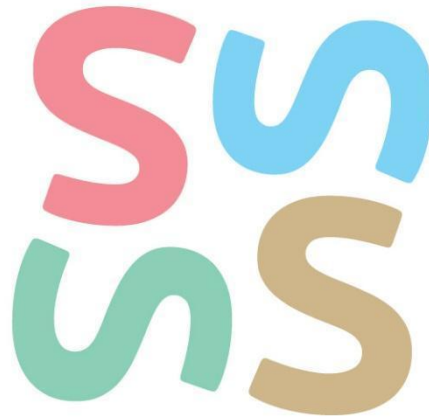




SafeSpace

WORK PACKAGE 2-MAP THE GAPS

Transnational Research Report on Parental Separation
Challenges: Perspectives of Parents and
Professionals in Türkiye, The Netherlands, Romania
and Greece

SAFE SPACE
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Executive summary

The Safe Spaces project is an Erasmus+-funded transnational initiative bringing together five partner organisations from Türkiye, the Netherlands, Romania, and Greece. Its core aim is to strengthen the capacity of parents and professionals to support children whose parents are separating or divorcing. Work Package 2 (WP2) — Map the Gaps — forms the evidence base of the project, mapping the knowledge, skills, and systemic gaps that prevent adults from effectively supporting children during family transitions.

The research engaged two key stakeholder groups across all partner countries: parents who have experienced or are experiencing separation, and professionals working with children and families. A total of 190 participants took part through online questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions, applying a unified mixed-methods framework that ensures cross-country comparability while remaining sensitive to national and cultural contexts.

Despite significant differences between partner countries in culture, policy, and social norms, four consistent findings emerged across all contexts. Parents experience an emotional double burden — suppressing their own grief while trying to remain stable for their children, often without adequate support. Children are frequently placed in adult roles as mediators or decision-makers, a pattern of parentification that is routinely misread as resilience. Communication paralysis is widespread, with parents either over-sharing adult conflicts or maintaining silence, leaving children to fill the void with self-blame. Finally, support systems across all countries operate reactively rather than preventively, intervening only after conflict has already escalated, while schools — the most critical front-line environment — remain the least resourced.

These findings point to four interconnected gap areas: knowledge gaps around children's developmental needs, skills gaps in translating knowledge into real-life interactions, psychosocial support gaps for both parents and professionals, and system-level gaps marked by cross-sectoral fragmentation. The findings of WP2 directly inform WP3, which will develop a free mobile e-learning platform with scenario-based simulations, and WP4, which will design culturally adapted training programmes for parents and professionals across all partner countries.

1. Introduction

The Safe Spaces project aims to strengthen the capacity of parents and professionals to support children whose parents are separating or divorcing. The project is grounded in the understanding that children's well-being during and after parental separation is closely linked to the emotional, social, and practical support available to the adults around them. By focusing on parents and professionals as key actors, the project seeks to create safer, more informed, and more supportive environments for children across different national contexts.

The project brings together partners from different countries to develop research-based training content, tools, and learning resources that respond to real-life needs identified at both individual and systemic levels.

The aim of Work Package 2 (WP2) is to map existing gaps, needs, and challenges related to supporting children in the context of parental separation or divorce. WP2 focuses first on understanding parents' needs during this process, and then on identifying where parents and professionals experience difficulties when supporting children.

Through a combination of desk research, online surveys, one-to-one interviews, and focus group discussions, WP2 seeks to generate a comprehensive and contextualized understanding of:

- the emotional, social, and practical needs of parents,
- the challenges faced by professionals working with children and families,
- and the areas where current support systems and resources are insufficient.

The findings of WP2 provide the empirical foundation for the development of training programs and tools in subsequent work packages, ensuring that project outputs are grounded in real needs rather than assumptions.

The desk research conducted within WP2 aims to establish a shared conceptual and contextual framework for the project. It reviews existing literature, policy documents, and practice-oriented resources related to parental separation, child well-being, parenting support, and professional practice.

The desk research supports the primary research by:

- identifying key concepts and definitions used across different contexts,
- highlighting existing evidence on the impact of parental separation on children and families,
- and mapping current approaches to parental and professional support at national and European levels.

This desk-based analysis informs the design of the research tools and provides a reference point for interpreting and comparing the findings across partner countries.

1.1 Parental Separation in Each Country

Türkiye: Modernization and changing social roles have driven a sharp, eight-fold increase in Turkish divorce rates, alongside a notable rise in "gray divorces" among older cohorts. Marital dissolution remains highly concentrated in urban, western provinces where women have more economic autonomy, whereas traditional values and low female employment keep rates significantly lower in rural, eastern regions.

Netherlands: While formal divorce rates have stabilized, parental separation increasingly occurs within non-formalized cohabitation and registered partnerships, often involving couples with young children. High gender equality supports complex

shared custody models across two homes, with urban areas showing diverse family trajectories and rural areas facing limited access to specialized support services.

Romania: Romania maintains low official divorce rates, but this statistically masks a high volume of unformalized, de facto separations and long-distance family fragmentation caused by labor migration. Around 74% of divorces occur in urban centers where financial independence is higher, while rural communities face strong social stigma and traditional pressures that deter formal separation.

Greece: Greece shows a rising divorce-to-marriage ratio, with most cases being consensual and occurring in long-term marriages among middle-aged couples with adolescent children. Marital instability is highly visible and accepted in major cities like Athens, whereas smaller rural and island communities maintain strong intergenerational scrutiny, imposing stigma particularly on separated mothers.

Synthesis:

Across all partner countries, parental separation is shifting from an anomalous event to a visible social reality, predominantly concentrated in urban centers where modernization, economic independence, and changing relationship norms are more pronounced. However, a significant cross-country divergence exists in how separation is registered and perceived; while the Netherlands and Greece show high numbers of formalized or consensual co-parenting models, Romania and Türkiye exhibit a strong urban-rural divide where traditional structures, migration, and social stigma frequently mask or deter formal divorces. Ultimately, regardless of national context, the increasing complexity of family transitions highlights a universal need for targeted support systems during high-risk separation periods.

1.2 Social and Cultural Meanings of Family, Parenting, and Separation

Türkiye: The Turkish context defines family through psychological interdependence, gender hierarchy, and child-rearing as the primary marital purpose, often prioritizing collective kin expectations over individual choices. Consequently, divorce is met with deep ambivalence and conservative political resistance; it triggers significant moral judgment and social isolation, particularly for women who face intense pressure to preserve the "ideal family" image and negotiate traditional boundaries with extended in-laws.

Netherlands: In the Netherlands, family structures are highly pluralistic and flexible, emphasizing individual autonomy, relational quality, and a deeply institutionalized co-parenting model that demands active involvement from both parents. While separation is socially normalized, it creates a unique paradox where parents face high social pressure to manage the transition with absolute rationality, emotional maturity, and seamless consistency across two households.

