



# CIRCLE OF SECURITY

## in ESC Mobilities

*A practical toolkit for mentors, coordinators and trainers in European Solidarity Corps projects*

**Developed by The GloRe Network**  
within the framework of the NEST project

2026

## Table of Contents

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[About The GloRe Network](#)

[About the NEST Project](#)

[Circle of Security in ESC Mobilities](#)

### [1. Introduction](#)

[1.1 Circle of Security in ESC Mobilities](#)

[1.2 How to Use this Toolkit](#)

### [2. Foundations of Security and Relationships](#)

[2.1 Theoretical Framework: Attachment Timeline](#)

[2.2 Reflection Walk: Secure Relationships and Concept Map](#)

### [3. Using COS in ESC and Mentoring Practice](#)

[3.1 Introducing the Circle of Security: Puzzle and ESC Application](#)

[3.2 Building Safer Spaces in ESC Projects](#)

[3.3 Using COS in Mentoring Practice: Active Listening](#)

[3.4 Mentoring from a Personal Perspective: Blindfolded Exploration Walk and Hands Exercise](#)

### [4. Annexes and Resources](#)

[4.1 Facilitator Tips for Emotional Safety and Regulation](#)

[4.2 Links and Resources](#)

[4.3 Session Materials](#)

### [5. Key Terms and Quick Reference](#)

[5.1 Glossary of Key COS Terms](#)

[5.2 COS Quick Reference Card](#)

## About The GloRe Network

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The GloRe Network (TGN) is a European-level ENGO established in Milan, Italy, in 2017. It operates as an international network of non-profit organisations working in the youth and volunteering sectors. As of 2025, TGN has a core staff of around five people and a membership of more than 50 organisations from over 20 Erasmus+ Programme Countries and additional countries worldwide.

TGN's mission is to strengthen the quality and impact of volunteering — with a particular focus, at European level, on the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) — by connecting organisations committed to shared standards, peer learning and strategic cooperation. Its name, GloRe, short for **Global Recognition**, reflects this commitment.

Since 2024, TGN has strategically reoriented its activities towards closer alignment with EU policies, particularly the ESC and the European Youth Strategy (Youth Goals 1, 3, 4 and 9). The network's main strategic pillars are:

- Improving the quality and inclusiveness of volunteering projects;
- Strengthening training, mentoring and capacity-building systems;
- Promoting recognition, advocacy and data collection on the impact of volunteering;
- Ensuring inclusive and participatory governance.

TGN member organisations collectively coordinate, send and host hundreds of ESC volunteers every year, while supporting thousands of local and international volunteers and reaching tens of thousands of individuals in their communities. The network's current activities include a structured ESC Volunteer Exchange System, the GloRe certification platform ([glorecertificate.net](http://glorecertificate.net)), online training courses for tutors and mentors, international training courses for youth workers, local workshops for mentors, a Pool of Experts in inclusion and safety, and an active advocacy strand engaging with EU institutions on ESC and youth volunteering policy.

This toolkit on the Circle of Security in ESC Mobilities is one of the methodological resources developed within this framework, designed to be shared freely across the network and beyond.

## About the NEST Project

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NEST is a capacity-building project led by The GloRe Network that brings together managers, mentors and tutors from ESC Lead Organisations to strengthen the quality, safety and advocacy capacity of the European Solidarity Corps network.

The project is structured around two core activities:

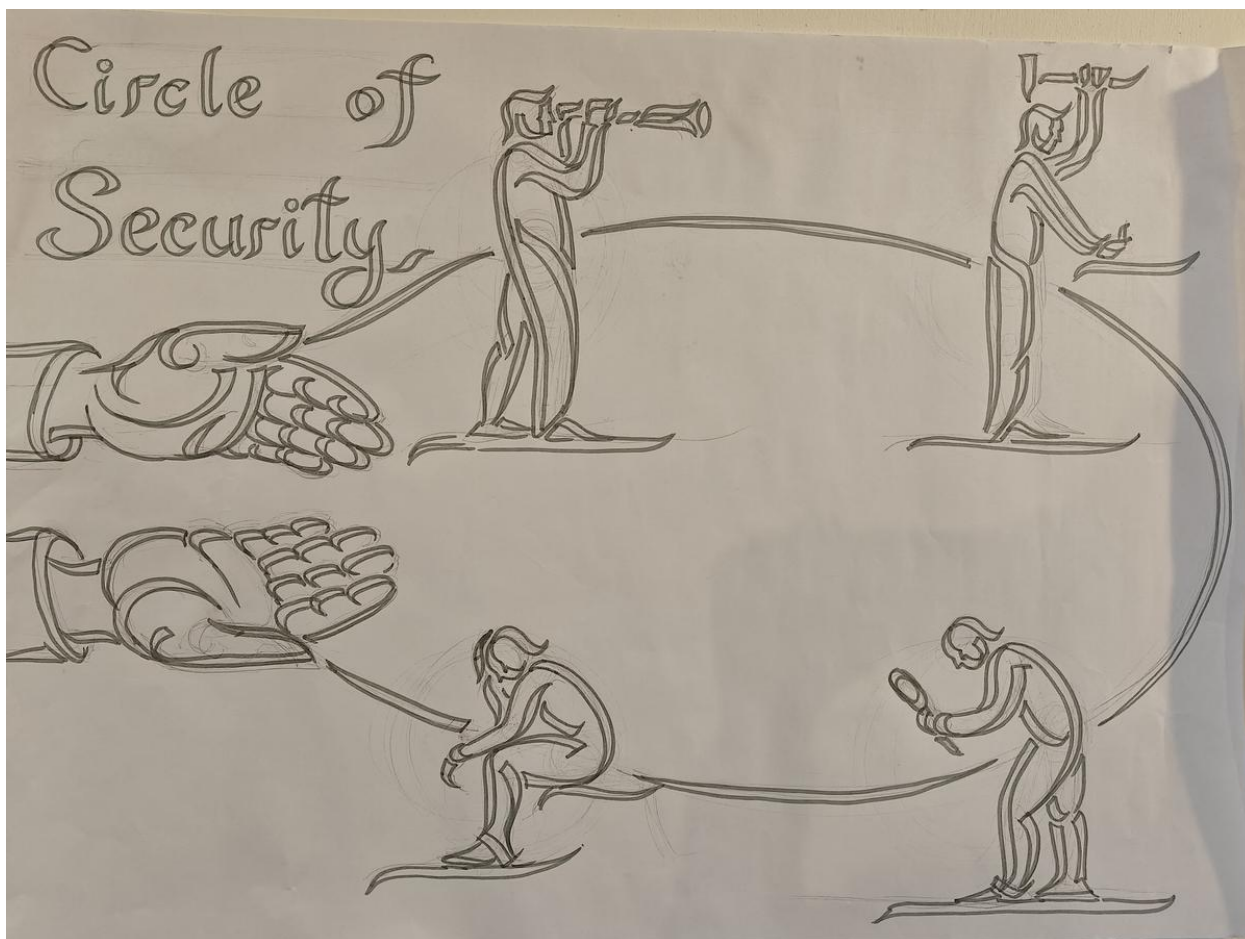
- **Networking Building Activity (NBA)** — Galbiate, Italy, 30 October–3 November 2025. A meeting of managers of ESC Lead Organisations focused on networking, the exchange of volunteers between partners, the exchange of good practices, the consolidation of ESC quality standards across the network, the advocacy strategy, and the update of the network's management bodies.
- **Training Course on Risk Mitigation and Conflict Management (TC)** — Crotone, Italy, 13–20 March 2026. A six-day training course for mentors and tutors aimed at transferring TGN's guidelines and quality standards, improving volunteer recruitment and selection, strengthening the capacity to support volunteers and manage conflict during the mobility, and reinforcing mentorship, monitoring and recognition practices.

