

ICEHEARTS EUROPE IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE



CONTENTS

3	WHY THIS GUIDE?
3	WHO WILL USE THIS GUIDE?
3	HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE?
4	OVERVIEW
	THE ICEHEARTS EUROPE PROGRAMME
	Origin: Icehearts Finland
	Icehearts Europe: key elements
7	PHASE 1. SITUATION ANALYSIS AND NEEDS ASSESSMENT (SANA)
	BACKGROUND
	AIM AND METHODS
	WHAT IS SANA?
	The framework of the Icehearts Europe project
14	PHASE 2. IDENTIFYING AND INVOLVING KEY ACTORS
	TARGET GROUP
	NETWORK AND STAKEHOLDERS
	FINANCIAL RESOURCES
18	PHASE 3. PLANNING THE PROGRAMME
	ROLES AND ACTIVITIES OF THE ORGANISATION
19	STEP 1 – PREPARATION
	Establishing a core implementation team
	Identifying stakeholders and services
	Identifying a contact person for the network of collaborators
	Assessing the costs of the programme
20	STEP 2 – MENTOR
	Recruiting the mentor
	Roles and activities of the Icehearts Europe mentor
	Requirements of the mentor
	Mentor’s main tasks and roles
	A support network for the mentor
22	STEP 3 – CHILDREN
	Assembling the Icehearts Europe team
	Presentation of the intervention and involvement of parents/guardians
	The Icehearts Europe team based on children’s needs
25	STEP 4 – A HOLISTIC APPROACH
	Plan activities
	Programme settings
	Working with families
	Working with other professionals
29	PHASE 4. MONITORING AND EVALUATION
33	INSIGHTS FROM ICEHEARTS FINLAND
38	References

Why this guide?

This guide provides basic guidelines to implement and disseminate in Europe the **Icehearts Europe Support Programme**, which aims to prevent social exclusion, promote health and emotional well-being, improve social skills and promote resilience and life competencies of disadvantaged and at-risk children and adolescents. Icehearts Europe consists of both a mentoring intervention and group sports & recreational activities.

The guide provides operational information on the main activities of the principal actors involved in the implementation process of the Icehearts Europe Programme: these are illustrative indications that represent a “lowest common denominator” to be referred to, while at the same time maintaining the operational flexibility needed to adapt it to different contexts. The proposed programme was developed within the framework of the Icehearts Europe project, funded by the EU4Health 2022 Work Programme of the European Commission.

Who will use this guide?

The main addressees of this guide are **grassroots sport and social promotion Organisations** in European countries that wish to implement the Icehearts Europe programme in their operational context to promote the well-being and health of children and adolescents living in particular vulnerable conditions.

Grassroots sport is defined as recreational, non-competitive sport with educational, recreational, and social objectives. It represents the largest sector of civil society in the European Union working with children and young people. Many grassroots sports organisations already operate with disadvantaged children and adolescents, using sport as a tool to promote their well-being, and can be considered the most suitable actors to embrace, implement and disseminate this approach.

How to use this guide?

The guide offers a description of the key principles, activities, and steps to follow in implementing the Icehearts Europe Support Programme.

There are different ways to implement and adapt the Programme according to the specific characteristics, needs and resources present in the territorial context in which the Organisation operates. There is no single adaptation solution that is valid for everyone.

The purpose of this guide is to facilitate the acquisition of useful operational tools to guide grassroots sport Organisations through the different implementation phases of Icehearts Europe.

SOURCES

- *Icehearts Europe Proposal (2022)*
- *Appelqvist-Schmidlechner K, Wessman J, & Kekkonen M (2017). Icehearts: Sport-based early support program for children at risk. European Psychiatry 41(S1), S179-S179. doi.org/10.1016/j.eurpsy.2017.01.2084*

OVERVIEW

THE ICEHEARTS EUROPE PROGRAMME

The proposed programme was developed as part of the European project Icehearts Europe (European Commission's EU4Health 2022 Programme), which aims to improve the mental health and well-being of vulnerable children and adolescents through a community approach that puts the child at the centre.

The Icehearts Europe project took the experience of the Finnish Icehearts best practice to transfer it into a model available to other EU countries, enabling them to adapt it to their own context.

ORIGIN: ICEHEARTS FINLAND

As mentioned, Icehearts Europe is based on the Finnish Icehearts experience. It originated in Vantaa in 1996 on the initiative of Ville and Ilkka Turkka, son and father, following Ville's experience working in childcare institutions.

Most of the children housed in these institutions showed various frailties, for example: problems in managing daily life and family relationships, mental health problems, social-relational difficulties, and schooling, which often resulted in risky behaviour (such as drug use, anti-social behaviour, dropping out of school).

A common element for these children was the lack of a hobby they could devote themselves to outside their daily commitments. Indeed, throughout their lives they had never had the opportunity to engage in leisure activities under the guidance of a trusted adult figure.

Hence, the Icehearts approach, dedicated to disadvantaged children and adolescents to promote their social-emotional skills and psychophysical well-being and to provide a response to their specific needs through sports activities and other hobbies practised in groups during leisure time, under the constant guidance of the Icehearts mentor.

The mentor is a reference adult who stays by the children's side from the assembly of the group (**the Icehearts team**) until they come of age, for a period of up to 12 years.

The long-term support and trusting relationship established between the mentor and the children in the team are the main requirements for the effectiveness of the Icehearts approach.

As part of its activities, the mentor cooperates with the school, social services, and other community services in order to better support the children and their families.

In Finland, this model continues playing a significant role in preventing social exclusion and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children and adolescents.

ICEHEARTS EUROPE: KEY ELEMENTS

Also targeting disadvantaged children and adolescents, Icehearts Europe is a prevention and support programme with a **sport-based approach**, which through an active lifestyle aims to prevent social exclusion, promote health and emotional well-being, improve social skills, promote resilience and life competencies, and develop skills that enable participants to **face life with greater personal resources**.