Romania: The Romanian concept of family remains heavily anchored in permanence and parental sacrifice, positioning formal marriage as a lifelong commitment and mothers as the primary emotional caregivers. Society is currently in an ambivalent transition; public openness to separation as a solution to high-conflict homes coexists with persistent, internalised guilt, subtle social gossip, and the exclusion of single parents from shared social networks.

Greece: Greek society views the family as a central pillar of socio-economic security, characterized by high emotional involvement, intergenerational dependency, and extensive daily support from grandparents. Although civil partnerships and consensual divorces are increasingly common, separation still carries personal failure connotations and severe social scrutiny in smaller communities, forcing parents to intensely suppress personal grievances to protect their children's well-being.

Synthesis:

A cross-country analysis reveals a clear cultural divide between the individualistic focus of the Netherlands, where separation is normalized but bound to strict expectations of mature co-parenting, and the collectivist frameworks of Türkiye, Greece, and Romania, where family continuity is tied to social identity and respectability. In these Mediterranean and Eastern European contexts, intense extended family involvement acts as a double-edged sword, offering vital practical support while simultaneously increasing social surveillance, boundary challenges, and stigma. Ultimately, all countries exhibit a shared paradox: regardless of how liberalized the national context is, parents face demanding cultural expectations to remain emotionally stable and child-centered, often without adequate parallel support for their own psychological distress.

1.3 Policy, Legal, and Support Landscape

Türkiye: Türkiye maintains a comprehensive legal structure incorporating social support programs and court-appointed counseling measures, yet the actual implementation remains highly fragmented, slow, and adult-centered. The lack of mandatory preventive mediation leads to protracted legal battles, leaving schools and understaffed social services to deal reactively with high levels of childhood trauma and parental alienation without cohesive, child-focused models.

Netherlands: The Netherlands features a highly decentralized infrastructure at the municipal level, providing access to early preventive youth care, family coaching, and private co-parenting mediation. Despite this robust landscape, the system suffers from severe fragmentation across education and healthcare sectors, resulting in long waiting lists for specialised mental health services and limited time for school-based care teams to manage complex parental conflicts.

Romania: Romania's support landscape relies heavily on the private sector for psychological services and family counseling, creating severe accessibility inequalities for low-income or rural families. Furthermore, state social services intervene only in high-risk child protection cases, leaving a critical structural gap in preventive guidance, structured co-parenting models, and cross-sector coordination.

Greece: Greece possesses a mixed support network where heavily burdened municipal social services are extensively supplemented by specialized NGOs that provide free telephone helplines and trauma-informed crisis intervention. However, the system faces deep fragmentation, financial barriers for private care, and severe geographic inequalities that leave rural and island regions with highly restricted access to child psychologists and institutionalized mediation services.

Synthesis:

A transnational synthesis of the policy landscape reveals that while all partner countries possess basic legal frameworks, they universally struggle with systemic fragmentation and a reactive, rather than preventive, approach to parental separation. A distinct operational divergence emerges between the Netherlands' decentralized municipal infrastructure and the NGO-dependent or private-reliant systems of Greece, Romania, and Türkiye, where access to affordable family support remains deeply unequal. Ultimately, all partner contexts share a critical structural gap: schools are consistently identified as the frontline environment for detecting child distress, yet they lack the specialized training, practical protocols, and permanent professional capacity required to effectively safeguard children during family transitions.

2. Primary Research

This section describes the research design, participants, data collection tools, and ethical framework implemented within WP2 – Map the Gaps. The structure and methodology are identical across all partner countries to ensure comparability and coherence of findings.

WP2 follows a structured mixed-methods research design, combining both secondary (desk research) and primary data collection. This design is directly aligned with the Safe Spaces application and ensures methodological consistency across all partner countries.

The research approach integrates desk research to establish a shared conceptual and contextual framework, quantitative data collection through online questionnaires, and qualitative data collection through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. This mixed-methods structure allows the project to capture measurable trends and general patterns through questionnaires, explore lived experiences and emotional processes through interviews, understand shared interpretations and collective dynamics through focus groups, and strengthen the validity of findings through triangulation of

methods and stakeholder groups. WP2 applies data triangulation (survey + interviews + focus groups), stakeholder triangulation (parents + professionals), and cross-country comparison across partner contexts to build a robust evidence base.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided all WP2 data collection activities across partner countries.

For parents: What emotional, educational, and practical challenges do parents face during or after parental separation? Which skills or knowledge areas do parents feel unprepared for when supporting their children? How do parents perceive their ability to communicate with their children about separation? What support systems do they use, and where do they experience gaps?

For professionals: What difficulties do professionals encounter when supporting children and families experiencing parental separation? Which competencies or tools do they need to improve their interventions? How do professionals assess the emotional and developmental needs of children in these situations? What structural or institutional barriers limit their support efforts?

Cross-cutting questions addressed across both groups include: What common needs, gaps, and challenges appear across countries? How do cultural or contextual factors influence support needs? And what forms of training, resources, or digital tools would best address these needs?

Sampling Strategy

WP2 uses a predefined and structured sampling strategy to ensure representation from both key stakeholder groups across all partner countries. Stratified sampling ensures that both parents and professionals are equally represented, with samples reflecting diversity in gender, socioeconomic background, and local context.

Each partner engaged a minimum of 25 parents (15 for the associated partner in the Netherlands), resulting in a total of 115 parent participants across the consortium. In addition, each partner conducted in-depth interviews with 5 parents and organised one dedicated focus group discussion with 3 parents. Parents were selected on the basis of having experienced parental separation and being able to reflect on the challenges faced by their children.

Each partner engaged a minimum of 15 professionals (10 for the associated partner in the Netherlands). Five professionals per partner participated in in-depth interviews, and 3 professionals took part in a dedicated focus group. Professional participants include educators, social workers, psychologists, youth workers, and child welfare staff.

Data Analysis and Integration

Given that all partners collected data in their own national languages, primary analysis took place at the national level. Each partner exported and cleaned their questionnaire dataset, conducted descriptive analysis to identify key trends, and transcribed and thematically coded their interview and focus group material. Partners then prepared a national WP2 summary — including main quantitative findings, key qualitative themes, anonymised illustrative quotes translated into English, and priority needs — using a shared template provided by PUHU.

PUHU synthesised national contributions by comparing themes and findings across countries, grouping results into cross-country thematic clusters, and integrating quantitative trends with qualitative insights. This transnational synthesis identifies shared European patterns, country-specific differences, and common gaps and training needs. The findings of WP2 serve as the primary input for the e-learning platform and immersive digital training developed in WP3, the psychosocial training programme in WP4, and the infographic series and communication materials produced in WP5.

2.2 Participants

WP2 engages two primary stakeholder groups: parents and professionals.

Parents

Parents participating in WP2 have experienced or are experiencing parental separation, represent diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, and reflect on the challenges of supporting their children during or after separation.

