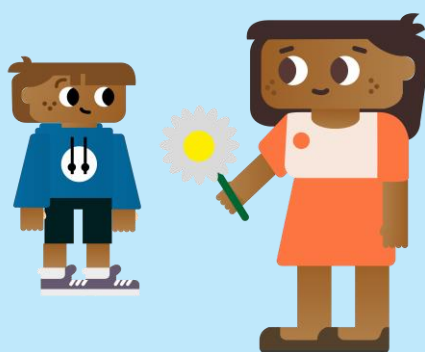


Children's Mental Health

Taken from
*Children's Realities in Europe:
Progress & Gaps*
Eurochild 2024 flagship report
on children in need across Europe.



Eurochild
Putting children at
the heart of Europe

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Children's Mental Health

On 20 November - World Children's Day - Eurochild released its flagship report on children in need titled 'Children's Realities in Europe: Progress & Gaps', which compiles information from 57 Eurochild members in 31 countries across Europe. Members from 30 countries contributed insights on children's mental health. This sub-report outlines the progress, challenges and recommendations for each country and provides general recommendations to the European governments and European Institutions.

Introduction

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) provides a robust framework for promoting children's mental health by emphasising their rights to well-being and equality.

Key provisions include:

- **The right to non-discrimination** (Article 2): The principle that all rights apply to children without exception, and States have an obligation to protect children from discrimination of any kind.
- **The right to life, survival, and development** (Article 6): Recognises mental health as essential to a child's holistic development.
- **The right to access information** (Article 17): Recognises children's rights to access appropriate resources and knowledge, supporting their well-being and mental health.
- **The right to the highest attainable standard of health** (Article 24): Recognises the right of the child to enjoy the highest level of health possible, including mental health, as an essential component of a child's overall health and well-being.
- **The right to an adequate standard of living** (Article 27): Recognises the right of every child to a standard of living that meets their physical, mental, and emotional development.
- **The right to physical and psychological recovery and reintegration** (Article 39): Recognises the right of every child who has experienced abuse, neglect, or exploitation to receive support, ensuring their recovery and reintegration into society.

The World Health Organisation defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity," underscoring its multidimensional nature and the diverse indicators used to measure it.

Childhood is a crucial period for mental health, as it lays the foundation for essential skills such as social interaction and learning that shape well-being throughout life. Supporting

children's mental health is critical for their immediate well-being, building resilience, and preventing future issues.

Despite rising demand, children's mental health has been overlooked or not prioritised in societal and healthcare policies, making access to support even more difficult. This lack of attention exacerbates barriers to care and worsens the challenges children face.

Children's mental health in Europe faces significant challenges, as outlined in recent reports and studies.

Key Issues in Children's Mental Health in Europe:

1. **The number of children experiencing poor mental health is increasing:** According to a [2024 UNICEF report](#), there are approximately 11.2 million children in Europe experiencing mental health issues.
2. **Mental Health is a Significant Concern for Children:** In 2024, [Children](#) identified that mental health is their biggest concern. School pressure was reported by 2 out of every three children as a major contributor to their mental health. Girls are more affected than boys, with 74% of girls citing school pressure as a concern, compared to 59% of boys.
3. **Gender Disparities:** A [report from the WHO Regional Office for Europe](#) highlights that adolescent girls experience worse mental health outcomes compared to boys. These disparities become more pronounced as children age, with 15-year-old girls reporting the worst mental health indicators.
4. **Ongoing Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic:** A recent [European Parliament report](#) identified the urgent need to address children's mental health. The pandemic exacerbated mental health struggles for children across Europe.
5. **Children's Mental Health and Environmental Challenges:** Children and youth are increasingly concerned about climate change, with [many experiencing eco-anxiety](#).

EU Actions and Policies:

The European Commission adopted a [Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health](#) in June 2023, focusing on prevention, early intervention, and improving access to mental health services across Member States. As part of this approach:

- UNICEF is participating in developing a prevention **toolkit for children and adolescents**.
- The European Commission published [Supporting wellbeing at school: new guidelines for policymakers and educators](#).