Icehearts Europe proposes a flexible model that is adaptable to local contexts, institutional resources and participants' needs. However, for the support programme to be effective, certain key elements must be in place:

Target

Children and adolescents between 6 and 18 years of age in deprived, disadvantaged, and vulnerable conditions, who need special support and attention.

This criterion assumes that each child is a unique subject who learns competently and actively, not a passive object of assessment. Although the focus is on children living in disadvantaged condition, it is placed on the child's resources and strengths, not on his or her problems and weaknesses.

Target groups could include, for example: immigrant children, children of single parents, children from large and/or multicultural families, asylum seekers, children who do not have the opportunity to access recreational activities, children who need support in studying and learning or with psychological, relational, cognitive, or psychophysical difficulties.

Children and adolescents of the same age form a team that is led by a mentor, a professional adult enrolled in the grassroots sport Organisation, which takes care of the team. Also, children and their parents know that the mentor is a resource they can rely on in difficult situations.

Mentor

The **Icehearts Europe mentor** is a qualified and specially trained person who guides and supports children/adolescents in his or her team. He or she is a facilitator of various activities, including **sports and other recreational activities**, and a **reliable reference adult** to whom the child and his or her parents/guardians can turn for help, discuss problems, and seek solutions.

The relationship established between the mentor and the child is fundamental to the approach: a **relationship of reciprocity, empathy and trust** that spans the different stages of the child's growth and development.



Community approach

With the aim of responding to the needs of each child, together with the mentor the Organisation adopts a **multi-professional approach and works in contact with the school and local services**.

In addition to supporting the well-being of the young people involved in the programme, the Icehearts Europe approach **strengthens the work of local public service professionals** by seeking to activate multiple Icehearts Europe teams in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, amplifying synergies.

Long term

A fundamental requirement is the **long duration of programme**, which allows the mentor to create a solid relationship of trust with the children and to provide them with support during the most critical phases.

Ideally, the Icehearts Europe programme should last 12 years (as is the case in Finland) to achieve optimal results and lasting impact. However, as not all contexts may have access to the same resources, this goal may not be achievable. The programme should be designed to last as long as possible with available resources.

The objective remains, therefore, to **maximise the positive impact** despite possible logistical and financial challenges.

SOURCES

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- Icehearts Europe Project <https://www.icehearts.eu>
- The Icehearts Europe model <https://www.icehearts.eu/resources>

PHASE 1

***SITUATION ANALYSIS AND
NEEDS ASSESSMENT (SANA)***

BACKGROUND

According to the World Health Organisation, at a global level, one in seven adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19 experiences mental disorder, and are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion, discrimination, stigma, difficulties at school and risky behaviours. Moreover, children from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds are also particularly at risk and often lag behind their more advantaged peers in many areas of life. In fact, the wellbeing of children requires constant support from parents/guardians, school, and community, but unfortunately this support is not always available to all.

Developed under the 2022 EU4Health Work Programme, the Icehearts Europe programme aims to scale up the successful and evidence-based Finnish best practice Icehearts at a European level.

The programme uses physical activity and team sports as both a hobby and, mainly, a tool for engaging disadvantaged children and adolescents, and thus promotes health and emotional well-being. Each Icehearts Europe team is led by a mentor who supports the participant children/adolescents in different life settings, over a time span of maximum 12 years.

The grassroots sport Organisations are considered the most suitable actors to adopt, locally adapt and disseminate the Icehearts Europe programme in EU countries.

Grassroots sport organisations who intend to carry out the intervention in their own country should take specific steps that are functional in the implementation process, starting with the **Situation Analysis and Needs Assessment (SANA)**.

AIMS AND METHODS

To facilitate this process, each grassroots sport Organisation needs to gather and assess information about the obstacles and opportunities to implementing the Icehearts Europe programme in their location.

There is no universal Icehearts approach. Each country in Europe is different. They vary significantly in their cultural frameworks, socioeconomic conditions, welfare systems, ethnic and language composition, and many other aspects. Some adaptation will be expected to make Icehearts compatible to each context.

To make sure that a country specific best practice can be successfully scaled-up in other European sites, it is first necessary to understand the contextual characteristics and differences between the original intervention site and the other implementation sites.

WHAT IS SANA?

Situation Analysis and Needs Assessment (SANA) is a methodology that helps to collect information and data needed to plan implementation of a specific programme, in this case Icehearts Europe.

The SANA results will describe the context in which the programme will be operating, the factors that put youth at risk, resources available, interventions, and programmes currently running around the implementation area and local needs of vulnerable children in the community. Moreover, they can be used to identify the gap between the current status in the Organisation's country, and the desired outcomes.

The **Situation Analysis** should be conducted at the beginning of the process: this will assist the Organisation in planning the implementation of the Icehearts Europe intervention. Situation analysis is like a scan to describe the environment, context, and situation in which the intervention will operate.

The **Needs Assessments** is used to determine the gaps between the existing situation and what is needed for the implementation of the intervention.

THE FRAMEWORK OF THE ICEHEARTS EUROPE PROJECT

The **Situation Analysis and Needs Assessment (SANA) model** has been elaborated to help each local partner and implementation site to understand the specific local needs, the factors that put youth at risk, as well as what resources are available, and what interventions are currently being implemented. At the end, the goal is to identify the characteristics of the context in which the intervention will be implemented and to examine the gaps between the existing situation and what is needed to plan the implementation of the Icehearts Europe programme¹.

Information was gathered in each pilot country before the implementation, and the data was collected in two phases: first, compiling the Situation Analysis and secondly, the Need Assessment. To facilitate the filling in of the template, resources, in terms of both time and human resources, needed to be allocated to the work.