Questionnaire (n), Interviews (n) and Focus Group (n)

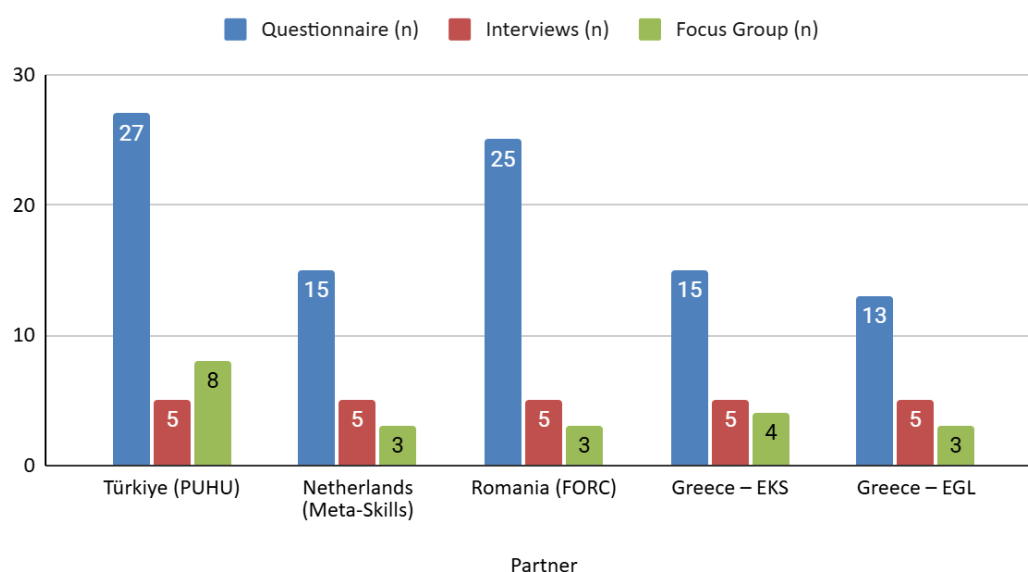


Table 1. Parent participation by country and partner

Across the five partner organisations, a total of 95 parents completed the online questionnaire. In addition, 25 parents participated in in-depth interviews (5 per partner) and 21 parents took part in focus group discussions. In Türkiye, the focus group was conducted jointly with professionals, resulting in 8 mixed participants.

Total (n), Female (n) and Male (n)

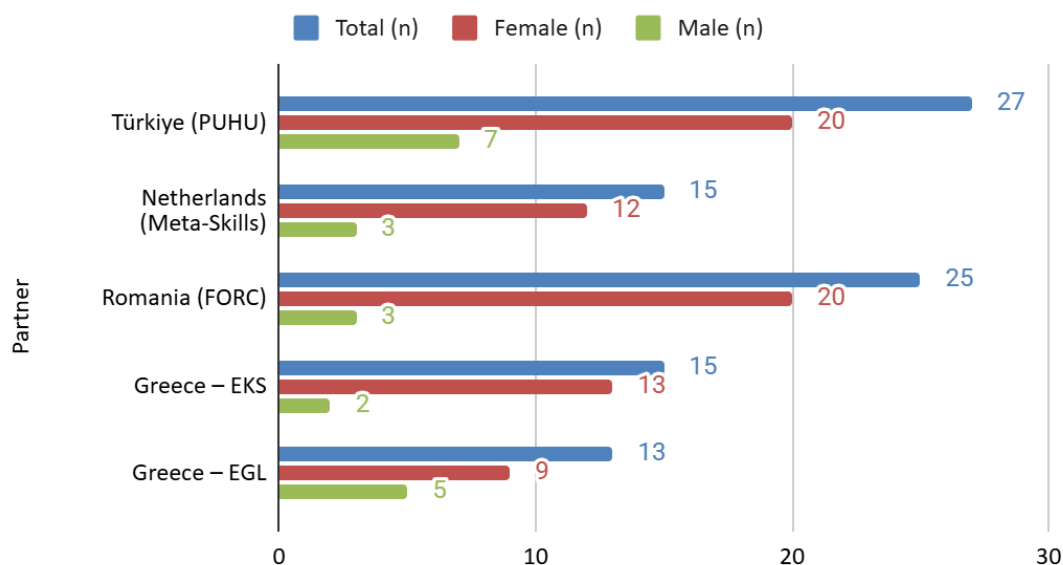


Table 2. Gender distribution

Gender data from the questionnaire reveals a consistent pattern across all partners where mothers constitute the large majority of respondents. This reflects the broader social reality in which women predominantly assume primary caregiving responsibilities following separation. It should be noted that Türkiye did not collect gender data through the online questionnaire; the figures reported for Türkiye are drawn from the qualitative sample.

Total (n), Primary Caregiver (n), Shared / Co-parenting (n), Secondary Caregiver (n) and Other (n)

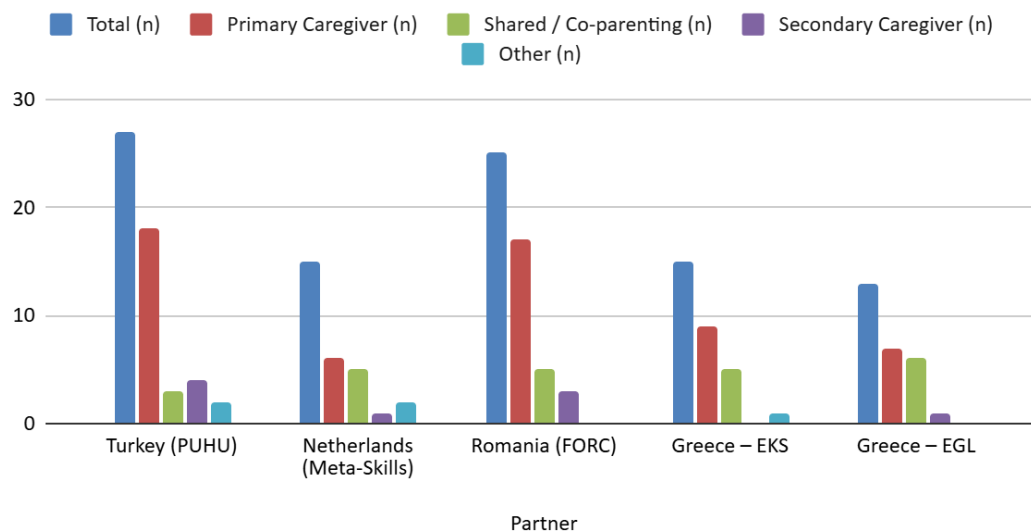


Table 3. Caregiving roles by country

In terms of caregiving roles, primary caregiving was the most common arrangement reported across all partner countries, followed by shared or co-parenting arrangements. Living arrangements similarly reflect this pattern, with the majority of children residing primarily with the responding parent, though shared and alternating custody arrangements were also reported across all contexts.