Findings from Eurochild Members

Albania

- **Progress:** Plans are underway in the education system to provide one psychologist per high school and one psychologist for up to 800 children in primary education.
- **Gaps:** Severe mental health service crisis with no further reform plans implemented. Services are predominantly psychiatry-based, with insufficient community-based care. Post-COVID, mental health issues have worsened for children and young people. Psychological support is costly, with limited free services and inadequate school-based support.
- **Recommendations:** Comprehensive reform, integration of psychologists, and professional supervision in schools.

Belgium

- **Progress:** Investments in free/reduced-cost specialist services and walk-in centres (e.g., Overkop-huizen). Reforms bring mental health assistance closer to youth, including in schools. Flanders is implementing the Third Suicide Prevention Plan.
- **Gaps:** High suicide rates (ages 15–19), long waiting lists (over two-thirds wait more than 1 year), and limited support for vulnerable groups. The stigma surrounding mental health remains significant.
- **Recommendations:** Improve coordination across sectors, support vulnerable groups (LGBTQI+, low-income families), and improve data collection.

Bulgaria

- **Progress:** Adoption of the 2020–2030 Mental Health Strategy.
- **Gaps:** Scarce investments, stigma, and limited mental health strategy implementation. Schools lack sufficient resources to address bullying.
- **Recommendations:** Develop comprehensive clinical, counselling, and psychotherapeutic services. Collaborate with stakeholders to reduce stigma and improve the implementation of the strategy.

Croatia

- **Progress:** Development of an Action Plan for Children’s Mental Health and deployment of trained school staff (e.g., PomoziDa programme). New Public Health Network draft.
- **Gaps:** Inadequate early intervention, long waiting times for appointments (e.g., 80+ days in Zagreb), and shortages of specialists and inpatient capacity. Emergency hospitalisations increased by 56% between 2019–2022. Regional disparities persist.

- **Recommendations:** Increase funding, deploy mobile multidisciplinary teams, and expand psychological first aid in schools.

Cyprus

- **Gaps:** Mental health services are neglected for both children and adults. Schools lack trained psychologists, offering only career counselling. Specialist services have long waiting times, delaying interventions.
- **Recommendations:** Establish dedicated mental health centres, provide comprehensive school-based mental health services, and collect data to inform post-COVID recovery efforts.

Denmark

- **Progress:** Early intervention opportunities exist through municipal social support and child psychiatry services. A 10-year mental health improvement plan is being implemented with increased funding.
- **Gaps:** Long waiting times for psychiatric treatment and poor coordination between health and social sectors.
- **Recommendations:** Expand child psychiatry capacity and improve cross-sectoral collaboration to reduce waiting lists.

England

- **Progress:** The government has committed to reforming the Mental Health Act, providing school-based mental health support, and proposing a Children's Wellbeing Bill.
- **Gaps:** A high prevalence of mental disorders (20% of youth in 2023), disproportionate mental health difficulties among children from poorer households, long waiting times (270,300 still awaiting support), reliance on emergency services, and racial inequalities.
- **Recommendations:** Address underlying causes (poverty, housing), prioritise early intervention, allocate £13.5 billion for recovery funding, and develop a racial equity strategy for mental health care.

Estonia

- **Progress:** Implementation of the Mental Health Action Plan (2023–2026) and legal provisions allowing children to seek psychiatric help independently without parental consent. Suicide prevention strategies are in development.
- **Gaps:** A shortage of mental health professionals, poor access in remote areas, lack of addiction support, and inadequate educational support. Young girls face an alarmingly high risk of mental health disorders compared to other age groups.

- **Recommendations:** Ensure universal access to evidence-based mental health prevention programmes. Train primary care professionals (e.g., kindergarten teachers, nurses, and family doctors) to identify mental health risks. Adopt a comprehensive strategy for suicide prevention among children and adolescents.