Both activities are supported by online preparatory and follow-up meetings and feed into two of the project's main outputs: the **ESC Quality Standards Handbook** and the **Circle of Security in ESC Mobilities Toolkit** presented in this document. Participants and partner organisations are then called upon to disseminate what they have learned through local presentations, promotional activities reaching young people aged 18–30, and the sharing of the project's published resources.

## Circle of Security in ESC Mobilities

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Circle of Security in ESC Mobilities



Circle of Security is a relationship-based framework that translates decades of attachment research into a simple visual "circle" showing how children and other dependents move between the need to explore (secure base) and the need to return for comfort and protection (safe haven), with caregivers acting as the hands on this circle. The Circle of Security® model and diagram were originally developed as an accessible description of attachment theory by Robert Marvin (University of Virginia), together with Glen Cooper, Kent Hoffman and Bert Powell (Marycliff Institute, Spokane), who integrated over fifty years of early child development research into a video-based intervention for parents and young children. [circleofsecuritynetwork.org](http://circleofsecuritynetwork.org)

In practical terms, the Circle of Security helps ESC mentors and coordinators notice where someone is on this circle — whether they are ready to take risks and try new tasks, or whether they are overwhelmed and need protection and emotional support — and respond accordingly. It translates decades of attachment and neuroscience research into everyday questions and images that make it easier to read

volunteers' behaviour, understand their underlying needs, and keep "hands on the circle" in a way that feels bigger, stronger, wiser and kind rather than controlling or distant.

Circle of Security is a powerful framework for ESC mobilities because it translates complex attachment science into simple, practical tools for supporting volunteers' emotional needs in new and often challenging environments. ESC volunteering asks young people to leave home, enter unfamiliar cultures, take on responsibilities, and cope with uncertainty — all of which activate deep human needs for both exploration and belonging. Circle of Security offers a clear visual map of these needs: volunteers need a **secure base** to try new tasks and grow, and a **safe haven** to return to when they feel overwhelmed, homesick, or discouraged.

By helping mentors, coordinators, and host organisations see themselves as "hands on the circle," COS encourages them to respond to volunteers' distress and risk-taking with attuned support rather than judgement or control. This improves resilience, reduces dropout, and turns crises into learning moments, because volunteers feel seen, safe and accompanied while they explore their potential and contribute to their communities.

## 1.2 How to Use this Toolkit

This toolkit is a practical, experience-based guide to using Circle of Security in ESC mobilities, weaving together theory, self-reflection and concrete tools for mentoring and organisational practice. It starts from attachment theory and invites participants to explore their own empowering relationships, then introduces the COS map (secure base and safe haven) and helps mentors see themselves as "hands on the circle" for volunteers. Through structured workshops — reflection walks, puzzles, role plays, case analyses, active listening exercises, nature-based activities, and crisis "wailing wall" sessions — the toolkit supports organisations to build safer spaces, respond to volunteer distress and exploration with attuned care, and co-create simple COS-informed protocols for conflict and crisis, so that ESC experiences become both emotionally safer and more growth-promoting for everyone involved.

The toolkit is designed as a flexible, hands-on resource for ESC mentors, coordinators and trainers to integrate Circle of Security into their everyday practice. You can use it as a complete training programme — following the sequence from theory and personal reflection to COS tools, mentoring skills and crisis work — or you can pick individual workshops to fit the needs and time frame of your group. Each activity sheet includes objectives, recommended duration and group size, materials, and step-by-step guidance, so it can be easily adapted to different contexts, languages and organisational realities. The invitation is to experiment: start where your team is, use the exercises to build a shared language about secure base and safe haven, and gradually embed COS-informed ways of seeing, listening and responding throughout your ESC projects.

## 2. Foundations of Security and Relationships

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework: Attachment Timeline

|                                                                                                    |                                                          |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
|  <b>Duration</b>  | 45–60 minutes                                            |
|  <b>Group</b>     | 12–30 participants · groups of 3–5                       |
|  <b>Materials</b> | Milestone cards · flipchart · markers · tape · projector |

#### Introduction

Attachment theory has developed over many decades, beginning with John Bowlby's observations of children who needed a reliable "secure base" to balance exploration with proximity to caregivers, and Mary Ainsworth's Strange Situation studies, which described secure and insecure attachment patterns in infancy. From the 1970s, the Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (MLSPC) provided a cornerstone of attachment science: starting in 1975 and reporting key results in the 2000s, it showed how secure attachment in infancy predicts greater resilience, stable relationships and better adaptation in adulthood, demonstrating continuity across the life course. In the 1980s and 1990s, contributions from Sue Johnson on Emotionally Focused Therapy and Daniel Siegel on interpersonal neurobiology further linked attachment to emotion regulation, brain development and therapeutic change, while more recent work in the 2020s on embodied attachment has emphasised how safety and connection are experienced through the body, movement and sensory regulation, not only through ideas. Within this evolving field, Circle of Security emerged as a visual, relationship-based map that synthesises these insights into a simple diagram of secure base and safe haven, offering caregivers, mentors and organisations a practical way to recognise attachment needs in real time and respond in ways that build security across childhood, adolescence and adulthood, including in ESC mobilities.

#### Objectives

- To understand the historical development of attachment theory up to Circle of Security.
- To place Circle of Security within key milestones and more recent developments in embodied attachment.

 **Recommended duration:** 45–60 minutes.

 **Recommended group size:** 12–30 participants, working in small groups of 3–5 people.

#### Materials

- Cards or papers with milestones and dates from attachment theory.
- Flipchart paper or a large wall space for the timeline.
- Markers and tape or Blu Tack.
- Projector and computer for short videos.