Professionals

Professionals participating in WP2 include educators, psychologists, social workers, mental health and family support professionals, and youth workers. They represent different sectors and levels of experience in working with children affected by parental separation.

Questionnaire (n), Interviews (n) and Focus Group (n)

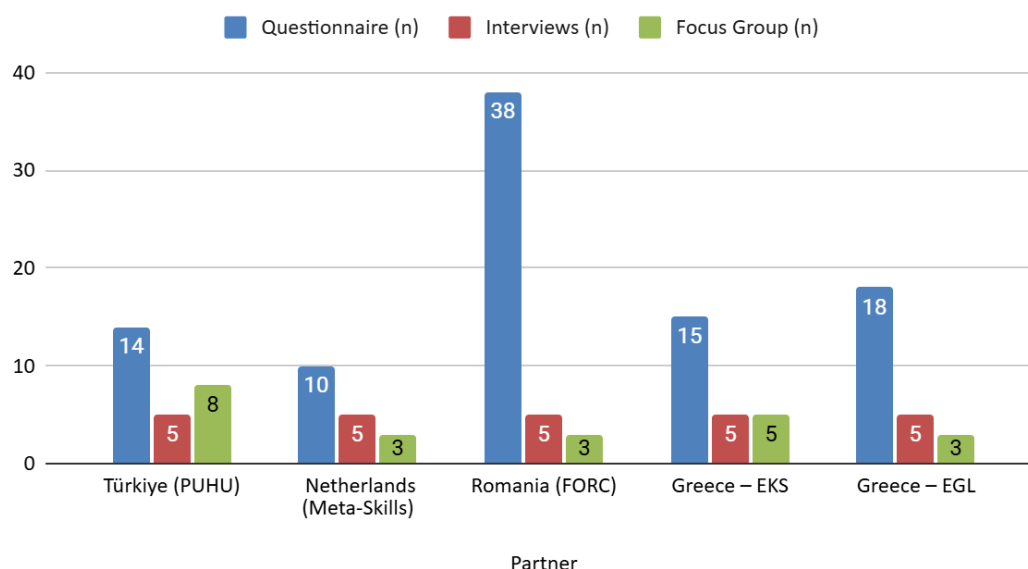


Table 4. Professional participation by country

Across the five partner organisations, a total of 95 professionals completed the online questionnaire. In addition, 25 professionals participated in in-depth interviews (5 per partner) and 22 professionals took part in focus group discussions. In Türkiye, the focus group was conducted jointly with parents, resulting in 8 mixed participants.

Total (n), Psychologist / Counsellor (n), Teacher / Educator (n), Social Worker (n) and Other (n)

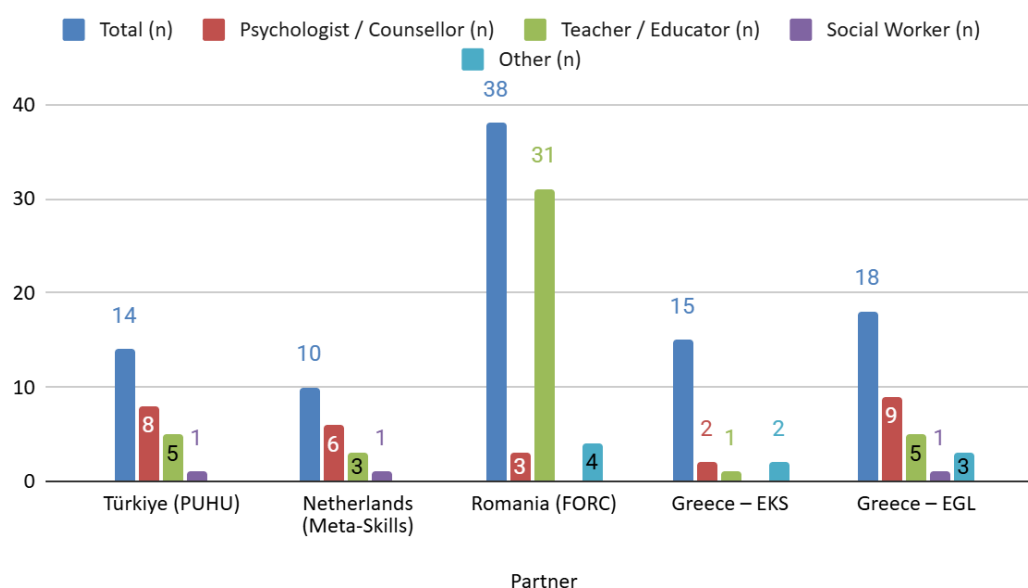


Table 5. Professional roles

The professional sample reflects a multidisciplinary composition across all partner countries, though with notable variation. Psychologists and counsellors represent the largest professional group in Türkiye, the Netherlands, and Greece (EGL), while educators and teachers constitute the majority in Romania, where 81.6% of professional respondents work in school settings. In Greece (EKS), the sample — drawn primarily from the interview cohort — includes psychiatrists, psychologists, and educators. Across all partners, professionals were predominantly based in educational settings, private practice, or NGOs, with some representation from social services and health sectors.

This dual-stakeholder structure ensures that the research captures both parental and professional perspectives on supporting children during and after parental separation.

2.3 Data Collection Tools

WP2 uses three primary data collection tools, applied consistently across all countries

Parent Questionnaire

A centrally designed and validated online questionnaire developed by PUHU is implemented across partner countries. It is translated into national languages (EN, RO, GR, TR, NL) while preserving conceptual meaning.

The questionnaire aims to:

- Identify emotional, educational, and practical needs of parents.
- Assess perceived preparedness and knowledge gaps.
- Map access to and awareness of support systems.

Professional Questionnaire

A parallel questionnaire is implemented for professionals, focusing on:

- Competency gaps in supporting children and families.
- Challenges encountered in practice.
- Structural or institutional barriers.
- Training and tool needs.

In-Depth Interviews (Parents & Professionals)

Semi-structured interviews are conducted with both parents and professionals. These interviews allow deeper exploration of:

- Emotional experiences

- Communication challenges
- Cultural and contextual factors
- Perceived support gaps
- Professional and parental reflections

Interviews are conducted in national languages and later summarised for transnational comparison

Focus Group Discussions (Parents & Professionals)

Focus groups conducted at the national level to explore:

- Shared experiences and recurring patterns
- Collective interpretations of support needs
- Expectations between parents and professionals
- Areas requiring joint learning or collaboration

Focus groups are moderated according to the WP2 Research Procedure and Fieldwork Guidelines

2.4 Ethical Considerations

Due to the sensitive nature of parental separation and child well-being, WP2 strictly follows ethical standards throughout all stages of data collection and analysis.

All participation in WP2 was fully voluntary. Prior to completing the online questionnaires, participants were presented with a clear informed consent statement explaining the purpose of the research, how their data would be used, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. To protect participant anonymity, no personally identifying demographic information was collected through the online forms.

