strengthen the protection of minors in the country. Then, the project's educational actions were described in which approximately 400 educators and 150 professionals working in child protection agencies in the Municipality of Athens participated, as well as their evaluations regarding the training they received, which were significantly positive and therefore encouraging for the necessity of further actions of this nature in the future.

The report concludes with proposals for strengthening child protection in the educational contexts of the country. The proposals concern necessary legislations that will support the role of educators in the protection of minors, structural changes that must be made in the field of child protection in Greece with the same purpose, proposals for future educators' trainings, as well as strategic applications that they will support the protection of minors in educational contexts.

Finally, is noted in conclusion, the important contribution of the project in pointing out the necessity of joint trainings of professionals from different professional groups, who are often called to work together in the context of their professional daily life. Equally important was the training in child protection issues of the managers and administrators of educational institutions, since due to their role, these people are often called upon to decide on the managing of child protection incidents in educational contexts.

## **2. Summary of the challenges of child protection in Greece**

The governance, viz the exercise of state executive power, of the child protection sector in Greece is exercised by several Ministries (e.g. Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Citizen Protection, Ministry of Migration) and regulated by different Laws that have been edited the Ministries in question. This fragmentation of the governance and legal framework for child protection leads to coordination difficulties at every level of government – central, regional and local.

At the operational level, there are also coordination and cooperation difficulties between state agencies, but also between state and private agencies, which have the mandate and responsibility of protecting children in Greece. The lack of coordination and cooperation has deprived the child protection sector of important incident prevention and response tools such as, for example, common incident detection, recording and management protocols. Besides, Greece does not have a single mechanism for recording child protection cases. The recording of child protection incidents is carried out by individual bodies of public and private law and for this reason it does not allow us to be optimistic, not in terms of stopping the phenomenon of child abuse, but also in terms of limiting it.

For the above reasons, the data available on children who have suffered some form of maltreatment in Greece is fragmentary. In this context, the epidemiological research with the acronym BECAN (2010)<sup>1</sup> conducted by the Department of Mental Health and Social Welfare of the Child Health Institute and aimed at the epidemiological mapping of the phenomenon of abuse and neglect of minors in Greece, is particularly important, because it captures the extent of the phenomenon. The study in question included in its sample approximately 10,000 middle and high school children who lived in Greece during its conduct, in different regions of the country. Among other very important findings, the study showed that the lifetime prevalence of juvenile exposure to physical violence was 76.4%, and to sexual violence 15.86% (a rate that includes sexual harassment and sexual violation). In other words, based on the findings of the BECAN study, more than 7 out of 10 children in Greece will experience at least one incident of serious physical violence, and around 2 out of 10 children an incident of sexual

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<sup>1</sup> Nikolaidis et al. (2018) Lifetime and past year prevalence of children's exposure to violence in 9 Balkan countries: the BECAN study. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13034-017-0208-x>

harassment and/or violation. However, the finding that should worry and activate those who work to prevent and combat the abuse of minors in Greece and the protection and reintegration into the community of children who have suffered some form of abuse was that out of all the incidents of child protection reported anonymously by the children themselves as part of their research participation, public and private child protection agencies were aware of and had addressed the situation for only 0.01%.

Therefore, in addition to the need for better coordination of the child protection sector at a central level, the need for duly constituted and systematic cooperation between operational entities at all levels of government – central, regional and local, the need for institutionalizing common detection and recording tools and handling of child protection incidents, and the need for a unified system for recording these incidents, remains an extraordinary and necessary condition for preventing and combating the abuse of minors in Greece, the modernization of the knowledge and tools of child protection agencies and systematic training in detection and managing of such incidents by all professionals who work with children and families as part of their professional duties.

The *Reinforce Educators Empower Children (REEC)* project funded by the European Commission, which was coordinated for Greece by the organization Terre des hommes Hellas and extensive reference will be made to it and its actions below, developed activities at all the above levels, contributing to the reinforcement and development of the child protection sector in Greece.

### **3. The educational contexts as areas for the prevention of the maltreatment of minors**

In Greece, children's participation in public education is free, and compulsory from 4 to 15 years. If the child decides to complete Secondary education while remaining in the public education system until the age of 18, the education continues to be provided free of charge. At the same time, there are private schools that provide primary and secondary education services. The Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs exercises control over all educational units of all levels, public and private, while there are local Directorates of Primary and Secondary Education.

