

# Estonia

## Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

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20.3%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in 2019

### Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

	Total number of institutions/ SGHs	Number of children
Institutional care (in total) in 2019	38	797
Institutions for children with disabilities		
Institutions for children 0-3		
Small group homes (SGHs) in 2019		
Number of children in family-based/foster care in 2019		1,527
Number of children in kinship care		1,394
Number of adoptions		22
Number of unaccompanied minors in 2019, 2020		0

### Alternative Recommendations

#### Supporting children and families in the short term:

- Family counselling services should be reinforced.
- The effect of the measures adopted to react to the COVID crisis must also be evaluated from the point of view of children's rights.
- Greater attention should be paid to important topics such as families with fewer economic possibilities; the increase in domestic violence; the use of narcotic substances; the increase in the psychological problems of parents and their exhaustion.

#### Supporting children and families in the long term:

- Legalise mandatory conciliation services in family law disputes and launch a national service system to ensure the widespread availability of a good quality conciliation procedure.

- Invest in the early discovery of special needs.

- Improve the continuing cooperation of health, social and educational sectors to ensure the availability and quality of necessary support services for all children.

- Develop a comprehensive strategy on young people Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) as a whole, ensuring a complex approach that includes prevention, intervention and compensation

#### Children in Alternative Care:

- Allocate additional funds to strengthen the child protection system to address the needs of the children in care and families providing foster care, including kinship care.
- Continue to promote family-based foster care by recruitment of new foster families, provision of adequate support to professional foster families and development of quality standards for foster care.

## Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



EU involvement in promoting children's rights at a national level:



2020 Country-Specific Recommendations:



Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children:



Government's protection of children's right to participate:



## Child Poverty

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

The Estonian government reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic in a positive way, especially considering that it supported families as a whole first and foremost. Nonetheless, there was a need to better support children's mental health and to reinforce support services in the education system in order to provide more systematic support for pupils in need and children left out of school.

#### Support for parents raising children with special needs:



The government also decided to financially support parents raising children with special needs who had to temporarily stop working.

#### Amendments to the Family Benefits Act



The amendments shortened the waiting period for the maintenance allowance from six to three months. The purpose of the maintenance allowance is to guarantee a monthly support payment to a parent who raises a child alone and thereby decrease the poverty risk of single parents and their children. The amendments also prolonged the period of coverage of parental benefit in the event of successive births from two and a half years to three years. As a result, unemployment caused by COVID-19 would not decrease the amount of parental benefit for mothers and fathers who have a child at the end of this year or in the following year.

### Negative developments

**Increased level of stress among parents:** as indicated by a survey commissioned by the Ministry of Social Affairs in April, 44% of the parents interviewed described the living arrangements arising from the emergency as burdening and stressful. The work of more than half

of the interviewees was affected by kindergarten children having to stay at home or children dealing with distance learning.<sup>1</sup>

**Worsening of families' economic situation:** According to the same survey, 42% of Estonian families witnessed a decrease in their family income. Moreover, in 2020 the unemployment rate is expected to increase by 9.2%.

**Increased inequalities among parents due to income, inhabited region and spoken language:** The possibility of teleworking is greater among parents who speak Estonian (42%) as opposed to parents who speak Russian (20%). Teleworking is less common in north-eastern Estonia (19% parents) and most common in northern Estonia (43% of parents). The possibilities for teleworking are greater among those employed in the public sector (60%) and limited in the private sector (30%).

<sup>1</sup> Rohkem kui poolte lapsevanemate töötamist on mõjutanud lasteaialaste kodusolemine või koolilaste distantsope.

**Increased inequalities in education:** Although Estonia did generally well with distance education, there were great differences among Estonian schools as regards the provision of additional tutoring, availability of support services and evaluation. Differences among teachers' digital competences also played an important role. Moreover, distance learning does not suit all pupils; many families, especially families with many children, experienced difficulties in acquiring the

necessary computers and other means of communication.