For in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants before any recording began. This approach was chosen in recognition of the emotional sensitivity of the topics discussed, ensuring that participants felt safe and in control of their involvement throughout the process.

All data collected across partner countries was anonymised and handled in accordance with GDPR principles. No participant names appear in transcripts, reports, or any project outputs. Personal identifiers were removed or replaced with codes at the national level, and only anonymised, summarised findings were shared across the consortium for transnational analysis.

Throughout all data collection activities, inclusive and non-judgmental language was used — in questionnaires, interview guides, and focus group protocols alike. This was particularly important given the diversity of family structures, cultural backgrounds, and personal experiences represented among

participants, and reflects the project's broader commitment to creating genuinely safe spaces for all who took part.

3. Primary Research Findings

3.1 Parents' Lived Experience of Separation

Türkiye: Turkish parents experience separation as a multidimensional crisis where intense personal grief intersects with a deep sense of guilt and perceived failure regarding the traditional "ideal family" unit. Primary caregivers, mostly mothers, face severe economic strains and acute caregiving overload that narrow their social networks, leaving them isolated within enmeshed extended family boundaries that frequently impose intrusive judgment rather than constructive support.

Netherlands: Dutch parents report a profound emotional double burden, struggling to regulate their own intense exhaustion and distress while simultaneously working to contain and respond to their child's emotional reactions. Although formal divorce is normalized, parents experience subtle social profiling and persistent internal anxiety over "failing" their children, which is further exacerbated by long mental health waiting lists and a severe lack of practical, non-judgmental daily support.

Romania: In Romania, parents often operate in an emotional "survival mode," experiencing a sense of being physically present but emotionally numb or absent due to deep-seated guilt over breaking the family cohesion. This internal pressure is compounded by highly unstable post-separation financial conditions and a complete absence of institutional sensitivity, particularly from schools that entirely fail to notice or inquire about the family's transition.

Greece: Greek parents describe separation as an emotionally depleting, long-term transition characterized by an intense psychological burden, financial insecurity, and a sharp fear of causing their children long-term developmental harm. Parents, especially single mothers carrying immense invisible labor, face subtle marginalization and rigid stereotypes of "failed family life" within local communities, forcing them to intensely suppress their own trauma to remain outwardly strong.

Synthesis:

Transnational qualitative data reveals a universal emotional "double burden," where parents across all partner countries must exhaustingly suppress their own trauma and financial anxieties to maintain a stable, functional facade for their children. A distinct cultural divergence emerges regarding social isolation: while Dutch parents primarily suffer from a lack of emotionally attuned, non-judgmental listening within individualistic circles, parents in Türkiye, Greece, and Romania face intrusive communal surveillance, extended family boundary violations, and severe structural stigma. Ultimately, all partner contexts highlight a critical systemic failure, as informal networks prove ill-equipped to offer guidance, leaving parents with a profound, unmet

need for structured post-separation roadmaps, financial relief, and child-centered professional validation.

3.2 Parenting While Coping: Supporting the Child

Türkiye: Turkish parents observe diverse behavioral distress in children, ranging from regressive behaviors like bedwetting and clinginess to academic decline and internalized emotional withdrawal. Professionals highlight a severe risk of parentification, where children suppress their own trauma to support an overwhelmed primary caregiver or are granted inappropriate decision-making authority over custody choices due to the parents' inability to coordinate constructively.

Netherlands: Dutch children express complex, phased emotional reactions, with younger children struggling to grasp the permanence of separation and older adolescents frequently withdrawing or showing sensitivity during household handovers. Parents consistently report deep uncertainty regarding how to maintain open, age-appropriate communication, often delaying essential disclosures which ultimately triggers internal loyalty conflicts and a fractured sense of belonging across two homes.

Romania: In Romania, children frequently manifest their distress through somatic symptoms like stomach pains and severe separation anxiety during school drop-offs or household transitions. Children exhibit a strong relational need for permission to love both parents, yet they are frequently triangulated into adult disputes, forced to navigate conflicting parental narratives and determine "the truth" without any empathetic monitoring from their school environments.

Greece: Greek children are acutely sensitive to parental tension even before formal separation, frequently displaying severe anxiety, shock, and behavioral outbursts during moves between residences. They face an intense fear of abandonment or replacement, particularly when new families are formed, and require constant reassurance of parental love alongside inclusive, empathetic school environments to combat peer stigma.

Synthesis:

Transnational data demonstrates that children across all partner countries exhibit shared behavioral and emotional distress, ranging from regressive clinginess and academic decline to severe somatic symptoms like chronic stomach pains. A critical cross-cultural pattern is the universal threat of parentification and triangulation; children consistently feel forced to regulate adult emotions, solve parental disputes, or suppress their own grief to protect overwhelmed caregivers. Ultimately, the synthesis highlights that a child's resilience is directly dependent on the parents' capacity for emotional self-regulation, demonstrating that providing parents with concrete communication tools and protecting children from adult conflict are the primary pathways to ensuring childhood safety.

3.3 Professionals' Experiences Working with Children of Separated Parents

Türkiye: Turkish mental health professionals and educators witness a normalisation of parentification and "decisional neglect," where children are inappropriately forced to make major life choices due to the collapse of parental coordination. Facing cases that constitute up to 50% of their clinical caseloads, these experts suffer from intense secondary trauma and professional isolation, primarily because schools remain underutilised and under-resourced to handle the intersection of legal and psychological conflicts.

Netherlands: Dutch professionals frequently struggle to decode children's distress, as emotional suffering is rarely articulated directly but instead masked through behavioral outbursts, physical restlessness, or sudden social withdrawal. They face severe ethical dilemmas and high-stakes interactions when caught between conflicting parental narratives or asked by adolescents to validate a specific side, all while navigating rigid institutional time pressures and long specialized waiting lists.

Romania: In Romania, specialists find their professional spaces heavily disrupted by parental hostility, leaving them vulnerable to significant emotional burden when children unexpectedly internalize guilt for adult decisions. Teachers, in particular, face the overwhelming challenge of managing acute emotional crises and children's somatic complaints while concurrently trying to fulfill rigid curricular demands without any structured protocol.

Greece: Greek professionals describe separation-related work as relationally toxic and emotionally exhausting, frequently encountering high-conflict custody disputes that spill directly into school settings. They report a severe lack of permanent school-based psychologists and clear institutional guidelines, forcing them to balance intense empathy with strict boundaries to avoid burnout while managing severe cases of adolescent anxiety and manipulation.

Synthesis:

A transnational analysis reveals that professionals across all partner countries universally struggle to manage the "spillover" of parental hostility into educational and therapeutic spaces, where they are frequently manipulated by parents to validate one side of a dispute. A distinct systemic convergence emerges as specialists from all contexts report that children rarely verbalize their distress, instead expressing trauma indirectly through regressive behaviors, academic disengagement, or physical somatic complaints that require specialized clinical decoding. Ultimately, the synthesis underscores an urgent, collective need to shift away from purely theoretical knowledge toward structured, case-based training and permanent institutional supervision, transforming schools from reactive settings into proactive, legally literate safe spaces.

