

A photograph showing two children's hands on a dark grey surface. One hand is holding a smooth, brown stone, while the other is open and reaching towards it. In the background, there are several other smooth stones of various colors (purple, yellow, brown) and a small pink flower.

# PROTECTION AND ASSISTANCE OF UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN

**Swiss Red Cross**

**CASE STUDY**

Photo description: Children participating in a Swiss Red Cross activity.  
Photo credit: Swiss Red Cross

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## Background

### Basic information

START stands for "Stress-Traumasymptoms-Arousal-Regulation-Treatment" and is a low-threshold, outreach group programme for vulnerable children and young people with trauma-related migration experiences. Participants learn how the body and mind react to stress. Psychosocial and psychoeducational support is offered. Mindfulness-based, action-orientated and playful relaxation and emotional stimulation exercises are practised in group sessions.

### Institutional context and partnerships

The programme is one of the regular services offered by the Outpatient Clinic for Torture and War Victims of the Swiss Red Cross (SRC), Outpatient Clinic for Torture and War Victims.

The methodology was developed in Germany in 2015 by Andrea Dixius (psychologist) in collaboration with Prof. Dr Eva Möhler (medical specialist) (Start your way, see also translated material in various languages).

### Cultural context and rationale

START as a method is suitable in an intercultural context, as the demonstration and imitation of exercises can be taught with little knowledge of the language. Interpreters are only used occasionally and at the information event for parents.

## Who was Supported and How

### Who

Accompanied and unaccompanied underage children and young people with trauma-associated migration experiences (mixed culture and gender). The exercises can easily be adapted to the age and interests of the participants.

### What

Ideally, a total of seven weekly sessions of 2.5 hours each should be held per group. Group sessions in asylum centres or schools (e.g. mainstream schools, educational bridge programmes) with eight to ten participants aged six to 18.

Larger groups are also possible: for school classes, a maximum of 16 participants is possible.

Lessons Learned: The younger the participants, the smaller the group. In collaboration with representatives of the institutions, the group leaders assess the social-emotional developmental level, language skills and needs of the participants.

### How

The group sessions are conducted by two specialists in co-leadership. The specialists are employed by the SRC on an hourly paid basis.

The group leaders are trained psychotherapists or specialists in the fields of psychology, social work or education with experience in the field of migration. They undergo a one-day training programme with accompanying supervision. They should be used to working with groups of children who often have some troubles in concentrating themselves over a longer period.

At the annual exchange meeting for all group leaders, they exchange experiences, challenges and needs and discuss possible measures.

## Successes

The programme was developed in 2017 and implemented as a pilot project in 2018. In the pilot project, group sessions were held in various settings, for example in resettlement transition centres, collective accommodation, accommodation for unaccompanied minors, at primary schools and in vocational preparation courses. Following the conclusion of the pilot project at the beginning of 2019, the service was implemented as part of the regular services offered by the SRC Outpatient Centre for Victims of Torture and War in Bern, Switzerland. Eleven groups with a total of 122 participants were successfully organised as part of the pilot project in 2018 and seven groups with around 70 participants in 2019.

## Challenges and Difficulties

The project was put on hold due to the Covid pandemic and staff departures at the SRC and has now been resumed from 2022. Since then, the focus has increasingly been on training group leaders who offer START independently in external organisations. In 2023, five training courses were organised with 73 participants. In addition, our own groups are also being set up again; in 2023 there were four groups with 44 participants, and internal groups are also planned again from 2024. We make good experiences in training staffs in other organisations in order to be able to scale-up knowledge of this very useful method START. We can scale-up also the number of children und youngsters who can learn and apply stressregulation.

### Lessons Learned

The SRC office adapted the method and implemented the pilot project as an outreach psychosocial programme. The evaluation in 2019 showed that the START method is a suitable group programme for stress reduction that young people enjoy. It worked best in schools or in asylum centers, where we could train the staff to continue with the method START after we left.

The coordination of group leaders, suitable time slots outside of school hours and the group composition sometimes proved to be an organisational challenge.

We would start organising START groups in schools first. The organisation is easier than in asylum centres, especially with mixed-age groups and limited space.

### Tips and Tools

In schools, the groups are already formed, the children are enrolled and the cooperation via school management can give the programme a stable foundation. Cooperation with decentralised asylum centres is important, but must be carefully examined to ensure that the organisational effort is proportionate. Be aware of the psychological and evolutionary state of a child. The age is not the only factor to be considered.

It is definitely worth training external organisations in the Start method so that they can later implement it themselves and the knowledge remains anchored locally. A tandem between an experienced group leader and a new group leader can be a worthwhile intermediate step.