The **Situation Analysis (SA)** included questions concerning:

- identification of population characteristics (the demographics of the local sites)
- social context
- identification of environment of the implementation site
- identification of possible target groups (the characteristics of the target groups)
- identification of service and school system in the local community
- how services and school systems are organised in the local communities
- identification of sport and after school activities available in the community

¹ In this framework, for each of the five pilot grassroots sports organisations respectively located in Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Italy and Slovenia was gathered information about the situation and needs in their country. For this purpose, the [Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare](#) and [EuroHealthNet](#) elaborated The Situation Analysis and Needs Assessment (SANA) model, shared with the pilot organisations.

In this context, the SA aimed at describing the environment of the implementation sites in each Country. Points such as **welfare systems, after school activities, target groups** etc. were selected specifically for Icehearts Europe.

The SA provided first a **demographic overview of the implementation sites**. This explained how many implementation sites were in the pilot countries, where exactly these were, and their size in terms of population. The second section presented an overview of the ethnic, socioeconomic, and language issues that may lead to social marginalization and that the programme thus aims to address. The third section described the social instruments and resources already available that could be used by local sites to create a network of support for children. The focus has been on the after-school activities and, in particular, on the sport facilities available that could be made use of for the implementation of the programme.

The **Needs Assessment section (NA)** focused more on programme-related aspects, such as **mentor recruitment, team sport opportunities and related facilities, and resources available**. Moreover, it also addressed the recruitment of the programme participants and the kind of individual support to be offered, as well as the monitoring of the progress and indications on **how to maximise the long-term sustainability** of the programme.

In the Icehearts' Inspiration 1 and 2 below there is some of the information gathered through the SANA template for the pilot Countries, within the Icehearts Europe project framework.

In Appendix, the whole template.

For further information, please visit <https://www.icehearts.eu/resources>



ICEHEARTS' INSPIRATION 1. TOPICS FOR SITUATION ANALYSIS

POPULATION AND IMPLEMENTATION SITE CHARACTERISTICS

- Demographic characteristics of the region/city of implementation site
 - Environment of the implementation site
 - Location of the implementation site
 - Description and reason why the region/city/location of implementation has been chosen
-

TARGET GROUPS

- Main vulnerabilities of the children that need to be addressed in the region/city of implementation site
 - Potential target groups and related risk factors for social marginalisation
 - Identification of service and school system in the local community
 - Social allowances/benefits that are in place for families struggling with means of living
 - Age at which children enter primary/comprehensive school
 - Services/programmes (health, social, educational, mental health) available for all children at school/throughout the school year
 - For schools, availability of preventive (social, health and mental health) programmes or interventions for vulnerable children in need of additional support, including sports-based ones
-

SPORT AND AFTER SCHOOL ACTIVITIES IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

- After-school activities organised by local schools
- Sport facilities for children, and possibilities for them to participate in organised sport and in leisure-time physical activities in the local area
- For Icehearts Europe team, possibility to use sport facilities provided by the local community

ICEHEARTS' INSPIRATION 2. TOPICS FOR NEEDS ASSESSMENT

MENTOR RECRUITMENT

- Challenges in hiring of Icehearts Europe mentors
- Main requirements, skills, work experience, education, and personal characteristics of the mentors
- Employment contract of the mentors
- Legal challenges in the recruitment process

RECRUITMENT OF INTERVENTION PARTICIPANTS

- Plan for recruiting children
- Plan for co-operating with other stakeholders (schools, social services, sport clubs, etc.) to reach the target group
- Engaging parents and children
- How to motivate children to participate in the intervention

INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT ACCORDING TO CHILDREN'S NEEDS

- Challenges in providing individualised mentoring to specific subgroups and/or children with some specific vulnerabilities
- Coordination and cooperation between Icehearts Europe staff and other services (health, social, educational, mental health) in the community

ACCESS TO FACILITIES AND RESOURCES

School as a working environment for the Icehearts Europe mentor

- Possibility of access in schools to provide individual support during the school day
- Possibility of access to schools for the children in the team
- Possibility to organise sports and other activities within schools

Facilities of local community and sport clubs

- Possibility of using the facilities of local communities and sports clubs
- Accessibility of local facilities for children/parents participating in the programme
- Supporting children/families in travelling to the facilities where team activities take place

TEAM SPORT AND AFTER SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

- Team-sport activities to offer the children
- Other sport /after-school activities planned to offer the children
- How to motivate children to participate in team sport and related challenges
- How to guarantee resources and equipment needed to start team activities

EXPECTED OUTCOMES REGARDING PARTICIPATING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

SOURCES

- World Health Organization. *Mental health of adolescents. Key facts.* <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health>
- Clarke, C. and O. Thévenon (2022), "Starting unequal: How's life for disadvantaged children?", *OECD Papers on Well-being and Inequalities*, No. 06, OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/a0ec330c-en>
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- Icehearts Brief in English. <https://www.icehearts.eu/Brief-In-English/>
- Icehearts Europe Project. Pilots. <https://www.icehearts.eu/pilots>
- A toolkit on how to implement social prescribing. Manila: World Health Organization Regional Office for the Western Pacific; 2022. <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/354456/9789290619765-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

PHASE 2

***IDENTIFYING AND INVOLVING
KEY ACTORS***

TARGET GROUP

In the area in which the Organisation operates, children and adolescents who are in a particularly vulnerable situation can take part in the intervention based on the Icehearts Europe model. Their characteristics vary depending on the area of implementation of the intervention and will be defined by the Organisation.

Each team consists of two groups:

- the **core group**, consisting of vulnerable children/adolescents, considered to be at high risk of social exclusion
- the **balancing group**, composed of the children with the least needs or vulnerabilities.

Since this is a preventive intervention, the assembly of an Icehearts Europe team should start as early as possible, preferably when the child is around the age of 6.

The Organisation manages the team assembly, in collaboration with other service professionals in the area.

Icehearts Europe is a preventive, long-term programme that aims to involve children and adolescents for as long as possible.

The “journey” of a team, based on the original Finnish experience, should last up to 12 years (from 6 to 18 years of age of the participants) under the guidance of the same mentor.

To promote the well-being of the participants, the programme takes a **holistic approach** that offers a comprehensive support: at school, at home, and in the team.