Finland

- **Progress:** The proposed “therapy guarantee” enables early mental health support without requiring a doctor’s diagnosis.
- **Gaps:** Severe staff shortages hinder the programme’s implementation. Access to specialised services remains limited.
- **Recommendations:** Strengthen primary and specialised services, allocate sufficient resources, and emphasise prevention and early intervention.

Germany

- **Gaps:** Diagnoses and waiting times have increased significantly (14.4 to 25.3 weeks in 3 years), worsened by external factors like war, economic instability, and the climate crisis, without a corresponding rise in service provision.
- **Recommendations:** Expand counselling and healthcare services, particularly in underserved regions. Address socioeconomic risk factors like poverty and inadequate living conditions.

Greece

- **Progress:** A positive regulation allows children to consult school psychologists without parental consent.
- **Gaps:** Only one public mental health clinic for adolescents exists, long waiting lists persist, and the child protection system is fragmented. There is a critical shortage of specialists.
- **Recommendations:** Increase investments in social services, support vulnerable families (e.g., Roma communities and children with disabilities), and improve collaboration across child protection systems.

Hungary

- **Progress:** Inpatient psychiatric care is now available in additional counties.
- **Gaps:** Outpatient care has decreased; only seven out of 19 counties provide inpatient psychiatric services. Staff shortages exacerbate service gaps, leading to unmet needs for children, especially those in poverty.
- **Recommendations:** Expand staffing and infrastructure in underserved regions and prioritise care for disadvantaged children.

Ireland

- **Progress:** An additional €100 million was allocated in 2024 for CAMHS staff recruitment. The Minister for Education announced plans to enhance mental health and well-being support.
- **Gaps:** Over 3,900 children remained on CAMHS waiting lists as of July 2023. Accessibility challenges persist for marginalised groups (e.g., refugees and LGBTI youth). Limited numbers of graduate psychologists worsen staff shortages.
- **Recommendations:** Prioritise early intervention, expand workforce training, and allocate resources to reduce waiting times and improve systemic accessibility.

Kosovo

- **Progress:** Approval of the Ministry of Health's Action Plan for Mental Health.
- **Gaps:** An increase in mental health needs post-COVID. Children with mental health problems face isolation and limited social interaction. Only seven child psychiatrists serve the entire country.
- **Recommendations:** Increase professional capacity, integrate psychologists into schools, and enhance social support systems for affected families.

Latvia

- **Progress:** The government's 2023 State Audit Office report acknowledges inadequate mental health services.
- **Gaps:** Services are fragmented and dependent on municipal financing, creating inequities. Long waiting times and limited free psychological services are widespread.
- **Recommendations:** Create a unified, inter-institutional mental health system. Increase funding for prevention and treatment programmes and collaborate with stakeholders to reduce stigma.

Malta

- **Progress:** Psycho-social teams in schools provide therapy, and children have access to counselling and psychotherapists from a young age.
- **Gaps:** A shortage of professionals and long waiting lists persist due to high demand.
- **Recommendations:** Expand therapy options (e.g., art and play therapy), improve working conditions for professionals, and extend mental health services to perinatal care.

Moldova

- **Gaps:** A critical shortage of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and psychiatric nurses limits systematic mental health interventions. Girls report a higher prevalence of mental health challenges than boys.
- **Recommendations:** Train and hire more mental health professionals. Foster collaboration between healthcare, schools, and social services to deliver comprehensive, child-centred care.

Netherlands

- **Progress:** Integrated healthcare and education systems support children with mental health needs, offering tailored education plans and crisis intervention.
- **Gaps:** Children experience increasing pressures from school and homework and are concerned about their future and issues such as housing shortages and climate change. Budget cuts threaten services, and vulnerable groups (e.g., migrants) face inequities in access.
- **Recommendations:** Improve service coordination, reduce waiting times, enhance data collection, and introduce centralised case management systems to ensure continuity of care.

Northern Ireland

- **Gaps:** Chronic underfunding, long waiting lists, and limited data undermine service quality. Social media amplifies mental health issues, especially among teenage girls.
- **Recommendations:** Secure long-term funding, prioritise early intervention, and expand specialist support within schools and communities.