### Activity development

- Divide participants into small groups and give each group one or more historical milestones from attachment theory.
- Ask each group to read its material, discuss why the milestone matters, and prepare a short explanation.
- In plenary, participants place their milestone on a collective timeline and explain their reasoning.
- The facilitator adjusts the order if needed, adds key context, and shows short videos to support understanding.
- Close by linking the timeline to Circle of Security as a practical framework for understanding emotional needs and secure relationships in ESC contexts.

 **Facilitator Note:** Run this before any emotionally activating exercises. Allow extra time if the group engages deeply with the video clips — a brief verbal intro to each researcher enriches the discussion.

## 2.2 Reflection Walk: Secure Relationships and Concept Map

|                                                                                                      |                                                                           |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  <b>Duration</b>  | 75–90 minutes                                                             |
|  <b>Group</b>     | 10–24 participants · sharing in groups of 3–4                             |
|  <b>Materials</b> | Reflection posters · origami paper · pens · Dixit/image cards · flipchart |

### Introduction

This activity invites participants to slow down and reconnect with their own lived experiences of feeling safe, encouraged and empowered in relationships. Through a silent reflection walk, origami boats and the use of evocative images, participants explore moments in which someone or a group offered them both "safe haven" and "secure base" qualities — comfort when things were hard and support when they were ready to grow. In doing so, they do not learn Circle of Security only as a theory; they feel its main concepts personally, naming when they have needed belonging and protection, when they have needed space to explore, and what concrete behaviours made these needs feel safely met. By sharing these stories in small groups and co-creating a concept map of the core ingredients of secure relationships, the group builds a shared language about what safety, trust and empowerment look like in practice, creating an experiential bridge to the later COS work on being "hands on the circle" in ESC mentoring.

### Objectives

- To help participants connect personally with experiences of safe and empowering relationships.
- To identify the main characteristics of secure relationships through reflection.

 **Recommended duration:** 75–90 minutes.

**👥 Recommended group size:** 10–24 participants; sharing phase in groups of 3–4 people.

### **Materials**

- A quiet room or outdoor space with several stations.
- Posters with reflection questions:
  - Think about a meaningful moment with someone (or a group) when you felt safe.
  - A moment when you could share difficult feelings and you felt comforted and accepted.
  - What feelings come to you when you think about this experience?
  - What was done and said that made you feel safe to express yourself freely?
  - Think about a meaningful moment with someone (or a group) when you felt secure.
  - A moment when you felt supported in taking risks, exploring and improving.
  - What feelings come to you when you think about this experience?
  - What was done and said that made you feel stronger, motivated and ready to grow?
  - What did you gain from these experiences?
  - What ideas and views about yourself did these experiences awaken?
  - Where in your body can you feel these memories?
  - What three words come to mind when you think about these experiences?
- Paper for origami boats.
- Pens or markers.
- Visual materials such as photos, Dixit cards, or image cards.
- Flipchart paper for a collaborative concept map.

### **Activity development**

- Begin with a short grounding exercise in a circle, inviting participants to breathe, stretch, and recall a moment that made them feel good.
- Explain that they will do a silent reflection walk focused on relationships that provide safety and strength.
- Each participant creates an origami boat where they will write answers to the questions found at the stations.
- Remind participants that they may skip any question that feels too vulnerable, and that self-care is part of the exercise.
- After the walk, guide participants to where the Dixit cards are placed and invite them to choose 2–3 images that represent what a secure relationship means to them.
- In small groups, they share their images and identify 4–8 core ingredients of secure relationships.
- In plenary, the group builds a collaborative concept map, supported by facilitator questions about links, logic, and missing elements.

 **Facilitator Note:** This is the most emotionally activating activity in the toolkit. Build group safety first and do not run it as the opening session. Have water and a quiet space available for anyone who needs a moment.

### 3. Using COS in ESC and Mentoring Practice

#### 3.1 Introducing the Circle of Security: Puzzle and ESC Application

|                                                                                                    |                                                |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
|  <b>Duration</b>  | 60 minutes                                     |
|  <b>Group</b>     | 12–28 participants · groups of 3–5             |
|  <b>Materials</b> | COS templates · puzzle pieces · markers · tape |

#### Objectives

- To understand the basic structure of the Circle of Security: secure base and safe haven.
- To apply the Circle of Security to typical ESC volunteer situations.

 **Recommended duration:** 60 minutes.

 **Recommended group size:** 12–28 participants, divided into groups of 3–5 people.

#### Materials

- Blank Circle of Security templates.
- Puzzle pieces with COS concepts such as "watch over," "help," "enjoy with," "comfort," and "organise feelings."
- Markers and tape.

#### Activity development

COS gives a simple, visual map of what every volunteer needs emotionally: a secure base to explore and a safe haven to come back to when things get hard. COS helps mentors see, name, and respond to volunteers' deeper needs, which keeps them safer, more motivated, and better able to learn from their ESC experience instead of being overwhelmed by it.

There are two basic human needs, and both need to be met for us to feel well and cope with life's challenges:

- The need to belong (comfort, attachment, safety);
- The need to differentiate and explore (autonomy, security).

Attachment relationships help us meet both needs. The more these needs are met in our close relationships, the more secure those relationships become, and the more such secure relationships we have, the greater our well-being. With this security, we cope better with difficulties and painful moments, and we are better able to take on the developmental tasks of each life stage. These two needs are both essential, but when they are activated, they usually cannot be fulfilled in exactly the same moment: at some times we primarily need belonging and safety, and at other times we primarily need differentiation and exploration. In this session, we will explore how mentors can meet these two needs when they are activated in ESC volunteers.

- Present the Circle of Security as a visual map of two core human needs: exploration and comfort.
- Ask: how does the need for comfort and safety show up? And the need for exploration and encouragement? Ask participants to discuss this in pairs, then invite them to share in plenary; write the signs they mention on the visual map and reinforce the idea that these signs might be misunderstood, and that it is crucial to be able to identify them so we can respond to volunteers in a way that builds security by attending to the needs they are experiencing.
- Distribute the puzzle pieces (actions that build security in relationships) to small groups.
- Ask each group to place the pieces where they belong on the circle and discuss their choices.
- Explain each of the actions in detail, going into the challenges that each one poses.
- After completing the puzzle, divide the group into smaller groups of five participants and ask them to discuss the following questions: "When does a volunteer need a safe haven?" and "When do they need a secure base?" Then invite them to share their answers in plenary and record them on the visual map.
- Close by reinforcing the idea that mentors and coordinators are "the hands on the circle."

 **Facilitator Note:** The discussion on when volunteers need safe haven vs. secure base is often the richest part — allow at least 10 minutes. The shark music video (used in 3.4) can be previewed here if the group is ready.