NETWORK AND STAKEHOLDERS

To implement the programme, the Organisation interfaces with resources and services already present in the territory; therefore, it should identify a local network of key professionals (such as social workers, school principals and teachers, professionals from the social/health area) to be involved in various activities, including:

- the process of assembling the Icehearts Europe team, to identify children who could benefit from participation in the programme
- the realisation of sports and recreational activities by providing equipped areas
- support to the mentor and to the Organisation in case of situations deemed particularly complex.

To create a local network to support the activities of the mentor and the Icehearts Europe team, it is important for the Organisation to have up-to-date names and contact details of the professionals to be networked.

The stakeholders the Organisation can address and involve are many. Examples are given below (Table 1):

**TABLE 1.
POTENTIAL STAKEHOLDERS BY AREA OF ACTIVITY**

AREA OF ACTIVITY	POTENTIAL STAKEHOLDERS
PROGRAMMING	Regional/local school offices
	Ministry of Education
	National/regional/local government departments for sport
	National/regional/local public health institutions
	Ministry of Health
	Possible financiers
SERVICES AND RESOURCES	Schools
	Employment and vocational learning services
	Municipal social services
	Community sport facilities
	Voluntary Organisations (e.g. Organisations for human rights)
	Centres for Children and Young people
	Health, social and health promotion assistance
	Civil Service
Students Internship	
PROTECTION	Authority for Children and Adolescents

THE SCHOOL

In the Finnish model, a large part of the mentor's activity is carried out at school, either at the end of the school day or during class time.

In Icehearts Europe too, the school can play a strategic role and be one of the places of choice for the creation of teams and the conduct of activities.

Collaboration with school staff is therefore encouraged, and in particular: with teachers, because they are central to the daily lives of children and adolescents, whose schooling they are familiar with, and with school administrators so that they can support the Organisation by creating the conditions for implementing activities within the school.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES

The implementation of an Icehearts Europe intervention programme requires **economic resources and long-term sustainable funding**, ideally up to 12 years for each team.

As early as the planning stage of the intervention, the Organisation should look for possible funding opportunities:

- externally, with funding from participation in calls for tenders, national/local allocations, activities of services and institutions in the area, donations, donations to the third sector
- internally, reallocating the economic resources already available.

The early identification and involvement of the right stakeholders is crucial for the feasibility and sustainability of the intervention.



ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL

In implementing what is presented in this guide, it is recommended to involve all potential stakeholders during the entire implementation process and to adapt the intervention to the local context.

SOURCES

- Smolej, Mirka (2017) *Icehearts Finland: Manual (Icehearts: Käsikirja)*. Helsinki: Suomen Icehearts Ry
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PHASE 3

PLANNING THE PROGRAMME

ROLES AND ACTIVITIES OF THE ORGANISATION

Grassroots sport Organisations are responsible for planning the activities of the intervention and must consider the context in which they operate, the **financial and human resources** available, the **administrative and logistical aspects**, and the **reference regulatory system**.

The following is a general example of the different steps the organisation should take care of.



STEP 1 PREPARATION

ESTABLISHING A CORE IMPLEMENTATION TEAM

Set up a core implementation team of experts within the Organisation dedicated to the implementation of the intervention, including monitoring, supervision, and mentor support.

IDENTIFYING STAKEHOLDERS AND SERVICES

Identify stakeholders and Community services relevant to the implementation of the programme and decide on the best way to involve them.

Use the expertise and experience of stakeholders to refine the intervention and strengthen their support.

IDENTIFYING A CONTACT PERSON FOR THE NETWORK OF COLLABORATORS

Within the territorial services identified as relevant for the success of the intervention, the core implementation team should identify a contact person within the Organisation who is responsible for the establishment and maintenance of the local network of stakeholders and who interfaces with it in the event of situations deemed particularly complex.

ASSESSING THE COSTS OF THE PROGRAMME

The cost assessment concerns both the implementation of the intervention and its long-term sustainability.

Once the availability of financial resources has been assessed, staff must consider the cost of different budget items, including:

- the salary of the mentor
- the use of spaces for carrying out activities
- materials and equipment for the team
- insurance costs
- the organisation of activities such as outings and summer camps
- the long-term sustainability of the intervention.

STEP 2 MENTOR

RECRUITING THE MENTOR

The Icehearts Europe mentor is the professional who implements the intervention with the children in the team.

The Organisation:

- recruits the mentor, who has defined **requirements** in terms of training, education, and personal skills
- provides him/her with an **ad hoc training program** that also includes information on the local context and the relevant regulatory framework
- **involves** him/her in all phases of the implementation
- defines the **code of conduct**, i.e., the behaviour and procedures to be followed to protect the children who are in the team
- **gives the mentor adequate remuneration** for his/her activity within Icehearts Europe.

Each Icehearts Europe mentor is dedicated to a team of no more than 20 children who should ideally be mentored for a period of up to 12 years, from 6 to 18 years of age.

ROLES AND ACTIVITIES OF THE ICEHEARTS EUROPE MENTOR

The Icehearts Europe mentor is a qualified and specially trained person (identified by the grassroot sport Organisation) whose aim is to foster the long-term development of disadvantaged children needing special support and attention.

The available literature on the subject suggests that mentoring is also an effective strategy for preventing or reducing deviant behaviour and improving social and school functioning.

REQUIREMENTS OF THE MENTOR

The minimum requirement to be a mentor is a university or professional **background in social, health, sports, or physical**

education. It is desirable for the mentor to have experience in **conducting group motor activities of an educational and recreational nature**, as well as expertise in **child protection**.

Further requirements may be defined by the Organisations according to local legislation.

Given the interpersonal nature of his or her role, **the mentor is hopefully a patient, prosocial, empathetic, proactive, outgoing person with a secure attachment style.**

The sports Organisation with which he/she is affiliated provides the mentor with specific training to inform and prepare him/her to work according to the Icehearts Europe approach, considering his/her background and experience.