### Good practice

#### Providing computers to children in need

Although Estonia is commonly defined as an e-state, distance learning was a real challenge for the country, given that many families did not have the necessary resources and/or internet connection. A group of enterprising Estonian citizens decided to launch the "A computer

for every pupil"<sup>2</sup> initiative to ensure that all children have the same learning opportunities. Thanks to this programme, more than 1,600 computers have been donated to children in need. In order to ensure the sustainability of the initiative in the future, in April 2020 the coordination of the initiative was handed over to the Estonian Union for Child Welfare.

#### International study on distance learning

The Children's Advisory Panel study was carried out in May 2020 in seven countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway) and allowed 7,017 pupils to share their distance learning experience gathered during the COVID crisis. The initiative took place on the initiative of the Telia Company and thanks to the contribution of various child protection organisations and schools.<sup>3</sup>

## Policies for Investing in Children

### National strategy to tackle child poverty

Estonia does not have a separate national strategy to fight child poverty. Yet, the Children and Families Development Plan 2012-2020<sup>4</sup> aims at ensuring that families with children can manage financially

by targeting measures and activities at children and families with children, including families with children with disabilities. It is worrying that the state has no intention to renew the Children and Families Development Plan in its present condition. It is also planned to dissolve the Child Protection Council established by the Child Protection Act of 2016

as an independent government committee.

One of the sub-goals of the Welfare Development Plan 2016-2023<sup>5</sup> is to improve the economic situation of citizens by means of active, adequate and sustainable social protection.

For a state with an ageing and decreasing population and a low birth rate such as Estonia, the national strategy to tackle child poverty would be necessary even without the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies show that single-parent families are still at high risk of poverty and that the emergency situation affected their coping greatly as the new measures meant

<sup>2</sup> Igale Koolilapsele Arvuti

<sup>3</sup> Children's Experiences with digital learning during COVID-19 period – Findings from the Children's Advisory Panel

<sup>4</sup> Strategy of Children and Families 2012-2020

<sup>5</sup> Welfare Development Plan 2016-2023

it was not possible to count on the other parent's help on an everyday basis.<sup>6</sup>

## EU influence on national developments

The EU exercised a good level of pressure on the Estonian government. On the other hand, the EU should pay greater attention to the transposition of EU directives at the national level.

The 2020 Country Specific Recommendations do not directly address matters related to children or NEETs. It is positive that the document discusses the need to improve the accessibility and resilience of the healthcare system, but no consideration is given to the need to support the social system as a whole. Indeed, several studies show that when the provision of social services decreases or stops, the pressure on the child protection system increases.

## Access to financial resources and services of high quality

**Good level of resources and services:** In recent years, great progress has been made especially as regards the development of services provided to children on a national basis.

**Regional inequalities:** The well-being of children depends, among other things, on how their fundamental social rights are guaranteed. Estonia's regional inequality continues to be a major challenge. The well-being of family with children depends to a large extent on the type of household and the area they live in. Depending on the region, the equivalent net income of households with children in 2018 differed almost two-fold, the relative poverty rate three times. Statistics and various surveys point to inequalities in health and differences in the availability of services. The well-being and

realisation of children's rights still depend on the municipality in which their parents live. Greater multidisciplinary cooperation is needed to support children in need.

**Mental Health Services:** Despite several initiatives to increase the accessibility of mental health services, the primary psychological assistance offered to children and young people is insufficient. For example, such support personnel are not present in all educational institutions. The current Mental Health Act does not enable minors to visit psychiatrists without the parent's consent, excluding children's and young people's independent power of decision. The Chancellor of Justice has requested that an amendment to the act be considered. On the other hand, it is worrying that the proceedings of the draft amendments have been stopped due to the strong opposition of some political parties.

**Education:** The Children's Advisory Panel study involved more than a thousand pupils from 10-18 years

of age.<sup>7</sup> The study showed that more than half of the students found that while distance learning they needed more time for studying. They also mentioned the importance of their parents' help. 40% of pupils highlighted that they did not have as many possibilities to ask for the teacher's help outside classes.

