‘Preparation and Transition into Adult Life—Guide for Professionals’: An Educational Tool from the SOS Children’s Villages

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Abstract

SOS Children’s Villages work to protect and improve the lives of children and young people placed in alternative care system. The goal is to break the cycle of family and social disadvantage within this framework, it is essential to provide tools to professionals to support young people path towards autonomy and social integration as active citizens in civil society. This article aims to present and discuss the preparation and transition into adult life—A guide for professionals recently implemented in SOS Children’s Villages, Portugal, within the context of Project PORTA. Educating for autonomy arises as the main concern for the organization, individually and collectively, since it is responsible for the care and support of development needs of children and young people in its programmes. With this aim, this guide helps professionals and young people to promote better practices for developing autonomy skills and preparing transition to adult life, through the explanation of resources and structured intervention individual plans. Thereby, knowledge and practices are shared, expecting to be useful for others as well. A special focus is dedicated to the reinforcement of specific skills, protective factors and social areas, aiming the preparation for autonomy people in close collaboration with all the intervenient and, in particular, with the participation of young people.

Keywords

Alternative care system, care leaver, youth transitions, SOS Children’s Villages, transition into adult life

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Introduction

The document ‘Guide for The Preparation and Transition into Adult Life’—GuidePTAL (Lobo, 2021), hereby presented, is one of the outputs of the project ‘Promoting Opportunities for Reintegration and Transition into Adult life—PORTA [translation: DOOR]’, developed by SOS Children’s Villages in Portugal, during 2020 and in the beginning of 2021, and supported by Banco BPI Fundação ‘la Caixa’. With this project, SOS Children’s Villages were able to restructure and define new strategies towards the intervention with young people living in residential care and preparing for leaving care.

The educational and therapeutic process in alternative care is based on the monitoring and guidance of the child and young person throughout his/her development, in order to repair the experienced trauma and to become autonomous, considering his/her age and skills, in all possible dimensions. The autonomy of young people is the ultimate and most comprehensive aim of all the work that is done. It is also the most challenging, as it is always unfinished and calls for a permanent adjustment (Lobo, 2021).

Before reaching the age of 18—the age of civil majority in Portugal—young people in alternative care are empowered, by the Law for the Protection of Children and Youths in Danger,1 to decide on the need to extend their care measure until the age of 21 (or 25 if still studying or under professional training at the time). This is one of the main reason why the development of autonomy in residential care settings have a greater importance in intervention, namely concerning young adults. However, it is certainly a gradual process starting at the first moment when the child/young person enters into alternative care, with risks for potential dependencies in a relational sphere; therefore, it should be planned at the very beginning of this child protection measure.

Despite 18% of children and young people placed in the Portuguese alternative care system are 18 years old and plus, only 1.8% are in Autonomy Apartments, and very few are effectively prepared for an autonomous life (ISS, 2021, with 2020 national data in CASA report). SOS Children’s Villages had almost 19,000 young people in alternative care all over the world in 2020, about 3,200 of them in Europe. There are 142 SOS youth programmes in Europe, none of them operating in Portugal, which is a clear evidence that it is an approach that needs to be structured and taken in place in a near future, particularly considering the average age of children and young people in alternative care (around 16 years old). Autonomy is a multifaceted process. It encompasses functional competences and emotional and relational dimensions marked by a dichotomy between the willingness to grow and the fear of losing care and protection. Therefore, it is important the intervention plans in alternative care settings include functional dimensions (e.g., educational and professionalising), as well as reparative dimensions and strategies, which enhance the integration of the young person’s emotional stability (Lobo, 2021).

The GuidePTAL emphasizes that the intervention does not end when the young person leaves the care setting. Each case professionals’ team is a reference in his/her life and in the life of his/her families. For this reason, it is the organisation’s responsibility to ensure that each young person can count on the care professional
and ensure, if wanted and consented, a follow up over time so the staff can support him/her when required. To this purpose it is essential to establish predefined limits of this intervention, so that expectations are aligned among all the intervenients.

Within the complex net of dimensions and variables, coming together in the process of developing autonomy, it is crucial to have as a backdrop the permanent need for an individualised look at each child/young person to ensure the adequacy of resources, plans and activities to be implemented on their transition to adulthood.

SOS Children’s Villages proposes different types of human and material resources and access conditions, depending on both the situation and characteristics of each child/young person, always aiming at his/her participation and, whenever possible, his/her family participation in their process of developing autonomy. The GuidePTAL is a tool that intends to contribute to this goal.

**Framework**

The GuidePTAL defines three lines of intervention, aiming to respond at different care stages, identifying in each one the goals to achieve and its activities. The guiding principles in the whole process are the ones established in Law for the Protection of Children and Youths in Danger\(^1\), Decree-Law that establishes the children’s alternative (residential) care\(^2\) and SOS Children’s Villages guidelines.

For the alignment between all the people who are the fundamental support in this process of preparing young people, it is of particular importance to know these principles and how they can be operationalised in each moment and each case.

It is also important to reinforce the understanding of the models by which SOS Children’s Villages bases its intervention:

1. **Ecological Approach of the Risk** (Belsky, 1980, 1993; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Cicchetti & Rizley, 1981): In SOS Children’s Villages, the intervention is focused on developmental needs of the child and young person. Alternative care key processes demand a deep knowledge and understanding on the child/young person and his/her family and on the relational quality of the living contexts and its developmental implications. This is essential information to outline the individualised intervention, which responds to real needs in each case. The assessment draws on a holistic, ecological, multidisciplinary and collaborative approach.