The mentor's activity is subject to monitoring and supervision by the Organisation to enable him/her to have a full understanding of the progress of the mentoring relationship.

MENTOR'S MAIN TASKS AND ROLES

Each Icehearts Europe mentor leads a team of up to 20 children of similar age, but with different needs and abilities.

A mentor's main task is to support and guide children or adolescents in his or her team, with the aim of promoting the development of social and emotional competences, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, which are necessary to prevent social isolation and foster positive development.

In other words, the aim of mentoring is to accompany children in their development and help them to become responsible adults and to set specific short- and long-term goals.

If children or their families have problems that would require specialised professional intervention, the mentor may report them to the Organisation to which he/she refers.

The relationship of trust that is established between the mentor and the child is the fundamental requirement for the programme to be effective: by acting in an empathic manner and with an attitude that places the child at the centre of attention, the mentor becomes a reference figure and a trusted adult to whom the child can turn for help and to seek solutions to problems together. Children may have different support needs, e.g., related to their families' financial situation, psychological problems or learning difficulties. For this relationship of trust to be established, however, it is necessary for the mentor's presence to be continuous and long-lasting.

The alternation of different mentors is therefore not recommended, except for reasons that make the continuous presence of the same mentor impossible.

Taking into consideration the different needs, interests and characteristics of the children who are part of the team, the mentor chooses together with them the extra-curricular sports and recreational activities to be practised by the team. The chosen sporting activity, whether team or individual, that the children play together becomes a means of experiencing mutual understanding, help, relationship, and acceptance.

Sports and recreational activities are a valuable intervention tool;

however, they should not be considered the only activities to be offered. Having a good attitude towards school and learning is a priority objective for children and their parents. Therefore, the Icehearts Europe programme must also be able to provide learning support at school, including support in doing homework and studying.

Since the Icehearts Europe programme is based on a child-centred approach, the mentor can organise one-to-one meetings with the child who needs them and involve him/her in additional activities of his/her liking.

The choice of activities to be carried out, their times and frequency are decided taking into account the resources available and the context in which they take place; however, they must be carried out on a regular basis and a well-defined schedule must be established, which must be clearly communicated to all those involved.

A SUPPORT NETWORK FOR THE MENTOR

Although there is only one mentor per team of children, the mentor is not left alone when decisions must be made. The core implementation team of experts within the Organisation is present and available to help, provide support and advice, and together with the mentor makes the necessary decisions concerning the activities to be carried out or the more complex situations affecting the child.

Whenever possible, mentors can organise themselves in such a way as to gather several teams in the same place and support each other while carrying out activities. For instance, they can share the same spaces during afternoon homework assistance.

If necessary, the mentor may request the presence of adult volunteers during regular activities and during less frequently organised events and activities (such as educational visits)

STEP 3 CHILDREN

ASSEMBLING THE ICEHEARTS EUROPE TEAM

For the process of assembling the team, certain conditions and factors in relation to children should be considered, such as: living in deprived areas, in large families, in single parent or in culturally and linguistically disadvantaged families (e.g. migrants and refugees); having special educational needs or difficulties in dealing with relationships and emotions; needing help with homework or difficulties at school; not having the opportunity to participate in a sports-recreational activity outside school.

In general, targeting socio-economically disadvantaged areas or neighbourhoods can increase synergy with resources, services and institutions already present in the area.

In compliance with the relevant regulations and coordinating with the local services, professionals and stakeholders involved, **the Organisation defines the criteria for identifying the chil-**

dren: first the core group and then the balancing group, and the relevant recruitment methods.

In addition to the Organisation carrying out the intervention, **it is advisable that the services involved in the area**, such as the following, **participate in the process of identifying the children who will be part of the team:**

- schools
- municipal social services
- voluntary organisations (including voluntary sports organisations)
- youth centres
- cultural organisations
- health and social care services
- competent authorities and guarantors for children and adolescents.

These services may act as the intermediary between the parents/guardians of the children and the Organisation, while respecting the protection of the personal data of the children and families involved.



PRESENTATION OF THE INTERVENTION AND INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS/GUARDIANS

The involvement of children in the team must be implemented bearing in mind certain aspects:

- voluntary participation in the intervention is an essential condition: no family (children and parents/guardians) should feel obliged to accept
- the enrolment process must respect the privacy of all those involved.

In the Icehearts' Inspiration 3 a possible process for enrolling children is given as an example only.

ICEHEARTS' INSPIRATION 3. "GUESS WHO'S JOINING THE TEAM?"

In the city of HeartVille, the national grassroots sport Organisation Sport Love is the first in the Country to implement the Icehearts Europe programme. Some schools are involved as well, and the activities are realised in a neighbourhood with a high rate of immigration, where Sport Love has its own facilities.

Shortly after the start of the school year, the Sport Love staff is contacted by the principals of two participant schools, who identified two children that could benefit from participating in Icehearts Europe: Mary, an 8-year-old foreign girl who just arrived in HeartVille with her mother and three younger siblings; and Mirco, a 12-year-old boy who exhibits oppositional behaviour.

The schools contact the parents of the two children and, with their permission, put them in touch with two Icehearts Europe mentors from Sport Love: Andrea, who takes care of a team of 6- to 8-year-olds, and Anne, who mentors a team of 11- to 13-year-olds. Andrea and Anne contact the children's parents; explain to them both what the Icehearts Europe programme is all about and why the respective school proposed participation of Mary and Mirco.

The families show interest and agree to personally meet the mentors and the Sport Love staff members involved in the programme. During the meeting, which takes place in the schools respectively attended by Mirco and Mary, more details are given about Icehearts Europe, the role of the mentors, the activities carried out together with the team, and the benefit the children could have by participating in the programme.

At the end of the meeting, having obtained all the information and understood the benefits that may arise from participation in Icehearts Europe, the families agree to Mary and Mirco joining an Icehearts Europe team. They sign an agreement outlining: the description of the activities that will be carried out and how they will be carried out, details of insurance cover, a description of the procedure for processing personal data, consent to any audio-visual filming and transport of the child to the out-of-school venues, and the names and contact details of all professionals involved.