3.4 Difficult Conversations and Boundary Challenges

Türkiye: In the Turkish context, communication oscillates between over-disclosure and total silence, often leaving parents paralyzed by the fear of saying something "irreparable" regarding the reasons for separation. This leads to significant boundary erosion where parents, in an attempt to compensate for the emotional loss, transition into a "friend" role or rely on children for emotional support, inadvertently handing them adult-level decisions (decisional neglect) that exceed their developmental capacity.

Netherlands: Dutch parents and professionals report high levels of uncertainty when responding to direct children's questions about the future or the reasons behind the divorce, often causing adults to "freeze" or give unclear answers to protect the child. This lack of clear narrative often results in children taking on a "mediator" role, where they attempt to fix parental tensions or manage household transitions alone, highlighting a critical gap in parents' ability to maintain firm but empathetic boundaries.

Romania: In Romania, difficult conversations are frequently hindered by the parents' own "emotional absence" or survival mode, where they find it impossible to provide truthful yet age-appropriate explanations. Boundary challenges often manifest as "relational neglect," where children are symptomatic (stomach pains, withdrawal) because they are caught between opposite versions of reality or used as emotional resources to calm their parents' distress.

Greece: Greek parents describe the exhausting responsibility of monitoring every conversation to prevent children from hearing negative comments from relatives, yet they struggle to keep children from being "placed in the middle" of legal and financial disputes. Professionals observe a high risk of emotional parentification, where children become "allies" or instruments of revenge, forced to reproduce the hostility of one parent toward the other while struggling to maintain their own sense of identity.

Synthesis:

The cross-country synthesis reveals a universal "communication paralysis" where parents, overwhelmed by their own guilt and grief, either over-share adult conflicts or maintain "informational silences" that children inevitably fill with self-blame. A significant transnational trend is the widespread erosion of boundaries, characterized by "decisional neglect" and "parentification," as children in all partner countries are being forced into the roles of mediators, confidants, or decision-makers. Ultimately, the findings underscore that the most difficult conversations are not about the legal facts of divorce, but about managing the child's search for "truth" amidst conflicting parental narratives, demonstrating a collective need for scripts and roadmaps that help adults reclaim their roles as protective emotional containers.

4. Identified Gaps & Needs (Analytical Synthesis)

4.1 Knowledge Gaps

Türkiye: Parents and school counselors lack concrete, age-appropriate protocols to translate complex marital conflicts into child-friendly language without assigning blame. Furthermore, a significant deficit in legal literacy among mental health professionals coexists with a general failure to recognize "parentification," which parents routinely misinterpret as resilience rather than a developmental risk.

Netherlands: A primary knowledge gap exists regarding how decisions made during separation (e.g., custody setups) impact a child's long-term development, leading to decision paralysis among parents. Additionally, teachers and non-clinical professionals lack specific training to distinguish normal behavioral adjustments from severe psychological distress rooted in household transitions.

Romania: Stakeholders exhibit limited understanding of how children internalize conflicting parental narratives, which directly distorts the child's sense of identity and emotional regulation. Parents are also largely unaware of existing professional support options (like mediation or therapy), causing delayed help-seeking behaviors and reliance on insufficient informal channels.

Greece: Substantial gaps remain regarding evidence-based co-parenting practices and child psychopathology, with adults consistently underestimating the emotional trauma of conflict exposure. School professionals face severe uncertainty regarding legal boundaries, custody arrangements, and institutional responsibilities when high-conflict disputes spill into classrooms.

Synthesis:

The cross-country synthesis reveals a universal deficit in understanding children's developmental and emotional needs across different age groups during family transitions. A distinct systemic alignment exists between Türkiye, Greece, and Romania, where frontline professionals (especially teachers) lack the necessary legal literacy and clinical knowledge to navigate complex family systems safely. Ultimately, this collective lack of structured, evidence-based psychoeducational frameworks across all partner contexts results in adults failing to detect hidden traumas, such as internalised guilt and ebeveynleşme (parentification).

4.2 Skills Gaps

Türkiye: Parents lack the emotional self-regulation required for "parenting while coping," frequently leaking their grief and anger into daily interactions with the child. Simultaneously, educators lack "in-the-moment" de-escalation skills to manage acute emotional crises in the classroom, while caregivers fail to maintain functional boundaries to keep children out of adult decisions.

Netherlands: Both parents and professionals lack the concrete, applied language skills necessary to conduct high-stakes conversations without reinforcing loyalty conflicts or over-sharing adult details. Moreover, adults struggle to make stable decisions in "grey areas," relying on emotional intuition due to a deficit in boundary-setting and neutrality management skills.

Romania: Professionals lack the specific interaction-based competencies required to manage sensitive disclosures from children or to engage defensive, resistant parents in high-conflict scenarios. Parents struggle to provide honest yet reassuring answers regarding an uncertain future, explicitly demanding concrete phrasing tools rather than abstract pedagogical advice.

Greece: Adults struggle with conflict de-escalation and emotional containment, frequently failing to prevent children from being emotionally weaponized or acting as mediators. Educators and social workers possess theoretical knowledge but lack practical skills to manage emotionally charged parent meetings while protecting their own professional boundaries.

Synthesis:

Across all datasets, the shift from theoretical knowledge to practical, interaction-based skills represents the most acute training deficit for both parents and professionals. The data highlights a shared struggle regarding "emotional regulation under stress," which directly compromises the adults' capacity to act as stable emotional anchors for the child. To bridge this gap, stakeholders across all partner countries unanimously reject abstract training, demanding instead experiential, scenario-based learning, role-plays, and ready-to-use classroom scripts.

4.3 Emotional and Psychosocial Support Gaps

Türkiye: High financial barriers restrict access to private mental health services, forcing families into a state of "unsupported endurance". This structural void is worsened by a near-total absence of non-judgmental peer-support groups and a lack of social validation for primary caregivers, which exponentially accelerates parental burnout.

Netherlands: A critical lack of safe, dedicated spaces prevents parents from processing their own emotional exhaustion, directly increasing the risk of emotional spillover onto the child. Furthermore, professionals face a severe secondary emotional burden and burnout, with inconsistent access to professional supervision or structured peer exchange.

Romania: The high emotional load of separation triggers pervasive feelings of loneliness and guilt among parents, who operate without any institutional spaces for reflection. Professionals suffer from a sense of helplessness when unable to influence destructive parental behaviors, a strain exacerbated by institutional isolation in under-resourced sectors.

Greece: Families face severe geographical and financial inequalities, leaving rural or low-income single-parent households without accessible psychological counseling. This is compounded by a deep social stigma surrounding mental health help-seeking, which causes parents to delay support due to shame or fear of custody repercussions.