### 3.2 Building Safer Spaces in ESC Projects

|                                                                                                      |                                                               |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
|  <b>Duration</b>  | 45–60 minutes                                                 |
|  <b>Group</b>     | 12–35 participants                                            |
|  <b>Materials</b> | Project-phase posters · post-its · markers · flipchart · tape |

#### Introduction

Throughout the whole ESC project cycle, organisations and mentors can choose concrete actions that speak to both sides of the Circle of Security, building security through relationships rather than only through procedures. From pre-arrival preparation and welcoming rituals, to everyday check-ins, supervision, conflict protocols and farewell moments, each phase can include practices that offer volunteers a secure base (support to explore, take on responsibility and grow) and a safe haven (emotional and practical safety when they feel overwhelmed, homesick or discouraged). By planning the project with COS in mind — asking at each stage "How are we helping volunteers feel they belong and can rest?" and "How are we encouraging them to try, fail, learn and lead?" — organisations turn ordinary mentoring tools into hands on the circle that consistently answer both attachment needs.

#### Objectives

- To recognise existing practices that foster safety and trust in ESC projects.

- To collect concrete organisational actions that strengthen secure relationships and safe spaces.

 **Recommended duration:** 45–60 minutes.

 **Recommended group size:** 12–35 participants.

#### **Materials**

- Posters for each ESC project phase: recruitment and selection, pre-departure training, welcoming, on-arrival training, mid-term evaluation, mentoring, final evaluation, follow-up.
- Post-its or A4 sheets placed on the floor or walls.
- Markers.
- Flipchart paper for clustering ideas.
- Tape or Blu Tack.

#### **Activity development**

- Introduce the question: what do organisations and projects already do to create safer relationships and spaces for volunteers?
- Invite participants to walk around the room in silence and reflect on prompts related to the different phases of ESC projects.
- Ask each person to add examples from their own organisation or project using post-its.
- In plenary, cluster the ideas by theme and identify shared good practices and gaps.
- Conclude by highlighting how small, concrete practices contribute to a wider culture of safety in ESC mobilities.

 **Facilitator Note:** Keep the silent walking phase truly silent — the facilitator should walk quietly too and resist the urge to direct. This activity works best after a break or physical transition.

### 3.3 Using COS in Mentoring Practice: Active Listening

|                                                                                                      |                                                    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
|  <b>Duration</b>  | 45–60 minutes                                      |
|  <b>Group</b>     | 8–24 participants · pairs or trios                 |
|  <b>Materials</b> | Active listening handout · timer · chairs in pairs |

#### **Introduction**

Active listening is one of the most practical ways ESC mentors can keep their hands on the Circle of Security, because it directly supports both safe haven and secure base needs in conversation. When mentors listen in a regulated, curious and non-judgemental way — staying emotionally available, reflecting back what they hear, and asking open, maieutic questions — they help volunteers feel seen,

understood and validated, which is the first step in providing comfort at the bottom of the circle. At the same time, active listening strengthens co-regulation and awareness, so that volunteers can clarify their challenges, reconnect with their strengths and move towards solutions, turning crises and everyday difficulties into learning moments where mentors offer both emotional holding and gentle guidance.

### Objectives

- To practise active listening as a core tool for building secure relationships.
- To strengthen emotional availability, curiosity, and regulation in conversations with volunteers.

 **Recommended duration:** 45–60 minutes.

 **Recommended group size:** 8–24 participants, mainly in pairs and optionally in trios with observers.

### Materials

- A short handout on active listening principles and responses that block listening.
- A timer or clock.
- Chairs arranged in pairs or trios.

### Activity development

- Introduce active listening as a way to support awareness, co-regulation, collaboration, and secure bonding.
- In pairs, one person speaks for three minutes on the prompt "What I want you to know about me," while the other listens silently without interrupting.
- Debrief briefly in plenary about how it felt to speak and to listen in that way.
- Repeat the exercise with the prompt "What I'm grateful for is," adding one or two co-regulation elements such as repeating some of the speaker's words, paraphrasing, and asking questions to clarify meaning.
- Debrief briefly in plenary about how it felt to speak and listen in that way.
- Close by identifying, in plenary, helpful listening behaviours such as silence, summarising, observing body language, and asking "Can I do something for you?"

 **Facilitator Note:** Choose a quiet space with no interruptions. The first round of silence often feels strange — name this explicitly before you begin. Avoid positioning pairs face-to-face, which can feel confrontational.

## 3.4 Mentoring from a Personal Perspective: Blindfolded Exploration Walk and Hands Exercise

|                                                                                                     |                           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
|  <b>Duration</b> | 75–90 minutes             |
|  <b>Group</b>    | 8–20 participants · pairs |

 **Materials**

Outdoor/indoor space · blindfolds · paper · pens · COS diagram · projector

This activity invites mentors to experience Circle of Security not just as a diagram, but in their own bodies and relationships, this time from both the perspective of the volunteer and that of the mentor. Walking blindfolded and guiding a partner through nature makes the roles of secure base and safe haven tangible: sometimes participants are the ones exploring and needing protection, and sometimes they are the ones watching over, encouraging and keeping the other safe. The subsequent hands-reflection exercise helps them name their personal strengths, challenges and self-support strategies, and connect these to the idea of shark music, so they can recognise when their own history or fears pull them off the circle, and what they need to stay bigger, stronger, wiser and kind in ESC mentoring.

In ESC mentoring, **shark music** is the inner fear soundtrack that starts playing in mentors' heads when a volunteer's attachment needs touch old wounds or anxieties, and it can quietly pull their hands off the circle. Instead of seeing a homesick text or a request to skip a meeting as a normal safe haven or secure base bid, shark music translates it into alarm messages like "lazy," "spoiled," "too dependent" or "irresponsible," leading mentors to ignore, over-control or moralise rather than comfort or encourage. Learning to recognise shark music allows mentors to pause, regulate themselves and ask COS questions such as "Where is this volunteer on the circle?" and "What do they need from me right now?", so they can respond from a bigger, stronger, wiser and kind place that keeps connection and learning possible even in difficult moments.

 **Objectives**

- To experience secure base and safe haven roles through embodied practice.
- To reflect on personal strengths, challenges, and self-support strategies in mentoring.

 **Recommended duration:** 75–90 minutes.

 **Recommended group size:** 8–20 participants, working in pairs.

 **Materials**

- An outdoor or natural space.
- Blindfolds or scarves.
- Marked exploration points or objects in the environment.
- Paper and pens.
- A COS diagram for the debrief.
- A projector.
- The COS shark music video: [circleofsecurityinternational.com](http://circleofsecurityinternational.com)

 **Activity development**

- Begin in silence and invite participants to connect with the environment through their senses.