Poland

- **Progress:** A dedicated mental health workforce exists. Some schools offer mental health support. WHO's Mental Health Gap Action Programme aims to improve service integration.
- **Gaps:** A severe mental health crisis affects vulnerable groups such as children in alternative care, migrants, and refugees (e.g., Ukrainian children). The insufficient workforce (1 psychiatrist per 12,400 children), long waiting lists, and inconsistent service integration exacerbate the issue. Early intervention support is limited and varies widely across regions and schools.
- **Recommendations:** Increase funding and workforce, enhance early intervention services, better integrate mental health into healthcare and education systems, and collaborate with stakeholders to reduce stigma.

Portugal

- **Progress:** Mental health services are integrated into Portugal's National Health System and free for those under 18.
- **Gaps:** Barriers to access due to staff shortages and long waiting lists. Schools lack adequate mental health support.
- **Recommendations:** Invest in mental health resources, increase staffing, and integrate services into schools to improve access.

Romania

- **Progress:** Mental Health Centres located nationwide.
- **Gaps:** Services focus more on treatment than prevention. Many children remain undiagnosed or lack access to appropriate support.
- **Recommendations:** Ensure comprehensive healthcare, expand access to preventive care and mental health services and improve screening to address unmet needs.

Scotland

- **Progress:** The 2023 Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy includes support for pregnancy, early years, crisis intervention, and prevention. Initiatives like the Creating Hope Together suicide prevention strategy involve youth participation. The Distress Brief Intervention programme supports young people aged 14–18.
- **Gaps:** High thresholds for accessing Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), long waiting lists, and rural barriers exacerbate feelings of isolation.
- **Recommendations:** Increase funding for school-based mental health support and CAMHS. Expand school-based services, strengthen prevention efforts, and address geographic inequities.

Serbia

- **Gaps:** Children report a high prevalence of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, particularly among adolescent girls. Institutionalised children often receive medication without therapy. Mental health services are fragmented and primarily project-based.
- **Recommendations:** Develop a systematic mental health care approach, increase psychotherapy access, and integrate mental health into broader healthcare systems.

Slovakia

- **Progress:** Adopting the National Mental Health Programme and its 2024–2030 Action Plan. Some schools have psychologists available, and mental health services are part of an integrated system.

- **Gaps:** Services fail to meet demand due to insufficient specialised facilities, fragmented early intervention implementation, and long waiting times for crisis cases.
- **Recommendations:** Provide timely support, increase the number of mental health practitioners, and fully implement the National Mental Health Programme.

Slovenia

- **Progress:** Children can access mental health services through paediatricians, regional Centres for the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents, emergency support clinics, and university psychiatric clinics.
- **Gaps:** Insufficient specialist clinics, long waiting lists, and overburdened school-based services. Victims of sexual violence lack immediate and specialised support. High academic pressures contribute to stress and mental health problems.
- **Recommendations:** Strengthen regional mental health centres, hire more specialists, and expand psychotherapeutic support.

Spain

- **Progress:** The 2022 Mental Health Strategy of the National Health System includes a focus on children's mental health.
- **Gaps:** High prevalence of mental health issues among children, especially migrants and refugees, exacerbated by poverty and insufficient investment. Early interventions and other support services are inadequate.
- **Recommendations:** Implement measurable actions within the Mental Health Strategy, prioritise early and timely interventions, and provide specialised support for migrant and refugee children.

Türkiye

- **Gaps:** Prevention is neglected, school counsellors lack resources, and private mental health care is unaffordable. The ongoing war has intensified the mental health crisis.
- **Recommendations:** Expand affordable mental health support in schools and communities, hire social workers, and prioritise prevention and early intervention strategies.

Ukraine

- **Progress:** Initiatives like How Are You and Gen.Ukrainian support and raise awareness about mental health.
- **Gaps:** The war has caused a profound mental health crisis among children and caregivers, with inadequate institutional support for mental health.

- **Recommendations:** Increase public investment in education, mental health recovery, and early childhood support to address trauma and promote resilience.