Synthesis:

The transnational data exposes a profound vacuum in emotional containment structures, establishing that when parents are left emotionally unsupported, the quality of care they provide to children sharply declines. A clear operational division appears: while the Netherlands struggles with systemic secondary stress among practitioners, Mediterranean and Eastern contexts (Türkiye, Greece, Romania) are heavily restricted by direct financial barriers, geographic inequalities, and cultural stigma. Ultimately, all partner countries demonstrate an urgent need for institutionalized supervision for experts and safe, peer-led communities for separated families to mitigate trauma re-activation.

4.4 System-Level Gaps

Türkiye: The legal system operates with a mechanical disconnect from the child's emotional reality, completely failing to enforce mandatory preventive counseling or to engage the secondary caregiver. Consequently, school systems remain heavily underutilized and systemically disconnected from the home environment due to a lack of coordinated entry points.

Netherlands: Severe institutional fragmentation across legal, educational, social, and psychological sectors forces families to undergo duplicated assessments and repeatedly retell their trauma. This structural rigidity is further aggravated by an acute shortage of school-based psychologists, high caseloads, and long waiting lists for clinical care.

Romania: The structural landscape is defined by a complete absence of standardized child-centered protocols, leaving support to rely entirely on individual professional goodwill or personal resources. State social services act strictly reactively, intervening only when family conflict escalates into extreme, high-risk protection crises.

Greece: The support network is highly decentralized and unevenly distributed across municipalities, lacking any integrated case management or clear referral pathways. Long court delays and the ineffective enforcement of child support decisions create structural instability, meaning that interventions occur reactively rather than preventively.

Synthesis:

At the systemic level, all partner countries suffer from acute cross-sectoral fragmentation, where schools, social services, mental health networks, and legal systems operate in parallel silos rather than cooperative alliances. The

current institutional frameworks function reactively rather than preventively, offering resources only after severe conflict has escalated or legal proceedings have caused psychological harm. This cross-country synthesis directly demonstrates the necessity for an integrated "single point of entry" and permanent, school-based support hubs to shield children's trajectories during family disruption.

5. Implications for Safe Spaces

5.1 Implications for WP3 – Digital Tools

Transnational research dictates that the WP3 e-learning platform must abandon abstract modules in favor of short, modular micro-learning units and downloadable psychoeducational resources (e.g., podcasts, video modules) designed for users experiencing severe emotional overload and time constraints. Methodologically, all partner datasets establish scenario-based learning and immersive avatar simulations as an absolute requirement to provide a safe, non-judgmental rehearsal space for practicing high-stakes micro-interactions, such as responding to a child's internalized guilt, managing household transitions, and navigating contradictory parental narratives without taking sides. Finally, to circumvent the severe financial and systemic barriers identified across the regions, the digital tools must be free, mobile-friendly, low-data-consuming, and written in an empathetic, non-clinical tone that normalizes the emotional challenges of life after separation.

5.2 Implications for WP4 – Training Programmes

The cross-country synthesis reveals that WP4 training programs must prioritize immediate relational and practical competencies over heavy theoretical pedagogy, centering professional curriculums on cross-sector legal literacy, boundary management, and classroom crisis de-escalation, while grounding parent training in emotional self-regulation techniques. Structurally, training designs must undergo rigid cultural adaptation to address the severe social stigma, gender stereotypes, and intense extended family surveillance prevalent in Türkiye, Greece, and Romania, while simultaneously validating diverse family structures and co-parenting models. Ultimately, the findings highlight a vital strategic opportunity for Joint Stakeholder Workshops that bring parents and professionals together into shared learning environments, thereby eliminating systemic misunderstandings, building cross-sector empathy, and creating a unified, child-centered language around family transitions.

6. Key Takeaways and National Priorities

Türkiye:

Key Findings Summary

- **Gendered Burden of Care:** The research reveals a significant gender imbalance, where mothers (74.1% of respondents) act as primary caregivers

and bear the brunt of both the emotional and logistical post-separation load, while fathers often occupy secondary or disengaged roles.

- **The Rise of Decisional Neglect:** A critical professional finding is the "normalisation of parentification," where children are granted decision-making authority over adult-level choices (e.g., school selection, living arrangements) not as autonomy, but as a result of parental disengagement or lack of coordination.
- **Economic Barriers to Mental Health:** Financial strain is the primary obstacle to empowerment (18.5%). Even highly educated, urban parents report that the high cost of private psychological support leads to "unsupported endurance," where mental health needs are sacrificed for basic economic stability.
- **Underutilised Institutional Hubs:** Schools are identified as the most vital yet underutilised intervention sites. While children spend most of their time there, teachers lack the practical protocols and specialized training to manage separation-related crises.
- **The "Why" and "What Next" Vacuum:** Children's primary distress stems from a lack of age-appropriate, concrete information about the reasons for separation and their future daily routines. Parents feel "paralyzed" by the fear of saying the wrong thing.
- **Possibility Beyond Crisis:** While separation is a trauma, it can also create space for new relational possibilities, where children and parents can develop connections and hobbies that were previously impossible within the marital conflict.

Country-Specific Priorities for Action

- **Professional Legal Literacy:** Bridging the gap between law and psychology. Professionals need to understand legal rights and protection mechanisms to feel competent in high-conflict cases.
- **Active Engagement of Secondary Caregivers:** Developing targeted strategies to re-engage "secondary" parents (mostly fathers) into the emotional and practical life of the child to alleviate the burden on primary caregivers.
- **School-Based "First Aid" Protocols:** Creating immediate, practical guidance for educators that can be applied in the classroom the moment a child shows signs of distress, moving beyond theoretical pedagogy.
- **Destigmatization through Peer Support:** Establishing structured, safe spaces for parents to share experiences, countering the social isolation and judgment prevalent in the Turkish social context.

Conditions for Safe Spaces to be Effective in Türkiye

- **Practicality Over Theory:** For the project to succeed, tools must provide "ready-to-use" scripts and roadmaps rather than general psychological advice. Stakeholders need to know exactly *what to say* in a crisis.
- **Free and Digital Accessibility:** Given the identified economic barriers, all Safe Spaces resources must remain free and easily accessible via mobile platforms to reach those excluded from private clinical support.
- **Cultural Resonancy:** Tools must acknowledge the "interdependent" nature of Turkish families while teaching healthy boundary-setting to prevent enmeshment and parentification.
- **Validation-Centered Design:** Effective intervention must validate the parent's own grief and efforts. As highlighted in the research, a parent who feels "seen" and regulated is better equipped to provide a "safe space" for their child.