The situation in early childhood education and care for children from 6 months to 4 years is a little more complicated. The competent bodies for the proper operation and control of childcare centers are the Municipalities of the country, which are controlled and financed by the Ministry of the Internal Affairs. In addition, there are private kindergartens. In Greece, there is no duly constituted curriculum or framework of educational principles for kindergartens. Also, there is no single control mechanism that evaluates the implementation of educators and care programs. According to data from the European Union, Greece ranks last in terms of participation in early childhood education and care. Only 68.8% of children aged 3-6 participated in early childhood education and care in 2020, far below the EU average, which is 92.8% and the target set by the E.U. of 96% by 2030. However, it is worth noting that the percentage of children aged 3 and under enrolled in early childhood education and training facilities increased significantly in the last 12 years or so, between 2009 (11%) and 2019 (32.4%). Nevertheless, the participation rate in the under-3 age group remains lower than the EU average (35.5%) and from the goal of Barcelona (33%)<sup>2</sup>

Although there are still many goals to be achieved in providing a quality and equal education for all children, *the educational contexts in Greece welcome thousands of children from 6 months to 18 years of age every day for most of every year.* After all, the educational contexts are the only public body with the ability to "see" the largest percentage of minors living in the country in a structured and protected environment, so systematically. For this reason, *it is in the interest of the state to prepare educational*

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<sup>2</sup> European Commission (2022). Education and Training Monitor 2021. Retrieved from <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor-2021/en/greece.html>

*facilities and the professionals working in them to detect children at risk and have the means and knowledge to manage child protection incidents.* It is important to note that a large proportion of educational professionals have at least a basic knowledge of human development and with appropriate training and support will be able to identify children who exhibit atypical and troubling behavior and who may need help.

### *3.1. Provisions of the Greek Legislation on the role of educational frameworks and educators in child protection*

In article 23 of Law 3500/2006 (Regarding the dealing with domestic violence and other provisions), it is provided that if teachers in the course of their educational work are informed or find that a crime of domestic violence is taking place against a pupil they are obliged to report it, without delay, to the principal of the school and he next to the competent prosecutor (in accordance with the provisions of article 38 of the new Code of Criminal Procedure entered into force by Law 4620/2019), or to the nearest police authority. In fact, the same obligation is recognized for teachers and principals of private schools, as well as for managers of all kinds of Early Childhood Education Units.

Furthermore, the article 38 of the new Code of Criminal Procedure (Law 4620/2019) provides that: 1) Investigative officers are required to communicate without delay to the competent prosecutor anything they learn in any way about a criminal act that is being prosecuted ex officio, 2) The other civil servants, as well as those who were temporarily assigned public service, have the same obligation for the criminal acts of par. 1, if they were informed about them during the performance of their duties, and 3) The announcement is made in writing and must contain all the information that exist and concern the criminal act, the perpetrators and the evidence. Since the abuse and neglect of minors is a criminal act that is prosecuted ex officio, then all public servants including teachers working in public education and care facilities must act based on article 38 of Law 4620/2019.

In addition, the Greek Legislation provides with the Article 2 of Law 1566/1985 that pupils' attendance is compulsory until the end of middle school and educational frameworks are obliged to report if a pupil has incomplete attendance - given that the



failure to cover the basic educational needs of minors is a form of deficient parental care and demonstrates neglect of the minor's needs.

Finally, Law 4837/2021 established the role of the Minors Protection Officer in child protection agencies. More specifically, the Minors' Protection Officer is the natural person designated, in accordance with article 5 of the same Law, in each unit of the Child Protection Agency and undertakes the collection and recording of reports of incidents of abuse of minors, their transmission to the competent prosecutor or the nearest police authority or potentially to the Social Services of the Local Self-Government Organizations of the first degree, as well as the parallel information of the organization's administration without delay. The same Law provides that the Juvenile Protection Officer, as well as other staff of Child Protection Agencies who report an incident of abuse of a minor, are not charged, sued, disciplined, fired, nor subject to any other type of sanctions or adverse treatment, for incident they reported in the course of their duties, unless they knowingly made a false report.

From the above, it can be concluded that the Legislator has recognized the possibility, ability and obligation of educational frameworks and teachers to assist in child protection, recognizing and referring to the competent authorities incidents of child protection that are recognized in the context of their educational duties, either through direct disclosure events by the child himself, or through indirect disclosure of such events by third parties or other means (e.g. drawings or writings of the child).