The meeting was also useful for the mentors to better identify the needs of the children and their families: Andrea understood the language and integration difficulties of Mary and her family and therefore, together with the staff, decided that she will organise help for Mary in studying the language spoken in the Country and provide her family with references to resources available in the area such as language courses and family support services. Anne, in turn, made aware of the behaviour presented by Mirco and the parents' difficulty in managing it, plans to work with the child on managing emotions, supported by other staff members.

Now, all that remains is to introduce Mary and Mirco to their respective Icehearts Europe teams!

THE ICEHEARTS EUROPE TEAM BASED ON CHILDREN'S NEEDS

The complete assembling of teams does not happen immediately but may take some time.

The children involved in Icehearts Europe teams are likely to be different in terms of background, strengths, and needs, such as support in studying and learning, school continuity, opportunities for sports or structured recreational activities that families cannot provide. The programme may also involve children with psychological, relational, cognitive, or physical difficulties.

The **core group** of the Icehearts Europe team is the most vulnerable children with the greatest needs, whom it would be desirable to include in the programme from the age of 6-7 years. Around the core group the complete team will be built up over time, through the involvement of the **balancing group**, consisting of the children with the least needs. It is important to pay attention that the group does not include too many children with complex needs.

The **teams are homogeneous in age**, with an internal gap of less than three years.

In Icehearts Finland, boys and girls have their own teams, and they also have joint activities. The choice to work with gender-diverse teams is at the discretion of the Organisation's internal staff.

Based on the original Finnish experience, the course of an Icehearts Europe team could last up to 12 years (ideally, from 6 to 18 years of age of the participants), under the guidance of the same mentor.

STEP 4 A HOLISTIC APPROACH

PLAN ACTIVITIES

The Organisation's staff defines the activities to be proposed to the team, the way they are to be carried out, the place, the time and the frequency, based on assumptions such as:

- team characteristics
- budget available
- mentor training and experience
- spaces available to the organisation
- access to school premises
- possibility of using and accessing local resources (sports facilities, community centres, parks and green areas, playgrounds etc.) for the team's sport and recreational activities.

When choosing the activities to be carried out, it is essential to listen to the opinion of the children/adolescents in the team.

It may happen that the mentor needs the support of other adult figures to take care of logistical and organisational aspects (on outings, accompanying children to team activities etc.): parents of the participating children, teachers, trainees, or figures within the organisation may help as volunteers and for this they must be recognised and protected in accordance with the relevant local regulations.

The Organisation is the main interlocutor, with which the involved institutions and community services interface, guaranteeing continuity and monitoring the activities of the teams, where they take place.

Generally, team activities are carried out after school hours, in the afternoon. These include activities such as homework help, structured and unstructured games, recreational sports, team sports.

The choice of activities to be carried out, their times and frequency are decided taking into account the resources available and the context in which they take place; however, they must be carried out on a regular basis and a well-defined schedule must be established, which must be clearly communicated to all those involved.

The frequency and type of activities offered to the teams depend both on the age of the children and what the neighbourhood /area can offer and change as the children grow up and become adolescents.

Programme settings

THE SCHOOL

School years are very important for the development of children's cognitive abilities, and any difficulties encountered in the school environment and related to learning can demotivate the child and lead to recurring disappointments.

Depending on the different contexts in which the intervention is implemented, the school may also be one of the settings in which the enrolment of the children who will be part of the team begins.

It is the Organisation's core implementation team to propose the programme to the school which one or more of the children in the team attend: if the school accepts, an agreement must be drawn up with the school authority covering how the mentor's activities will be carried out, in accordance with the relevant regulations and in agreement with the parents/guardians.

If an agreement is made between the Organisation and the school to carry out Icehearts Europe activities, the mentor becomes an additional adult resource for both the Icehearts Europe participant who need it, supporting them in their learning, and for the whole class.

SPORT

Children and adolescents can greatly benefit from participation in grassroots sport, understood as “physical leisure activities practised regularly at non-professional level by people of all ages for health, educational or social purposes”¹.

Physical activity and sport are central tools of the Icehearts Europe model, and this is why the mentor works with the team:

- proposing sports and recreational activities that are accepted by all members (strengthening internal team cohesion)
- creating contacts with sports associations, coaches, and infrastructures
- offering an example of a welcoming and safe community.

THE COMMUNITY

In planning the team’s activities, the Organisation may benefit of the contribution of local cultural and recreational organisations aimed at improving the relational dimension, fostering socialisation, and encouraging expressive and artistic growth. Through collaboration with these resources, it is possible to propose new opportunities for leisure and out-of-school activities to the team.

Working with families

Usually, even children who need the support of a mentor can also rely on their parents/guardians, siblings, and peers. Therefore, if needed and possible, **a mentor should interact with all figures in the child’s family and friendship network**. To provide the best support to the child, it is important to create alliances with this network, mostly aimed at agreeing on common goals and activities to support the child. However, every family is different: while a mentor will most likely interact with all family members to some degree, there is no guarantee that he/she will always get full cooperation.

The Icehearts Europe approach is based on the idea that **a child is well if his or her family is well**. Therefore, the mentor should cooperate with the parents/guardians and maintain regular contact with them. If appropriate, he/she may involve them in team activities, outings, and trips to strengthen their relationship with the child.

When necessary, the mentor can become a facilitator both in interactions between the family and the school attended by the child (e.g., by participating in meetings with teachers) and in interactions between the family and community services (e.g. by informing the family about the offer and available resources that might be useful for them).

¹ Erasmus+. EU programme for education, training, youth and sport. Glossary of terms - Sport
<https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-d-glossary-of-terms/glossary-of-terms-sport>

Working with other professionals

The school is commonly a setting for the implementation of formal mentoring programs for young people.