Netherlands:

- A first key finding is that both parents and professionals feel underprepared for the emotional and relational complexity of separation, particularly in communication with children.
- Second, there is a strong need for practical, experience-based learning, as theoretical knowledge alone is insufficient for managing real-life situations.
- Third, emotional support for parents and professionals is a critical but under-addressed need, with significant implications for their capacity to support children effectively.
- Fourth, systemic fragmentation and lack of coordination reduce the effectiveness of existing support services and create additional burdens for families and professionals.
- Fifth, there is a clear demand for structured guidance, including communication frameworks, protocols, and accessible resources.
- Sixth, digital tools, particularly scenario-based and immersive formats, are seen as promising solutions for addressing key skills gaps.
- Seventh, collaboration between parents and professionals is essential but currently insufficiently supported.
- National priorities should therefore include expanding access to psychological support, increasing the presence of specialised staff in schools, developing integrated support systems, and investing in training programmes that combine emotional, relational, and practical components.
- For Safe Spaces to be effective, they must be accessible, non-judgmental, and adaptable to diverse needs. They should provide both emotional support and practical tools, and create opportunities for reflection, learning, and connection.

Romania:

Key Findings

- Both parents and professionals lack practical guidance for managing real-time emotional interactions with children.
- Emotional burden is high across all stakeholder groups, with limited access to structured support.
- Communication — with children and between adults — is one of the most critical and challenging areas.
- Children are frequently exposed to parental conflict and conflicting narratives, with insufficient protective mechanisms.
- There is a strong demand for concrete tools (guides, examples, simulations) rather than abstract knowledge.
- Systemic limitations (time, resources, coordination) significantly constrain effective support.
- Peer support and community connection are important but underdeveloped resources for parents.

National Priorities for Action

- Develop accessible, practice-oriented training for both parents and professionals
- Increase availability of school-based psychological support
- Create standardized guidelines and protocols for institutions
- Strengthen collaboration between education, mental health and family services
- Promote awareness of children's needs during separation at a societal level

Conditions for Safe Spaces to be Effective

- tools must be practical, concise and directly applicable
- emotional safety for users (non-judgmental, supportive tone)
- opportunities for practice, not just information
- integration with existing support systems (schools, services)
- accessibility across different socio-economic contexts
- inclusion of both parents and professionals in the learning process

Greece

EKS:

Key findings summarized

- Children experienced significant emotional distress during separation, including fear, sadness, guilt, confusion, insecurity, emotional withdrawal, and anger. Stability, routine, emotional reassurance, and continued relationships with both parents were identified as critical protective factors.
- Parents themselves experienced high emotional burden, including grief, loneliness, anger, exhaustion, stigma, insecurity, and emotional overload while simultaneously trying to support their children.
- Communication difficulties emerged as a major challenge. Parents and professionals often struggled with how to explain separation to children,

respond to difficult questions, and avoid exposing children to parental conflict and contradictory narratives.

- High-conflict separation and triangulation negatively affected children's emotional well-being, particularly when children felt pressured to choose sides or became emotionally involved in parental disputes.
- Legal and financial constraints emerged as major stressors affecting both parents and children. Participants referred to exhausting court procedures, uncertainty regarding custody arrangements, ineffective child-support enforcement, financial insecurity, lack of flexible employment conditions, childcare difficulties, and economic pressures that directly affected family stability and parents' ability to support children emotionally and practically.
- Long-term psychological consequences were repeatedly identified, including anxiety, depression, emotional collapse, interpersonal difficulties, eating disorders, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation associated with unresolved parental conflict and trauma.
- Significant institutional and systemic gaps were identified, including limited psychological support, insufficient school-based services, fragmented interventions, lack of multidisciplinary coordination, and inadequate legal and financial guidance for families.
- Participants strongly emphasized the importance of counselling, mediation, psychoeducation, peer-support groups, experiential learning, and digital support tools as valuable interventions for both parents and professionals.

Country-specific priorities for action

- Strengthen accessible psychological support services for children, parents, and separated families, including affordable counselling and peer-support structures.
- Expand school-based support systems through the presence of psychologists, social workers, and teacher training on separation-related emotional difficulties.
- Develop parent education programs focused on communication with children, emotional regulation, conflict management, co-parenting, and trauma-informed parenting approaches.
- Improve legal literacy and accessible guidance regarding custody, parental rights, domestic violence, child support, and institutional procedures.
- Address financial insecurity and practical difficulties faced by single-parent families through stronger childcare support, flexible work arrangements, and targeted social support measures.
- Promote public awareness campaigns addressing stigma, gender stereotypes, family diversity, inclusion, and non-violent communication.
- Strengthen multidisciplinary collaboration between schools, psychologists, social workers, legal professionals, and community support services.

Conditions for Safe Spaces to be effective in this national context

- Safe Spaces must provide emotionally safe, non-judgmental, and stigma-free environments for both children and parents.

- Interventions should combine emotional support, psychoeducation, legal guidance, and practical coping strategies rather than focusing only on information provision.
- Programs should adopt child-centred, trauma-informed, and family-sensitive approaches prioritizing emotional safety, stability, and respectful co-parenting.
- Services should be accessible, flexible, and available through both face-to-face and digital formats.
- Experiential and interactive approaches such as role-playing, case studies, emotional expression activities, and scenario-based learning should be integrated into interventions.
- The training should be culturally sensitive and adapted to the Greek social context, including social stigma, gender expectations, family pressures, and attitudes toward divorce.

EGL:

- The findings indicate that parental separation in Greece (and in Greek families) is experienced as a deeply emotional, relational, and socially embedded process that affects not only children but entire family systems. Across stakeholder groups, one of the clearest findings was that children are affected less by separation itself and more by the quality of parental communication, emotional regulation, and conflict management during the process. Both parents and professionals emphasized children's strong need for emotional safety, predictability, reassurance, and protection from adult conflict. At the same time, parents frequently reported feeling emotionally overwhelmed, isolated, and insufficiently supported in understanding how to respond to children's emotional needs. Professionals similarly described feeling underprepared for the emotional and relational complexity of separation-related cases, particularly in institutional environments with limited resources and unclear procedures.
- Another key finding concerns the fragmented nature of support systems in Greece. Participants consistently identified gaps in coordination between schools, mental health services, legal systems, and social support structures. Financial barriers, limited accessibility of psychological services, and lack of preventative interventions further intensified stress for many families. The findings also highlighted the importance of culturally sensitive approaches that recognize the strong role of family interdependence, extended family involvement, and prolonged parent-child dependence within the Greek context.
- National priorities emerging from the research include strengthening early psychosocial support for separated families, improving access to affordable mental health services, developing practical co-parenting education, and creating clearer institutional protocols for schools and professionals working with children affected by separation. There is also a strong need for training programmes that integrate emotional regulation, communication skills, and child-centred approaches into both parenting support and professional practice.

- For *Safe Space* to be effective in the Greek context, it must provide emotionally safe, non-judgmental, and practically useful environments where both parents and professionals can develop communication skills, emotional awareness, and confidence in supporting children through separation. Effective Safe Spaces will also require accessibility, cultural sensitivity, interdisciplinary collaboration, and opportunities for experiential learning that reflect the emotionally complex realities families face during separation and divorce.

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