## Children's participation

**The participation of children is still problematically low.** Children in Estonia usually have a say in issues affecting the child, but they participate less in family issues and even less in school life or society. Even very active young people feel that their participation is often rather a formality and mainly for show. According to the Children's Worlds survey, pupils felt that they were not listened to and their views were not taken into account at school (one in four children was critical of the teacher in this regard).<sup>8</sup> The modest involvement of Estonian children in school was also confirmed by the

<sup>6</sup> Rohkem kui poolte lapsevanemate töötamist on mõjutanud lasteaiaste kodusolemine või koolilaste distantstõpe.

<sup>7</sup> Children's experiences with digital learning during covid-19 period: findings from the children's advisory panel

<sup>8</sup> Children's Worlds in Europe and Children's Worlds National Report Estonia

results of a study on children's rights and parenthood.

**Right to vote:** The fact that, from 2015, Estonian citizens and citizens of the European Union who have turned 16 years are eligible to vote in the local government council election is a major improvement.

**Children's participation during COVID:** Youth organisations were indignant that young people were not involved in the decision-making process concerning the crisis on a national level.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, in June 2020, youth and children's organisations were not involved in the discussion of the draft amendment act of section 3 of the Mental Health Act (115 SE), although it directly affected children and young people and their power of decision.

## Recommendations

- Set up a periodic monitoring of the operational programme to address the gaps identified by the final conclusions presented by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to the state in 2017<sup>10</sup>
- Renew the Children and Families Development Plan 2012-2020
- Relaunch the activities of the Child Protection Council
- Enhance the influence of children and young people in shaping society and the various decision-making processes
- Provide greater support for the involvement of groups in vulnerable situations
- Develop a children's participation strategy to normalise children's involvement in situations in which decisions concerning their lives are made



For more information, please consult the [2020 Eurochild Report](#) or contact [Enrico.Tormen@eurochild.org](mailto:Enrico.Tormen@eurochild.org) and [Zuzana.Konradova@eurochild.org](mailto:Zuzana.Konradova@eurochild.org)

<sup>9</sup> Eesti Noorteühenduste Liidu juht: millal otsustajad noorte poole pöörduvad?

<sup>10</sup> Concluding observations on the second to fourth periodic reports of Estonia.

## Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

### Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

To support families in vulnerable situations during the COVID-19 crisis Estonia introduced temporary financial support to parents of children with special needs. The aim of the financial benefit was to help parents who lost their employment or who remained on unpaid leave. Parents of children with profound, severe or moderate disability, educational special needs and lack of immunity were granted 70% of their average income until 31 May 2020.

Due to the emergency situation caused by COVID-19, disability status and the payment of social benefits were automatically prolonged for six months for persons whose disability status would otherwise end from the beginning of the emergency situation until 31 August 2020.

People who were ill, had a child/ close family member who was ill or

needed care or had been exposed to COVID-19, could apply online for paid sick leave. Sickness benefit was extended to cover the first three days of sick leave, which was not covered by the Health Insurance Fund before.

Local governments created possibilities for 24-hour childcare, mainly for emergency workers, social services providers, transport, food production etc. All schools were closed and pupils had to study online. Local governments had to ensure internet connection for teachers and children.

Thanks to the cooperation of the private sector, volunteers, local governments and schools, children from disadvantaged groups also got access to the internet and computers.

Mainly in cooperation with the Estonian Food Bank, food assistance was organised by local governments for families in need. Many local governments worked in cooperation with local grocery stores and pharmacies to deliver food, other

basic necessities, and medicines. A number of local governments continued to provide school meals for children (mandatory for children from families with coping difficulties etc.).

Diverse hotlines were made available to provide assistance to people in need. The child helpline 116 111 continued to be in operation during the emergency situation with the possibility for an online chat. Tallinn Children's Hospital crisis hotline 678 7422 advised workers at the front line of the COVID-19 (health workers and police) who were worried about themselves and their children. Additional finances were allocated to the regular financing for victim support and psycho-social crisis assistance.