- In pairs, one person guides the other, who is blindfolded, through an exploratory walk.
- Encourage guides to support exploration with care and attentiveness.
- Switch roles, then gather in a circle for debriefing. Discuss how participants felt in each role and which "hand" of the circle felt easier or harder to embody. Possible debrief questions: How did you feel during the activity in each role? How does this connect to the Circle of Security? When you were guiding, in which "hand" did your partner seem more comfortable?
- Ask participants to draw the outline of their hands on paper, with each hand representing one of the two hands of the COS circle. In the centre of each hand, ask them to write something they do or tell themselves to encourage or comfort themselves; on the fingers, ask them to write something they do well, something that feels challenging, and something they want to improve.
- Participants can share the results of their "hands" in pairs.
- Link the reflection to the concept of shark music and self-awareness in mentoring relationships. You can introduce shark music using the COS video referenced above.

💡 **Facilitator Note:** Walk the route yourself first and remove any tripping hazards. Brief participants clearly on safety signals before blindfolding. If no outdoor space is available, a large indoor space with furniture as terrain works well.

## 4. Annexes and Resources

### 4.1 Facilitator Tips for Emotional Safety and Regulation

Circle of Security work can be deeply meaningful because it invites participants to connect theory with their own attachment experiences, mentoring style, and emotional triggers. For that reason, emotional safety should not be treated as an "extra," but as a core part of facilitation throughout the whole training process, especially in activities that involve personal memories, silent reflection, embodied exercises, feedback, or discussion of difficult volunteer situations. Facilitators can strengthen safety by stating at the outset that participation is always invitational: participants may pass, speak briefly, write instead of sharing, or skip any prompt that feels too exposing. In the reflection walk activity, for example, the guidance explicitly states that some questions may trigger vulnerability and that self-care is part of the exercise, offering a useful model for the whole toolkit.

A regulated facilitator is one of the strongest resources in the room. Before leading a session, take a moment to check your own state — notice whether you feel rushed, anxious, irritated or emotionally pulled — and use simple grounding strategies if needed, because active listening and secure responses depend on the facilitator's capacity to stay emotionally available and calm. This is especially important in COS-informed training, where "shark music" can appear not only in mentoring relationships but also during facilitation itself, for example when a participant withdraws, challenges the process, becomes tearful, or reacts in a way that triggers urgency, frustration or over-control.

It is helpful to normalise that different people will engage differently. Some participants process internally and need silence; others need movement, structure, or time before speaking. In experiential or nature-based activities, explain clearly what will happen, what is optional, and how support can be requested, so that challenge does not become overwhelm. When difficult emotions emerge, the first task is not to analyse or solve them, but to respond with safe-haven qualities: welcome the feeling, stay present, reduce pressure, and avoid pushing for disclosure. A simple response such as "Take your time," "You can step out if you need to," or "You don't have to explain more than you want to" can communicate protection and welcome without making the person feel exposed.

Facilitators should also keep a close eye on the group as a system. Emotional safety is supported by practical conditions such as adequate breaks, access to water, clear timing, consent in pair work, an appropriate room layout, and opportunities to move between plenary, pairs and small groups. In COS terms, these organisational details matter because physical and relational safety are linked: people regulate better when expectations, transitions and support pathways are clear.

During debriefings, invite reflection without forcing disclosure. Questions such as "What was easy or difficult in this role?", "What helped you feel safe enough to participate?", or "What did you notice about your own tendencies?" usually create more space than questions that ask directly for intimate personal history. If someone shares something vulnerable, thank them, protect the pace, and avoid turning their experience into a group case study unless they clearly want that. Because this toolkit addresses ESC mentoring, facilitators may also need to hold stories of homesickness, conflict, loneliness, exclusion, or

helplessness related to volunteers. In these moments, COS can help by shifting the focus from blame to need: instead of "What is wrong with this person?", the group can ask "What need might be activated here?" and "What would help us stay on the circle?" This reframing reduces judgement and supports a more compassionate, regulated learning climate.

It is good practice to close emotionally demanding sessions with some form of regulation and reorientation — for example, a grounding breath, a brief round with one word for how participants are leaving, a reminder of available support, or a short transition task that reconnects them with the present moment and the group. When appropriate, facilitators can also encourage peer support, supervision, or follow-up conversations after the session, particularly if activities have stirred strong memories or professional self-doubt.

Finally, emotional safety does not mean removing all challenge. COS-informed learning often asks mentors and coordinators to face discomfort, notice their triggers, and rethink habitual responses. The facilitator's role is to create conditions in which that discomfort becomes tolerable, meaningful and shared, so participants can reflect, repair and grow without feeling abandoned, pressured or shamed.

#### 4.2 Links and Resources

The Circle of Security® model and diagram were originally developed as an accessible description of attachment theory by Robert Marvin (University of Virginia), together with Glen Cooper, Kent Hoffman and Bert Powell (Marycliff Institute, Spokane), who integrated over fifty years of early child development research into a video-based intervention for parents and young children.

The Circle of Security® Intervention is presented comprehensively in *The Circle of Security Intervention: Enhancing Attachment in Early Parent–Child Relationships* by Bert Powell, Glen Cooper, Kent Hoffman and Bob Marvin (Guilford Press, 2014); its core ideas have also been adapted for a wider audience in *Raising a Secure Child: How Circle of Security Parenting Can Help You Nurture Your Child's Attachment, Emotional Resilience, and Freedom to Explore*, by Kent Hoffman, Glen Cooper and Bert Powell (2017). The intervention protocol and the Circle of Security® diagram are protected intellectual property. Any use of the Circle of Security® map, wording or programme materials in training or written resources should acknowledge Circle of Security International and/or the Circle of Security® Network, include an appropriate copyright notice (for example, "© 2000 Cooper, Hoffman, Marvin & Powell. Circle of Security® is a registered trademark, used with permission"), and direct readers to official sources such as Circle of Security International and the Circle of Security® Network for formal training, accreditation and original materials.

The resources below can support facilitators, mentors and organisations who want to deepen their understanding of attachment, Circle of Security and emotionally attuned practice in ESC contexts. Several of these links are already referenced in the toolkit materials, including the Circle of Security introductory video, the attachment timeline materials, and ESC-related mentoring guidance.