Wales

- **Progress:** The NEST Framework integrates mental health support across systems. Schools must offer counselling services, and 24/7 NHS mental health helplines are available. The government is working on an all-age Mental Health Strategy.
- **Gaps:** Long CAMHS waiting lists and post-pandemic challenges, including rising debt, hunger, and mental health issues, as well as barriers to education and professional support.
- **Recommendations:** Strengthen school and community-based mental health services, increase resources, and address underlying social determinants like poverty and housing insecurity.

General Recommendations

All children should have universal access to mental health support, including professional services from psychologists, therapists, and psychiatrists, regardless of whether they live in urban or rural areas. They should be actively involved in designing and evaluating mental services. There is an urgent need to enhance early intervention support for those facing mental health difficulties, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, refugees, asylum-seeking and migrant children, and the LGBTIQ+ community. National decision-makers must invest in mental health services and address the various factors impacting children's mental health, including material and social deprivation, climate change, and the challenges posed by online platforms.

1. Include Children in designing and evaluating Mental Health Services

- Involve children in designing, implementing, and evaluating mental health initiatives to ensure these programmes effectively address their needs.
- Children's perspectives and lived experiences should be valued in shaping policies, services, and support systems, fostering a more inclusive and responsive approach to mental health care.

2. Expand Mental Health Services

- Increase the number of mental health professionals, including psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and psychiatric nurses.
- Establish additional clinics and centres to improve access to mental health support in underserved areas.

3. Enhance School-Based Support

- Integrate mental health services into schools with trained psychologists, counsellors, and social workers.
- Develop school programmes focused on early intervention, emotional resilience, and stress management.

4. Promote Prevention and Early Intervention

- Implement universal mental health screening programmes to identify and address issues early.
- Focus on preventive measures such as mental health education and awareness campaigns in schools and communities.

5. Address Workforce Shortages

- Increase funding for mental health training programmes and offer incentives to attract and retain professionals.
- Develop and deploy mobile multidisciplinary teams in rural and underserved regions.

6. Reduce Stigma

- Conduct national awareness campaigns to normalise seeking mental health support.
- Work with schools, families, and communities to educate people about mental health to overcome stigma.

7. Improve Accessibility and Equity

- Ensure marginalised groups, including migrants, refugees, and children living in poverty, have equitable access to mental health services.
- Expand telehealth services to reach remote and underserved areas.

8. Strengthen System Integration

- Enhance coordination between healthcare, education, and social services to create a seamless system for mental health care.
- Centralise case management to ensure continuity of care across services.

9. Allocate Sufficient Resources

- Invest in mental health infrastructure, staffing, and research.
- Ensure policies and strategies are backed by adequate funding and implementation plans.

10. Focus on Gender-Specific Needs

- Develop targeted interventions for girls who report higher stress levels due to school and societal pressures.

11. Address Regional Disparities

- Build mental health facilities and services in rural and underserved regions to reduce geographic inequities in mental health care.

12. Specialised Support for Vulnerable Groups

- Provide tailored mental health programmes for children in alternative care, those with disabilities, and victims of trauma or abuse.

13. Monitor and Evaluate Progress

- Collect data on mental health prevalence, outcomes, and service effectiveness to inform policy and improve programmes.

By addressing these recommendations, countries can create a robust framework to support children's mental health and well-being.

Summary

Children are increasingly facing mental health challenges exacerbated by insufficient resources, fragmented systems, and delayed interventions. Vulnerable groups, such as those from disadvantaged backgrounds, rural areas, migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, and the LGBTIQ+ community, encounter additional barriers in accessing support. The COVID-19 pandemic, social inequalities, conflicts and wars have further worsened these challenges, with inadequate school-based systems and limited early intervention aggravating the crisis.

Addressing these issues requires cross-sector collaboration, targeted reforms, and greater investment in mental health care to ensure timely and equitable support. Children should be actively involved in designing and evaluating mental health services to ensure these initiatives effectively meet their needs. Prioritising prevention, reducing stigma, and integrating mental health services into education, healthcare, and social systems are crucial to improving outcomes.

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