Institutional care in Estonia is defined as residential care. The statistics and the legal framework do not distinguish between larger institutions and smaller residential settings. In all residential care settings all family units have up to six children, including the foster care

services offered to children with special needs. There have been no changes in the provision of the service during the lockdown. The situation affected mostly children's communication with other relatives as this had to be conducted online or via phone instead of face to face. The main challenges included limited resources for adequate home schooling (competency of social workers, lack of computers, not sufficient internet connection etc.). Staff were overstretched and at higher risk since most social workers are older people. Similarly, for foster families ensuring an online education was a major challenge.

The Estonian Union for Child Welfare has been operating for 31 years and has built its resilience, i.e. the organisation is capable of performing flexibly in difficult times (for example, some training courses were carried out online, parent counselling was carried out over the phone, innovative solutions were used for organising events). They foresee that most civil society organisations in Estonia will face severe problems in

terms of maintaining their activities and budget.

### Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

Local government authorities manage child protection on the local level and create the necessary preconditions in the municipality. The Child Protection Act of 2014, which entered into force in 2016, imposes an obligation on local governments to ensure that a child is only separated from his/her family if necessary. The Child Protection Act recognises the family as the natural environment for a child and to achieve this, parents or caregivers are entitled to receive consultation from a social services department.

The National Social Insurance Board, with a specialised Child Protection Unit, assists local governments in resolving child protection cases and supports local governments in deciding suitable measures for children and families. The Social Welfare Act outlines that minimum social services are available in

local municipalities. However, the Estonian Union for Child Welfare explains that the availability and quality of social services vary since these social services are funded by the municipality itself.

The Estonian Union for Child Welfare points out there was a lack of information about children and families in vulnerable situations during the lockdown. Home visits were not allowed. Without proper monitoring and a contact with children via usual channels such as school, hobby classes and medical appointments, the child protection risks (problems in the home, violence, abuse and neglect) may remain hidden, which also suggests a decrease in the registration of child protection cases. In the period January-May 2020, a total of 870 child protection case proceedings were registered by the local governments in Estonia. For comparison, in 2019 it was 1,081, i.e. about 20% more than this year. When the state of emergency ended in mid-May 2020, the registration of case proceedings began to rise.<sup>11</sup>

### Care leavers

Care leavers in Estonia are entitled to a monthly allowance of a minimum of 250 euros if they are enrolled in university/higher education up to 25 years of age. They also receive assistance with housing and individualised support. Otherwise care leavers receive housing support, personnel support services and a financial contribution from the local government. Care leavers have struggled both to keep their jobs and find new jobs. The temporary subsidies offered by the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund partially helped.

### Children in migration

There were no migrant, unaccompanied and separated children in Estonia last year. At the end of 2013, SOS Children's Village took responsibility for partnering with the state and providing support and care for up to five children or young people at one time (unaccompanied minors). A contract with the Social Insurance Board has been concluded for this purpose.

### EU funds

Actions for improving the quality of substitution care and diversifying forms of alternative care were supported through the European Social Fund (Measure: 2014-2020.2.2 Welfare measures supporting participation in the labour market). The main aim is to increase the number of family-based alternative care providers and improve the quality of alternative care. Also, support- and aftercare services were further developed.

Measure 2014-2020.2.1 - Development of childcare and care services for children with disabilities to reduce the care burden. This action contributes to the participation of parents/carers in the labour market. The aim is to develop and provide support services for children with severe and profound disabilities - childcare, support person and transport - thereby reducing the parental care burden and barriers to employment. It also encourages and raises awareness of the reconciliation of work and family life.

11 In May 2020, 161 child protection cases were registered, an order of magnitude higher than a month earlier (in April 95 cases), but the number of cases registered is still lower comparing the same months of 2019 (201 cases in May 2019 and 219 cases in April).