According to the Finnish experience, the Icehearts mentor is in the school to support the children in the teams working as an extra resource to the school. Ideally, the mentor should have the opportunity to access the school premises, cooperate and communicate with teaching staff, and receive feedback regularly on how the children benefit from the intervention.

The mentor collaborates with professionals from community services: social and health services, third sector organisations, child and adolescent protection authorities, etc. For instance, should the children be in the care of social services, a regular collaboration with social workers is essential to ensure the child's well-being.

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PHASE 4

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The monitoring and evaluation process operates with a **dual purpose**. Firstly, it focuses on the **continuous and systematic monitoring** of the activities foreseen by the model to facilitate the identification of possible weaknesses and to allow the implementation of improvement changes that support the quality of the implementation of the intervention. Secondly, it operates in a broader perspective, focusing on the **actual implementation of good practices**.

Additionally, data gathered through monitoring and evaluation processes could support the convincing case for financial support and clearer evidence that investment has impacted on wider objectives.

In the Icehearts Europe framework, the latter is achieved **by monitoring and evaluating the relevance and impact that the application of the model has on the beneficiaries of the project**: the children and mentors.

With reference to the beneficiaries, the objective of the monitoring and evaluation process is to:

- i. understand the relevance and impact of Icehearts Europe activities in general
- ii. be a reflective process to help participants, their families and mentors evaluate and appreciate progress.

Within the Icehearts Europe project in which this guide was developed, the approach adopted is based on a robust methodology incorporating the Theory of Change and the Most Significant Change theory.

Through a rigorous and participative process, the theory of change allows the actors involved to plan short, medium, and long-term objectives by relating them to the results observed, emphasising the hypotheses and pathways through which the intervention model is articulated, tracing the connections between the proposed activities, their implementation and the results obtained. This approach makes it possible to identify, in



a structured and evidence-based manner, indicators of success that operators will have to monitor systematically to make changes and/or improvements where necessary.

Indicators are defined as signs of change or progress. They may be both **quantitative** (i.e., to describe population or determine cause-effect correlations) **and qualitative**. These latter are based on the analysis of texts, interviews, opinions, and evaluations, and contribute to go more in depth of specific topics and offer indications that allow contextualising the quantitative results. Qualitative evaluations are conducted after the achievement of each objective and make it possible to examine mainly: effectiveness, usefulness and satisfaction of the results achieved, user satisfaction and level of maturity of the knowledge developed by the beneficiaries. They will also allow for constructive feedback aimed at developing and improving practices through open questions and suggestions for improvements.

Monitoring and evaluation processes thus enable practitioners to obtain both quantitative and qualitative evidence on the effectiveness of the model. This holistic approach helps to make decisions, identify good practice, and to make continuous improvements to the intervention model.

Through a participatory iterative process that allows for a comprehensive, person-centred evaluation of the intervention implementation process, children, mentors, and all stakeholders are invited to share their personal experiences and narratives about observed changes.

Adopting this integrated approach makes it possible to:

- **have a holistic understanding of the impact of the intervention:** Icehearts Europe aims to promote positive changes in the lives of vulnerable and at-risk children and to promote their mental health through participation in play and recreational activities
- **focus on processes and pathways:** this aspect is particularly relevant as the model envisages long-term mentoring and support for vulnerable children; therefore, it is necessary to assess whether the hypothesised pathways of change have been followed and possibly make changes in the implementation
- **Involving stakeholders:** by focusing on the well-being of participants and their families, Icehearts Europe is naturally inclusive. The processes of monitoring, evaluating, and sharing results improve transparency, accountability, and knowledge dissemination within the network
- **continuous learning and improvement:** the integration of the two theories presented favours a cycle of continuous learning and improvement as well as the effectiveness and sustainability of the model in different cultural contexts.

MONITORING

On-going evaluation of the implemented interventions in order to monitor the achievement of the objectives according to the set timeframe and budget.

EVALUATION

Targeted evaluation of implemented interventions in order to examine the achievement of objectives in an effective and efficient manner.

The Monitoring and Evaluation system consists of the following steps:

- i. Outline objectives, expected results, hypotheses and pathways through which changes can be made according to the philosophy of the Icehearts Europe model, following the theory of change
- ii. Identify indicators of success of activities and systematically monitor achieved objectives using qualitative-quantitative tools
- iii. Analysing the data collected: quantitative data will allow an assessment of the overall impact of the Icehearts Europe model; qualitative data, on the other hand, will be useful to better understand the experiences, stories and changes observed among participants
- iv. Identifying the most significant changes at the level of participants, families, mentors, and stakeholders by applying the theory of most significant change
- v. Produce reports containing progress, results, challenges, and lessons learnt to be shared with key stakeholders.

SOURCES

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INSIGHTS

FROM ICEHEARTS FINLAND

Icehearts activity has a long history. The rapid regional spread and extensive evidence of effectiveness and impact advocates the introduction of the Icehearts model nationally and internationally.

**Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare.
Management of Health and Wellbeing Promotion.
Evaluation of the Icehearts model, 2023**

LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY.

The key to long-term funding is cooperation. In Finland, once the need of social support for children in a certain area is recognized, municipalities fund the yearly expenses of teams and cooperate in implementing the model. Then, Icehearts Finland is responsible for the recruitment of mentors, one for each team, for a period of 12 years.

MONITORING.

To receive funding, Organisations are increasingly required to address the impact and effectiveness of their activities. Therefore, it is essential to monitor activities regularly and collect relevant data. Icehearts Finland monitors its activities and uses the information collected to evaluate their impact and effectiveness. Monitoring also offers mentors the opportunity to reflect on and improve their educational work.

BE CONFIDENT AND BELIEVE THAT GOOD WORK WILL BE NOTICED AND REWARDED.