- **Circle of Security International** — general introduction, videos and parent/caregiver resources: [circleofsecurityinternational.com](http://circleofsecurityinternational.com)
- **Circle of Security model / trauma-informed overview** — useful for introducing shark music and "hands on/off the circle": [circleofsecurityinternational.com](http://circleofsecurityinternational.com)
- **Introductory COS video** used throughout the toolkit: [youtube.com/watch?v=1wpz8m0BFM8](https://youtube.com/watch?v=1wpz8m0BFM8)
- **European Youth Portal — European Solidarity Corps**: [youth.europa.eu/solidarity\\_es](https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity_es)
- **European Solidarity Corps Guide** — reference for project stages and organisational responsibilities: [European\\_solidarity\\_corps\\_guide\\_2025.pdf](https://european_solidarity_corps_guide_2025.pdf)
- **ESC Mentoring Guide** — practical support for mentors and support structures: [oph.fi/mentoring-guide.pdf](https://oph.fi/mentoring-guide.pdf)
- **Pre-departure phase of ESC volunteering projects** — useful for linking COS to the project cycle: [saltonetwork.eu](http://saltonetwork.eu)

For facilitators who want to enrich the theoretical background, it may also be useful to revisit key figures already covered in the toolkit's attachment timeline — John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth, the Minnesota Longitudinal Study, Sue Johnson and Daniel Siegel — and connect their ideas back to the practical COS questions used in mentoring: Where is the volunteer on the circle right now? What do they need from me? What is happening in me? In this way, the resources section does not sit apart from practice, but supports the same aim as the whole toolkit: helping mentors, coordinators and organisations respond to volunteers with greater attunement, clarity and care.

### 4.3 Session Materials

#### Annex 1 — Theoretical Framework: Attachment Timeline

##### Timeline, with dates and links to videos

- **1930s–1950s** — John Bowlby begins observing orphaned and emotionally distressed children.
- **1950s–1960s** — Harlow's key experiments on dependency in rhesus monkeys.
- **1969** — Mary Ainsworth introduces the "Strange Situation." [Watch on YouTube](#)
- **1970s** — Edward Tronick's Still Face Experiment. [Watch on YouTube](#)
- **1985** — Sue Johnson introduces Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT). [Watch on YouTube](#)
- **1990** — Daniel Siegel introduces Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB). [Watch on YouTube](#)
- **1998** — Circle of Security (COS) is developed. [Watch on YouTube](#)
- **2000** — Results published for the Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk and Adaptation (Sroufe, Collins, et al.), which began in 1975.
- **2020s** — Development of embodied attachment theory.

### Cards to print and give to participants

"Intimate attachments are the hub around which a person's life revolves. From these intimate attachments a person draws strength and enjoyment of life and, through what he contributes, gives strength and enjoyment to others." (John Bowlby) — Bowlby's attachment theory highlights the importance of early relationships in emotional and social development. Key points: infants form attachments for survival and security; early interactions shape lifelong internal working models of self and relationships; caregivers provide a secure base of safety and comfort; and early attachments influence adult relationships and mental health. These findings transformed our understanding of child–caregiver bonds and their role in emotional and social development.

**Studies in dependency in monkeys.** These studies challenged prevailing behaviourist views by demonstrating that attachment stems from emotional needs, not just physical sustenance. In the experiments, infant rhesus monkeys were separated from their mothers and given access to two surrogate "mothers": one made of soft cloth that provided no food, and one made of wire that provided nourishment through an attached baby bottle. The infant monkeys went to the wire mother only to feed, but preferred to spend their time with the soft, comforting cloth mother.

**The Strange Situation experiment.** Mary Ainsworth and her colleagues introduced the "Strange Situation" experiment, which allows researchers to observe the nature of attachment between a caregiver and a baby or young child through brief separations and reunions. From this work came three attachment classifications: secure, ambivalent/resistant insecure, and avoidant insecure. The Strange Situation has become a cornerstone of attachment research, continuing to inform research and practice in child psychology and early-years education.

"People are resilient if they have at least one relationship, hopefully more, where they feel worthy and special. They need to get the message that they are competent and strong enough to take life on. We want to build emotional bonds, because we know these bonds are the source of resilience." (Sue Johnson) — Sue Johnson applied attachment theory to adult relationships and pioneered Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT). Her work emphasised that emotions are tied to fundamental needs, and that secure emotional bonds are essential for healthy relationships. EFT helps people identify and transform negative interaction patterns, fostering secure attachment and emotional connection.

**Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB).** IPNB explores the intersection of neuroscience, psychology and relationship science — how the brain, mind and relationships interact to shape human development and well-being. The model explains how social interactions shape neural connections, recognises the brain's capacity to change and grow throughout life, and emphasises the importance of early relationships in shaping neural structures. Daniel Siegel is one of its leading proponents.

**Circle of Security (COS)**, developed by Bert Powell, Glen Cooper, Kent Hoffman and Bob Marvin. Developed as a direct application of attachment science, the Circle of Security is a visual map that makes attachment theory more accessible. The COS diagram is used as the central visual in interventions for caregivers, all focused on helping caregivers reflect on children's attachment needs in order to promote secure attachment. The model's impact includes a reduction in intergenerational insecurity.

**Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk and Adaptation.** One of the first prospective longitudinal projects to examine how parent–infant attachment develops, how it changes over time, and how the quality of early attachment shapes later development. Key findings: early attachment patterns (secure vs. insecure) predict later self-reliance, emotion regulation and social competence into adulthood (developmental continuity); the quality of attachment interacts with environmental factors such as caregiver sensitivity and socio-economic stress (transactional processes); supportive relationships later in life, especially in adolescence, can mitigate the effects of early adversity (pathways to resilience); and individuals who were secure as infants are more likely to become resilient adults with stable, satisfying close relationships, although early attachment does not rigidly determine outcomes (continuity into adult relationships).

**Embodied attachment theory.** Research has highlighted that attachment is not only a cognitive process but also has physiological components, emphasising the crucial role of the body in shaping attachment experiences and relationship patterns. Early interactions with caregivers are not just mental events but also deeply physical and sensory experiences that shape the developing nervous system and influence how we regulate emotion, connect with others, and respond to stress throughout life. Key concepts: the body is a primary site where attachment experiences are encoded and stored; secure attachment fosters healthy interoceptive (heartbeat, breathing, gut feelings) and proprioceptive (body position and movement) awareness, supporting emotional regulation; non-verbal communication plays a central role in shaping attachment bonds; and co-regulation is essential in early development.

## Annex 2 — Introducing the Circle of Security: Puzzle and ESC

COS gives a simple, visual map of what every volunteer needs emotionally: a secure base to explore and a safe haven to come back to when things get hard. COS helps mentors see, name, and respond to volunteers' deeper needs, which keeps them safer, more motivated, and better able to learn from their ESC experience instead of being overwhelmed by it.

There are two basic human needs, and both need to be met for us to feel well and cope with life's challenges:

- **The need to belong (attachment, safety)** — the need to feel part of a group, to be loved unconditionally, and to have a place to rest, recover and gather strength so we can go out again; this includes emotional regulation and basic physical regulation (sleep, hunger, thirst, temperature).

- **The need to differentiate and explore (autonomy, security)** — the need to explore the world, to test and expand our physical, cognitive and emotional capacities, and to try out social roles, relationships and even conflicts.

Attachment relationships help us meet both needs. The more these needs are met in our close relationships, the more secure those relationships become, and the more such secure relationships we have, the greater our well-being. With this security, we cope better with difficulties and painful moments, and we are better able to take on the developmental tasks of each life stage. These two needs are both essential, but when they are activated, they usually cannot be fulfilled in exactly the same moment: at some times we primarily need belonging and safety, and at other times we primarily need differentiation and exploration.