### *3.2 Characteristics of educational contexts that make them spaces for the prevention of child maltreatment*

Based on the above, it appears that the state and civil society have the opportunity to strengthen the country's child protection system by focusing on the appropriate preparation and training of education and care agencies in order to point them out in practice as places for the prevention of child abuse and detection child protection incidents.

More specifically, since education in Greece is compulsory from the age of 4, and therefore the vast majority of children in Greece enter an educational context every morning, approximately 28% of children from 0 to 3 years of age attend programs of

public and private kindergartens and the professional fields that support the educational agencies of the country are specific and known, the state and civil society have the possibility of developing targeted interventions specifically organized to prepare the educational frameworks to assume their responsibility in reinforcing the child protection system. Examples of such targeted interventions are the educators' training, the reinforce of collaboration between educational settings and child protection services, the parents' education/information, and the developmentally appropriate education of children of all ages on issues that will enhance their ability to self-protect.

Of the above targeted interventions, educators' training seems to be the most urgent and the one that best answers the call for interventions that serve the cost-benefit equation. This follows from the fact that most educators, especially in early childhood and primary education, have some knowledge of Developmental Psychology, which would allow them to better understand the concepts and professional practices of child protection. Also, the teachers are the only professionals who live with the children who live in the country several hours a day for at least 9 months of the year. Finally, the close relationships of trust that are often established between children and teachers are common in motivating children to disclose any abuse and neglect they experience to their teachers.

The European Commission-funded project "Reinforce Educators Empower Children (REEC)", considering all the above, focused most of its educational activities on early childhood educators and primary school teachers.

#### **4. Lessons learned from the implementation of the Reinforce Educators Empower Children (REEC) project in Greece**

The two-year implementation of the REEC project, which created opportunities for collaborations with many different agencies and professionals who contribute in one way or another to the protection of minors in Greece, allowed the project team to reflect and learn from its successes and challenges of the process.

Specifically, regarding the training of professionals, the project team reached several rich conclusions. First, it is important that the trainings for professionals are developed based on evidence for the educational needs of the specific group of professionals to whom they will be addressed, as was the case in the context of this project. The Project Advisory Committee also played an important role in properly identifying the educational needs, consisting of representatives of the main target group, that is, early childhood educators and primary school teachers.

In addition, the prevailing view was confirmed that professionals are more actively and constructively involved in an educational process when team-collaborative approaches are chosen, which are enriched with many experiential exercises. Group management of case studies, role plays, pictorial representation of the hazards of an educational setting, and more, created a warm, safe, and creative environment in which the trainings took place successfully.

Equally important for the successful outcome of the trainings was, as noted by the participants, the expertise of the trainers accompanied by personal experience in the field of application of what the team was working on in the trainings. Educators with experience in the field can better understand the challenges and opportunities of professionals being trained to enhance the protection of minors in their professional everyday life.

The expertise of the trainers and their experience in the field allows them to know the status quo of the protection of minors in Greece at the given time when the trainings take place. Thus, it is possible to give the trainees specific instructions for agencies with whom they could cooperate during the implementation of their project, instructions for managing incidents in ways that can be effective with the current understaffing of relevant services, the lack of relevant training of many professionals involved in child protection, and the insufficient information of the Directorates of the educational

frameworks regarding their role in child protection as provided by the Greek legislation today.

It is also important to note that the most effective educational intervention during the project was the coexistence opportunities offered to professionals from different agencies, who are asked to work together in their professional everyday life. For example, the project brought around the same table, and within the safe context of an educational process, early childhood educators and primary school teachers and professionals working in community child protection agencies. These people were asked to co-manage several case studies which referred to child protection incidents detected in the community. They considered together the duly constituted referral process, the challenges and the most effective solutions that could be given to difficult-to-manage cases. In this way, what was discussed and decided in the educational process will be ready and agreed to be applied more effectively in their professional field. The participation in the trainings of administrative employees and managing staff of the educational frameworks had a similar meaning. It is very important that the professionals who make the final administrative decisions based on their role have the same knowledge as the professionals who will point out the child protection incidents.