It should be noted that Finnish Icehearts already has a long history, and that both the model and the Organisation have developed over the years. Originally, activities were done purely as volunteer work in addition to the daily work of the Icehearts founders. Moreover, right from the start the Icehearts path was planned to be a 12-year journey, although not as comprehensive as it is now. The first full-time employee was hired in 2002, six years after Icehearts was founded. The development of the model and the scope of Icehearts activities in terms of the number of teams have required time and perseverance as well as efforts making Icehearts known, for example, writing blogs and articles as well as contacting stakeholders.

CHILD-ORIENTED APPROACH.

Mentors work for the children and with the children advocating for them and constantly standing as their allies. Since each child in the team is a unique individual with specific needs, the support provided by the mentors should be tailored to meet the specific needs and strengths of each child. This means that the work of the mentors cannot be entirely structured in advance; rather, the Organisation gives mentors some autonomy in defining their work. While this might sound challenging, the experience highlighted the motivating impact of autonomy on mentors.

Find the right mentor. Icehearts' work is a long-term job carried on with disadvantaged children. Therefore, it is essential to recruit mentors with care to find the right person, committed and enthusiastic. When recruiting a mentor, Icehearts Finland values a child-oriented approach, good attitude, teamwork skills, perseverance, and heart.

Network and stakeholders. In Finland, mentors select children for the teams together with preschools, schools, and social service professionals. Through cooperation the mentor gets the necessary help and support in the selection of children who are believed to benefit from Icehearts and authorities get to better understand the role of the mentor, i.e. an adult who advocates for the children. In the Icehearts' Inspiration 4, the point of view of two stakeholders from both the municipality and the school are reported.



ICEHEARTS' INSPIRATION 4. THE STAKEHOLDERS' VOICE



The Icehearts approach offers a flexible and cost-effective way for the municipality to implement preventive child protection work, supporting the children along with their family through the journey from childhood to adulthood. Thanks to this approach, it is possible to get both short-term and long-term results. In particular, the municipality's own initiatives do not necessarily achieve the same level of long-term effectiveness. Compared to a professional from the municipality, an Icehearts mentor is able to create a more personal relationship with the children or youths and their families. A personal and trusting relationship is a necessary condition for positive results in educational work."

Petteri Lahti
Head of the Sports Unit
City of Pori, Education and Culture Department, Sports and Youth Unit



The Icehearts model is a system that cannot be compared to any other, because it is a holistic, comprehensive model to support children. I have seen nothing like this during my 29-years career. The results are amazing. As a teacher, I am grateful to have been able to work with mentors in and outside my classroom. I have learnt a lot without making an extra effort, taking time to plan or losing my role as teacher, only receiving something otherwise unreachable - how to face a child with dignity and respect, how to stand for the child no matter what and how to always see the good and positive. The presence of a mentor has an impact on the whole class and school community by creating equality, respect and empathy."

Riikka Heinzmann
Consultative Teacher and Teacher of Music (MEd)
Vantaa, Finland

ASSEMBLING THE TEAM.

When assembling and then expanding the Icehearts team, it is crucial to consider the team's capacity to provide and receive social support. It is important to pay attention that the group does not include too many children with complex needs. Past experiences have shown that, in this case, both the group dynamics and the mentor's ability to support and assist the children become significantly more challenging. To ensure that the teams can successfully conduct their activities, it is important to find a balance that accommodates the different starting points, challenges, and levels of difficulties among the children. It has been seen that the involvement of the mentor in the selection of children promotes his or her commitment to the team and long-term work.

Icehearts has found most challenging working with kids with more severe symptoms, who are not (yet) receiving any support from the mental health services. While Icehearts cannot replace any professional treatment (e.g., psychological and psychiatric treatment), with long-term support it can be a valuable additional resource for these children and their families¹.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS.

The key to effective Icehearts work in schools is to get schools committed to Icehearts: it is essential that the school management commits to and supports the Icehearts work. In Finland, a significant part of Icehearts work is done in the school environment, especially during the first years of activity. Moreover, regularly informing the school staff has also been found to be a good practice to reduce misunderstandings and create a basis for flexible and open cooperation.

MAKE CONNECTIONS WITH THE CHILD'S FAMILY EARLY ON.

Collaboration with families is an important part of Icehearts' work. It is an educational partnership between the family and the mentor. At the beginning, it is enough to have contact with the family; later on, cooperation can be deepened. The main aspect is that the mentor gives the parents/guardians a positive perspective on the child labelled as "difficult", as well as being an extra adult in parents/guardians burdened everyday life.

WORK OF THE MENTOR.

In the work of a mentor, peer support is a key source of emotional support. In Finland, for example, when establishing teams in new areas, it is required that at least two teams are established at the same time.

The main goal, however, is to establish a whole chain of teams in the area. This would allow for activities to be offered to different age groups, as well as greater peer support for mentors.

Icehearts Finland's mentors find their work meaningful and inspiring. Likewise, it is said to be demanding and burdensome. The Organisation should pay attention to this aspect and advise

¹ Appelqvist-Schmidlechner, Kaija & Kekkonen, Marjatta (2020) Muutokset Icehearts-lasten käyttäytymisessä ja tunne-elämässä. Tuloksia Icehearts -pitkittäistutkimuksesta. Tutkimuksesta tiiviisti 6/2020. Helsinki: Terveystieteiden tutkimuslaitos <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-343-497-4>

the mentors right from the start to take care of their own coping and to recover adequately. In Finland, the Icehearts support group takes care of this by supporting mentors in their work. A mentor who feels good can accept and face children's good and bad days and offer them the support they need.

The mentor should keep in mind that the Icehearts work is about long-term support. The goal is to achieve both short-term and long-term results, but permanent results are achieved over time, there is no need to rush.

BE AWARE!

Icehearts has a very good reputation in Finland. Some parties may seek to benefit from it and use the Icehearts' target group for dubious purposes. Avoid contributing to articles if their purposes are unclear, do not accept donations from those who expect something in return, and do not work with volunteers who seem to be more interested in improving their own reputation than actually supporting children.

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Juhani Järvenpää

MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROJECT:

www.icehearts.eu

ICEHEARTS EUROPE PROJECT

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