2. **Collaborative approach** (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992; Madsen, 1999, 2007, 2009; Monk & Gehart, 2003): The intervention occurs as a commitment in the empowerment process between the staff the child/young person and his/her family. In this way, it is up to the professionals to assume an attitude of openness and uncertainty that leads the alternative care team to questioning (even when they assume knowing the answer) and listening to, aiming, to learn more about the internal world of the
child/young person, his/her motivations, expectations and goals. This approach implies inviting the child/young person to collaborative participate in a process that respects and honours his/her life story and knowledge ground on the assumption that each one has the right to lead his/her own life project shaped in the Individual Intervention Plan. As such, it means developing a relationship of trust, guiding and support in the building of autonomy, as well as participating in a continuous way to search for solutions to the situation of each child/young person and his/her family.

3. **The child/young person participates in the continuous preparation for his/her emancipation (Quality4Children) - Quality Standards for Out-of-home Childcare in Europe, 2007**: The child/young person must be supported in the development of his/her autonomy, according to needs, aspirations and expectations identified in the Individual Intervention Plan. The intervention should focus on encouraging the child/young person to assume daily responsibilities, increasing their degree of complexity according to his/her level of understanding and maturity. Opportunities are provided for children and young people to learn to take care of themselves, to know how to manage their money, to resolve administrative matters and other practical everyday issues as it happens in any family. Alternative care professionals/teams should develop the interests of the child/young person and should plan activities that support the further development of his/her knowledge and skills. It is the organisation’s responsibility to promote the acquisition of skills that encourage the use of individual own resources, the ability to reflect and act, the ability to face personal problems and social pressures, always keeping in mind that these children and young people are the leading actors of their lives and authors of their own stories.

Besides these models, other key documents were important in the creation of the Guide PTAL, namely ‘Prepare for Leaving Care’ (Gale et al., 2018) and ‘the Youth Development User Guide’ by SOS Children’s Villages (2020).

**Objectives**

The main objective of ‘The Guide for Preparation and Transition to Adult Life’ - GuidePTAL (Lobo, 2021) is to ensure that the development of autonomy is planned and co-built with each young person in the care setting, aiming to leave the residential care in a more effective way to reach subsequent emancipation. And, as specific objectives: (i) to develop individual monitoring and support processes considering a psychosocial, material, informational and socio-professional insertion levels; (ii) to promote the development of young person life skills, such as personal, social, intellectual, practical and professional ones, empowering him/her autonomy; (iii) to establish a collaborative, holistic and integrated technical intervention that facilitates the transition of young people to
adult life, by enabling procedures to reinforcement of family and social support networks after leaving care: and (iv) to encourage the integration of young people in the community and to promote an active citizenship.

**Intervention**

The intervention draws on three lines, which integrate the whole process of development of young people’s autonomy and transition to adulthood according to principles established in the national law and international standards: (a) Autonomy in Progress, (b) Transition Home(s) and (c) Follow-up after Leaving Care.

Autonomy in Progress (AP) defines and guides actions to be taken with young people in the context of their preparation for individual responsibility and autonomy, strengthening emotional, social and resource management skills that allow a progressive transition for adult life, in a full, safe and integrated way. It takes place at a SOS Village’s Home, evolving young people with 16 years of age or more that will be living the residential care setting in two years time.

The Transition Home (TH) is a specialized residential unit for young people in need of life routines with greater autonomy and flexibility than those possible in a generalised/regular SOS Children Home; although still unable to assume a degree of responsibility and full independence that allow them to organize themselves without face-to-face supervision. The placement in a TH intends to promote the development of skills at a personal and social level and reinforces the encounter of each young person with their own life story, the understanding of the difficulties and how to grow the confidence in his/her skills to build a life project in autonomy; therefore, facilitating integration and participation in society. TH are spaces that provide conditions for progressive self-determination and accountability, driving the development of social and personal skills that allow them to make the more effective transition to adulthood in a full, safe and holistic environment.

The Follow-up after Leaving Care (FALC) program focuses on the moment and transitions of leaving residential care, particularly among young adults; so it must be carefully planned and implemented by the staff. FALC intends to guarantee support to young people so that they do not consider leaving care as a new disruption in their life. This intervention clarifies what are resources needed to support each young person after leaving care and cooperates with the family of origin, if consented and applicable. With respect for individual autonomy and privacy, the intention is that intervention leads to prevention of the risk of social isolation; and maintenance of psychosocial support or temporary material, adjusted to the particular situation of each young person. Considering that young people are the main care experts on their lives and about the quality of the social response, their feedback is essential for further development of the quality of the models in the alternative care system. Hence, FALC presupposes a reflection on the care process in the leaving care moment.

The Guide PTAL procedures have been implemented since 2020 and the leaving care process has been taking a more solid strategy in preparing youth for their next
stage. Several suggestions and details about each intervention are developed on the Guide. Forms, approaches and check-lists take also part of this manual, providing information on best practices to work with young people leaving care and moving into adult life. Since 2020 and after this work with the teams, SOS Children’s Villages in Portugal opened two youth autonomy programmes (Autonomy Apartment in Lisbon and a Community Intervention Team working with young refugees and unaccompanied minors) and have been preparing Transition homes’ teams for a more effective individual intervention aiming the young people transition into adult life. Hopefully in a near future, evidences of the impact of this structured actions can be measured and presented.

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1. Approved by the Law no. 147/99, in its 5th version, the most recent, Law no. 26/2018, of 05/07) (https://data.dre.pt/eli/lei/147/1999/p/cons/20180705/pt/html).
2. Approved by the Decree-Law no. 164/2019, of 25/10 (https://data.dre.pt/eli/dec–lei/164/2019/10/25/p/dre).

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