Another knowledge that emerged through the process of organizing educators' trainings was that it is particularly facilitating for the timely and successful implementation of educational actions within the framework of two-year projects, which usually do not allow much time for the planning and implementation of the planned activities, educational programs aimed at teachers to be approved by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs to facilitate teachers' participation in them. Of course, the procedures for approving educational programs provided by the said Ministry are particularly bureaucratic and time-consuming. It would be good to advocate for the development of a more direct and less bureaucratic and time-consuming process, so that educators working in public education bodies can benefit from the actions developed in the context of European Commission-funded projects such as REEC.

Finally, it became visible once again that the good organization and care of the venue of the trainings greatly affects the good outcome of them. In particular, the training venue should allow for movement in the space, collaborative processes, have easy access to an open space, and be easily accessible by most of the participants. Since the

trainings lasted a whole working day, it was very important that it was financially possible to provide lunch to the participants. Mealtime appeared to enhance the creation of a sense of belonging to the group, gave participants the opportunity to get to know each other better and feel even more comfortable participating in more challenging experiential exercises such as role-plays that are moments of self-exposure. In addition, the sense of belonging to the group allowed for more honest and difficult discussions among members regarding challenges that the teaching profession faces in trying to support the protection of minors within their role.

## **5. Suggestions for strengthening child protection and safeguarding children in educational contexts in Greece**

The suggestions for reinforcing child protection and safeguarding children in educational contexts in Greece are based on the results of the implementation of the transnational REEC project, and especially on the systematic and in-depth cooperation of the project contributors with early childhood educators and primary school teachers during the last two years and within the framework of the project's activities. For the drafting of the following proposals, the existing legislative framework of child protection in Greece has been taken into account, and especially those parts that refer to the role of educational frameworks and teachers in the protection of children. The proposals propose filling legislative and strategy and implementation gaps.

1. ***Enactment of a single standard Child Protection Policy*** for all educational contexts, of all educational levels. The unified Child Protection Policy must be developed by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, in collaboration with child protection experts, and communicated to all educational units, public and private, including childcare centers that are under the auspices of the Municipalities. For this reason, the participation of the Ministry of the Internal Affairs in the above process is deemed necessary. Besides, the existence of a Child Protection Policy must be a prerequisite for all public and private law bodies that cooperate in any way with minors.
2. ***The Child Protection Policy must regulate at least the following:*** a) procedures for managing incidents of child protection and child safeguarding, b) code of ethics for the organization's employees and volunteers, c) staff recruitment procedures sensitive to child protection issues, d) staff training procedures on child protection and child safeguarding issues, and e) mechanisms for submitting complaints and/or complaints appropriate for the age of minors receiving services from the respective institution.
3. ***Legislative regulation so that the provision of Law 4837/2021, article 5, for the appointment of a Minors Protection Officer "in each unit of the Child Protection Agency, which undertakes the collection and recording of reports of incidents of abuse of minors, their transmission to the competent prosecutor or the nearest police authority or potentially to the Social Services of the Local Authorities of the first degree, as well as the without delay parallel information***

to the organization's management", **be expanded** to include all bodies of public and private law that provide in any way, of any form and nature, a service to minors. Agencies should notify their supervising Authority of the identity of the agency's Minors' Protection Officer. The proposal for the above legislative regulation is considered particularly imperative for all educational contexts, of all levels, given that the Greek Law (e.g., Law 3500/2006) assigns special importance to the role of educators in the prevention of child abuse and the management of child protection incidents, and it is judged that the above-mentioned regulation will support their work.

4. ***Enactment of a body for coordination, support, monitoring, and training of Minors' Protection Officers.*** It is proposed that this service be an autonomous Department under the supervision of either the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, or public bodies such as the National Center for Social Solidarity and the Directorate of Mental Health and Social Welfare of the Child Health Institute. The Department is proposed to be supported by social scientists and mental health scientists with expertise in child protection and child safeguarding. It is deemed necessary to operate a counseling telephone line, which will be available on a 24-hour basis, all days of the week.
5. ***Legislative regulation to expand the provisions of Law 4837/2021*** on the protection of professionals from criminal prosecutions of individuals due to the emergence of child protection incidents at least to educators of all levels, but also with a nominal reference to all public officials who cooperate with minors due to their duties (e.g. doctors and nursing staff in public health facilities).
6. ***Duly constituted and carried out at regular intervals,*** but definitely once a year, ***training on child protection and child safeguarding for the Minors' Protection Officers of the educational frameworks*** and other bodies of the public and private sector that work with minors and the appointment of a Minors' Officer is foreseen Protection of Minors from the legal framework. The training should be conducted by experts in child protection and child safeguarding, with material that will be updated based on modern scientific data and adapted to the Greek reality. The training must definitely include incident detection exercises, interpersonal communication with abused children, cooperation with the family and with child protection agencies, and the

applicable referral procedures for child protection incidents, adapted by geographical region of Greece.