This session explores how mentors can meet these two needs when they are activated in ESC volunteers.

ESC volunteers send attachment bids for both core needs of the Circle of Security throughout their mobility. When the need to explore and learn is activated (top of the circle), they reach out by proposing ideas, asking to lead activities, taking on new responsibilities, experimenting with roles or relationships, and requesting just enough guidance to manage a challenge — each of these is a bid for secure base support, asking mentors to watch over them, help when needed, delight in them, and enjoy being with them while they grow. When the need for safety and comfort is activated (bottom of the circle), volunteers approach with stories of difficulty, show strong emotions, text or call when they feel lost, or become unusually quiet and withdrawn; these behaviours are bids for safe haven, asking mentors to protect them, welcome their feelings, offer comfort, and help them organise what they are experiencing so they can recover and return to exploration.

Throughout an ESC mobility, volunteers move up and down the Circle of Security many times, alternating between moments of exploration and moments of needing comfort. At the top of the circle, they feel confident and curious: they want to try new tasks, take on responsibilities, lead activities, experiment with new roles, initiate social contact, and ask for just enough help to succeed — these are secure base moments that call for mentors to watch over them, help when needed, delight in their efforts, and enjoy being with them, especially around pre-departure, arrival, the first weeks in the organisation, and mid-project growth phases. At the bottom of the circle, volunteers feel overwhelmed, distressed or unsure, and need protection and emotional organisation more than challenge: homesickness, culture shock, loneliness, low mood, conflicts at home or in the team, performance crises, doubts about staying, and the mixed feelings of preparing to return home are all typical safe haven moments in ESC mobilities, when mentors' main job is to welcome feelings, offer comfort and safety, help make sense of what is happening, and only then gently support a return to exploration.

**For the need to explore and learn (top of the circle),** the Circle of Security names four key caregiver actions: watch over me, delight in me, help me, and enjoy with me. Volunteers show this need when they take initiative, ask for new responsibilities, share ideas, try out new roles or social connections, or ask for just enough help to succeed.

- **Watch over me** means being present and attentive while the volunteer tries new tasks or roles, allowing them to take the first steps toward what interests them while quietly checking that the risks are manageable. The challenge is to avoid sliding into either invisibility (hands off — the volunteer feels alone and unsupported) or over-control (hovering, micromanaging), and to trust their initiative while still being a reliable backup.
- **Delight in me** is about celebrating the person, not just their achievements — showing genuine joy in their attempts, ideas and growth, and treating mistakes as a normal part of exploring. The challenge is to keep delight focused on who they are rather than on performance, so that praise does not become pressure or conditional approval, and to manage one's own tendency to reward only "success" or to compare volunteers.
- **Help me** involves offering just enough support so the volunteer can succeed and learn — for example, giving guidance after they have tried something and got stuck, or scaffolding a task so they can complete it themselves. The core challenge is finding the balance between too much help (taking over, reducing autonomy) and too little (leaving them overwhelmed); mentors need to resist the urge to fix everything while still stepping in before frustration becomes failure.
- **Enjoy with me** means sharing some of the fun, curiosity and satisfaction the volunteer experiences when exploring — joining in activities, laughing together, and showing that their interests matter. The challenge is to participate without taking the lead away from them or overstimulating the situation; mentors must let the initiative remain with the volunteer and notice when their own enthusiasm might overshadow or steer the experience too much.

**For the need to feel safe and recover (bottom of the circle),** the Circle of Security names four key caregiver actions: protect me, comfort me, welcome me, and organise my feelings. Volunteers seek attachment in these moments when they approach mentors, share stories, show strong emotions, or withdraw and go unusually quiet.

- **Protect me** means showing clear commitment to the volunteer's safety so they know someone will step in if something bad happens — for example, intervening when living conditions are unsafe, advocating in conflicts, or setting limits that keep them from harm. The challenge is twofold: first, to offer comfort even when the volunteer is scared or worried about something the mentor personally finds minor, rather than minimising ("It's nothing") or mocking; second, to protect them from dangers they do not yet see, without imposing the mentor's own fears or over-restricting their autonomy. This requires distinguishing real risk from personal anxiety, and staying kindly firm rather than controlling.
- **Comfort me** is about easing physical and emotional discomfort — being present, listening, offering soothing contact or practical care, and helping stress or fear come down to manageable levels. The challenge is to resonate with the emotion without being flooded by it: to validate and understand the volunteer's feelings ("It makes sense you feel this way") while keeping enough emotional balance to stay supportive, rather than becoming overwhelmed, defensive, or switching too quickly into problem-solving. Mentors need to hold the feeling with the volunteer, not take it over or shut it down.
- **Welcome me** means showing that the volunteer is genuinely wanted and cared for even when they are struggling — that their sadness, anger or confusion does not threaten the relationship. This includes open body language, a warm tone, and an attitude of "I'm glad you came to me," especially when they bring difficult stories or behaviours. The main challenge is resisting the urge to push uncomfortable feelings away by changing the subject, cheering them up too quickly,

moralising, or focusing only on solutions; mentors must tolerate discomfort in the room and keep the door open to all emotions.

- **Organise my feelings** involves acknowledging and naming emotions, attuning to their intensity, and helping the volunteer make sense of what is happening ("It sounds like you feel overwhelmed and a bit ashamed after what happened"). The challenge is remembering that mentors are guessing, not stating facts: emotional reflections should be offered tentatively ("I wonder if...", "Does it feel like...?") so the volunteer can confirm or correct them, rather than being imposed as labels that might feel wrong. Done well, this action supports regulation and self-understanding; done rigidly, it can feel intrusive or invalidating, and can actually block connection.

In Circle of Security, mentors and coordinators are not neutral observers of volunteers' journeys; they are, quite literally, "the hands on the circle" that make secure base and safe haven possible in everyday ESC life. Their presence, reactions and small, concrete behaviours are what allow volunteers to climb up the circle with confidence — knowing someone is watching over them, helping when needed, delighting in their efforts and enjoying being with them — and to drop down for comfort when they feel overwhelmed, homesick or lost. Seeing themselves as the hands means recognising that every check-in, boundary, listening moment or gesture of care can either fall off the circle (by disappearing, gripping too tight, or going limp) or stay on it by being bigger, stronger, wiser and kind, so that volunteers feel both encouraged to explore and safely held when things get hard.

