Please cite as: EUAA, 'Vulnerability of unaccompanied children' in *Guidance reception unaccompanied children*, Enero 2022.

Vulnerability of unaccompanied children

Unaccompanied children in migration require specific and appropriate protection(5).They are in a state of particular vulnerability due to their age, distance from home, and separation from parents or carers.They are exposed to risks and have possibly witnessed extreme forms of violence, exploitation, trafficking in human beings, physical, psychological and sexual abuse before and/or after their arrival on EU territory.They may risk being marginalised and drawn into criminal activity or radicalisation.Unaccompanied children as a particularly vulnerable group are more easily influenced by their environment.Unaccompanied girls especially are at risk of forced and early marriages as families struggle in straitened circumstances or if their families wish to see their daughters married in order to protect them from further sexual violence.Unaccompanied girls could furthermore already have the responsibility of caring for children of their own.In addition, unaccompanied children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable; they are at a high risk of being victims of violence.Unaccompanied children may also be particularly vulnerable due to their sexual identity, sexual orientation or gender expression.Therefore, protecting children in migration, and especially unaccompanied children, and ensuring that their best interests are respected, regardless of status and at all stages of migration, is a priority for the EU (6).

Assessing vulnerabilities and addressing the needs of unaccompanied children respectively, does not mean that their strengths should not been taken into account.A necessary focus on vulnerability should not limit the development of appropriate policies, support and care practices adjusted to the needs and capacities of the unaccompanied children, all the while recognising their resilience (7).

(5) European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The protection of children in migration, 12 April 2017, COM(2017) 211final.
(6) European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The protection of children in migration, 12 April 2017, COM(2017) 211final.
(7) Björklund, Unaccompanied refugee minors in Finland – Challenges and good practices in a Nordic context, 2015, available at https://nordicwelfare.org/integration-norden/en/fakta/unaccompanied-refugee-minors-in-finland-challenges-and-good-practices-in-a-nordic-context-2/ ; Vervliet, The trajectories of unaccompanied refugee minors: Aspirations, agency and psychosocial well-being, 2013, available at https://biblio.ugent.be/publication/4337248.

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