7. ***Duly constituted training in child protection and child safeguarding issues for educators of all levels***, and in general for those professionals who work with minors in the context of their professional duties, in bodies of public and private law, as well as in charitable institutions, voluntary organizations and unions. The training should be conducted by experts in child protection and child safeguarding, with material that will be updated based on modern scientific data and adapted to the Greek reality. The training must definitely include incident detection exercises, interpersonal communication with abused children, cooperation with the family and with child protection agencies, and the applicable referral procedures for child protection incidents, adapted by geographical region of Greece. The training could be organized by the National Center for Public Administration and Self-Government and offered twice a year.
8. ***Establishment of Social Services at the local Minors' Prosecutor's Offices***, so that it is possible to deal with all incidents of child abuse in a timely manner. Today, it is observed that the Social Services of the Municipalities are understaffed to such an extent that they are unable to cooperate with community agencies at the level of prevention, or to function in consultation with other professionals regarding incidents that can be supported in the community. The problem is even more acute in large urban centers. This understaffing has the result that the social services of the Municipalities act in the community only under a prosecutor's order. The large number of reports of child abuse makes it necessary to organize social services in the local Prosecutor's Offices.
9. ***Reinforcement of the Social Services of the Municipalities***, with additional personnel, tools and means (e.g., immediate intervention vehicle) so that it is possible to systematically frame and support the schools of each Municipality, preventively and at the level of dealing with incidents.
10. ***Training of Police Authorities to provide services in educational areas***. The cooperation of the Police with educational contexts and children of different ages who are at risk has many particularities. For example, the Security Forces are not trained in the developmental peculiarities of children of different ages to know the appropriate ways to approach, talk and support, especially when



they themselves are in a vulnerable position due to abuse. It is further suggested that in the context of the training of Police Authorities in the management of child protection incidents in educational contexts, it would be particularly important to provide opportunities for mediation and co-education with teachers of different levels, to promote effective collaborative models of managing such incidents.

11. ***Annual campaign to inform the public*** about the measures to prevent and deal with the abuse of children, especially in relation to the handling of child protection incidents in educational contexts.
12. ***Introduction of a lesson on Sexual Education and Children's Rights in schools***, with developmentally appropriate material for all levels of education, taking into account the minimum standards for the inclusion of this course as communicated and proposed by the European Commission and the group of European Union Children's Advocates.
13. ***Training of teachers of all levels of education in the implementation of activities that support self-protection behaviors in children.*** Self-protection activities should be developmentally appropriate and developed by child protection and child safeguarding experts with knowledge of human development and educational contexts.
14. **Enactment of feedback tools for children of all ages regarding their experience in educational contexts.** It is important that children have an active participation in shaping educational contexts in safe spaces that promote democracy and the equal treatment of all children. It is important that children feel heard and receive appropriate responses from the context of what they share and write or say. In this way, the trust between the parties is reinforced, and the sense of security and belonging to a community.

## **6. Conclusions**

Many children in Greece enter every day the forecourts and classrooms of the country's educational frameworks, of all educational levels. Educators are the only professional group that our children interact with so systematically and for a long time. The training of this professional group in the prevention of child abuse and in dealing with child protection and child safeguarding incidents is a unique opportunity for the Greek Authorities to significantly strengthen the fight against all forms of violence against children of different ages.

The organization and implementation of this project must be based on national and international good practices and take into account the opinion and experience of people working in the field of child protection and the teachers themselves who know, better than everyone, the everyday life of educational contexts.

Moreover, particular attention is due to ensuring practical and applicable ways of collaborative cross-disciplinary management of child protection and child safeguarding incidents detected in educational contexts. The experience of implementing the REEC project leads to the admission that the most effective educational intervention was the coexistence of professionals from different agencies, who are called to cooperate in their professional daily life, in the same educational process. In this way, what was discussed and decided in the educational process was ready and agreed to be applied more effectively in the professional field.

Finally, it is concluded that the responsibilities for the protection of minors in Greece must be organized under one body, which will be able to offer expertise, coordination, supervision and guidance to the professionals who, based on their duties, work daily with children and families in the community.