### Cards for participants

- **Watch over me** means being present and attentive while the volunteer tries new tasks or roles, allowing them to take the first steps toward what interests them while quietly checking that the risks are manageable.
- **Delight in me** is about celebrating the person, not just their achievements — showing genuine joy in their attempts, ideas and growth, and treating mistakes as a normal part of exploring.
- **Help me** involves offering just enough support so the volunteer can succeed and learn — for example, giving guidance after they have tried something and got stuck, or scaffolding a task so they can complete it themselves.
- **Enjoy with me** means sharing some of the fun, curiosity and satisfaction the volunteer experiences when exploring — joining in activities, laughing together, and showing that their interests matter.
- **Protect me** means showing clear commitment to the volunteer's safety so they know someone will step in if something bad happens — for example, intervening when living conditions are unsafe, advocating in conflicts, or setting limits that keep them from harm.
- **Comfort me** is about easing physical and emotional discomfort — being present, listening, offering soothing contact or practical care, and helping stress or fear come down to manageable levels.
- **Welcome me** means showing that the volunteer is genuinely wanted and cared for even when they are struggling — that their sadness, anger or confusion does not threaten the relationship. This includes open body language, a warm tone, and an attitude of "I'm glad you came to me," especially when they bring difficult stories or behaviours.
- **Organise my feelings** involves acknowledging and naming emotions, attuning to their intensity, and helping the volunteer make sense of what is happening ("It sounds like you feel overwhelmed and a bit ashamed after what happened").

## 5. Key Terms and Quick Reference

### 5.1 Glossary of Key COS Terms

The terms below are used throughout this toolkit. They are rooted in attachment theory and Circle of Security practice. This glossary is intended as a quick reference, not a full theoretical treatment.

**Attachment** — The deep, lasting emotional bond that forms between a person and their significant others (caregivers, mentors, close relationships). Attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby and expanded by many researchers, holds that humans are biologically prepared to seek and maintain proximity to trusted others, especially under stress or uncertainty.

**Circle of Security (COS)** — A visual, relationship-based framework that maps two fundamental human needs — to explore (secure base) and to return for comfort (safe haven) — and helps caregivers, mentors and coordinators recognise which need is active and respond accordingly. Developed by Cooper, Hoffman, Marvin and Powell.

**Secure Base** — The caregiver or mentor function that supports a person's readiness to explore, take risks and grow. When a volunteer approaches a task with curiosity or initiative, they are drawing on a secure base. Mentor responses that build secure base: watching over, helping, delighting in, enjoying with.

**Safe Haven** — The caregiver or mentor function that provides comfort, protection and emotional regulation when a person feels overwhelmed, scared or distressed. When a volunteer is homesick, in conflict or struggling, they need a safe haven. Mentor responses that build safe haven: protecting, comforting, welcoming, organising feelings.

**Hands on the Circle** — The COS metaphor for the mentor or coordinator's active role in providing both secure base and safe haven. "Hands on the circle" means being present, responsive and attuned; "hands off" or "hands too tight" means being unavailable or over-controlling.

**Shark Music** — The inner fear soundtrack that can play for mentors when a volunteer's attachment bids trigger their own unresolved anxiety or past experiences. Shark music can lead mentors to misread a volunteer's need (e.g., interpreting a bid for comfort as manipulation), causing them to respond in ways that are off the circle.

**Co-regulation** — The process by which one person's regulated emotional state helps another person's nervous system calm down. Mentors who are themselves regulated provide co-regulation; dysregulated mentors may inadvertently amplify a volunteer's distress.

**Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB)** — A field developed by Daniel Siegel that explores how the brain, mind and relationships interact to shape human development and well-being. IPNB supports the COS model by showing how secure relationships literally shape neural pathways for emotion regulation.

**Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT)** — Developed by Sue Johnson, EFT applies attachment theory to adult relationships and therapeutic change. Its insight that emotional bonds are the source of resilience informs the COS approach to mentoring adults, including ESC volunteers.

**Embodied Attachment** — The understanding that attachment is not only a cognitive or relational process but is also encoded in the body through sensory and physiological experience. Relevant to nature-based and movement activities in this toolkit (see 2.2 and 3.4).

**European Solidarity Corps (ESC)** — The European Union programme that enables young people aged 18–30 to volunteer or work on projects in their own country or abroad. ESC mobilities place volunteers in host organisations for periods typically ranging from two weeks to twelve months.

**Mentor / Tutor (ESC)** — In ESC contexts, the mentor is the person within the host organisation responsible for the volunteer's day-to-day well-being and personal development. The tutor is responsible for the learning and task dimension of the placement. In many organisations these roles overlap or are held by the same person.

## 5.2 COS Quick Reference Card

The table below summarises the eight COS actions — four at the top of the circle (supporting exploration) and four at the bottom (providing safety) — with a brief description and the core challenge for each. It is designed to be printed and used as a reference card during mentoring conversations, supervision sessions or team meetings.

| 🔭 TOP OF CIRCLE — Supporting Exploration (Secure Base) |                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                         |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Action                                                 | Description                                                                                                                       | Core Challenge                                                                                                          |
| 👁 Watch over me                                        | Be present and attentive while the volunteer tries new tasks; allow first steps while keeping risks manageable                    | Avoid disappearing (hands off) or hovering (over-control); trust initiative while remaining a reliable backup           |
| 😊 Delight in me                                        | Show genuine joy in their attempts, ideas and growth; celebrate the person, not just results; treat mistakes as part of exploring | Keep delight focused on who they are, not on performance; resist rewarding only success or comparing volunteers         |
| 🤝 Help me                                              | Offer just enough support so the volunteer can succeed and learn; step in after they have tried and got stuck                     | Balance: don't take over (reduces autonomy), don't abandon (leaves them overwhelmed); resist fixing everything          |
| 🎉 Enjoy with me                                        | Share the fun and curiosity of the volunteer's exploration; join in activities and show their interests matter                    | Participate without taking the lead away; let initiative stay with them; notice when your enthusiasm overshadows theirs |
| 🏠 BOTTOM OF CIRCLE — Providing Safety (Safe Haven)     |                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                         |
| Action                                                 | Description                                                                                                                       | Core Challenge                                                                                                          |

|                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                             |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  Protect me           | Show clear commitment to the volunteer's safety; intervene when living conditions, conflict or harm require it   | Distinguish real risk from personal anxiety; protect from dangers they don't yet see without imposing your own fears        |
|  Comfort me           | Ease physical and emotional distress; stay present, listen, and help their stress come down to manageable levels | Resonate with the feeling without being flooded by it; validate before problem-solving; don't shut down or take over        |
|  Welcome me           | Show they are genuinely wanted and cared for even when struggling; keep the door open to all emotions            | Resist pushing feelings away, changing the subject, cheering up too quickly, or moralising; tolerate discomfort in the room |
|  Organise my feelings | Acknowledge and name emotions; attune to their intensity; help the volunteer make sense of what is happening     | Offer emotional reflections as guesses ("I wonder if..."), not labels; stay tentative so they can confirm or correct you    |