

# How children feel

Children's perceptions of mental health  
in 4 EU Member States



**Eurochild**  
Putting children at  
the heart of Europe

# A child-friendly abstract

In this report, Eurochild presents the perspectives of children<sup>1</sup> from Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, and Malta on mental health. The main goal of the report is to understand how children define mental health, what influences it, and what they believe is needed to support their well-being.

In these four national conversations, children were asked six questions about mental health. Here is a summary of their responses.

When asked about their understanding of mental health, children described it as emotional well-being connected to thoughts, feelings, and the ability to cope with stress. They emphasised that good mental health is more than just the absence of problems; it is a sense of inner peace and stability.

When asked about threats to their mental health, children identified school pressure, social media pressures, and family dynamics. They also highlighted the stigma surrounding mental health, which makes it more difficult to seek help.

When discussing safe and trusting spaces to confide, children stressed the importance of environments where they can express themselves without fear of judgment. They highlighted the need for trust and respect in these spaces in order to feel supported. When it came to resources and systems that support mental health, children noted that accessing professional help can be challenging due to stigma and concerns about confidentiality. Children want free and better access to mental health services, particularly within schools.

When talking about recognising struggles and promoting mental well-being, children pointed to changes in mood or behavior as signs of mental health issues. They emphasised the role of hobbies, time in nature, and friendships in maintaining good mental health.

Regarding the role of adults, children urged parents and teachers to listen with empathy and not dismiss their struggles. They recommended reducing academic pressure and integrating mental health support into the school environment.

By sharing children's voices, Eurochild aims to ensure that decision-makers shape policies and practices that truly meet children's needs on mental health.

<sup>1</sup> In line with Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Eurochild defines a child as "every human being below the age of eighteen years".

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## Acknowledgements

This report is the final product of a series of consultations with children carried out by four National Eurochild Forums (Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, and Malta).

The National Eurochild Forums (NEFs) are spaces where children can share their ideas and views about important issues affecting their communities, countries and Europe. Eurochild member organisations support the NEFs and involve children from different backgrounds and lived experiences. The NEFs help connect local and national concerns with discussions and decisions made at European level, ensuring children's perspectives are heard in important debates and policies.

**The NEFs provide a framework to connect with children in their communities and countries**, particularly children in the most vulnerable situations. This helps to ensure that a diverse, wider range of children's views and lived experiences are included and represented in Eurochild's work, making it more representative and impactful. These are:

- **Bulgaria:** [National Network for Children](#)
- **Croatia:** [Society 'Our Children' Opatija](#)
- **Estonia:** [Estonian Union for Child Welfare](#)
- **Malta:** [Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society](#)

The Eurochild Secretariat would like to acknowledge the NEFs for coordinating and carrying out this research. In particular we would like to thank Kristina Nenova from the National Network for Children, Antonia Katić from Society 'Our Children' Opatija, Triin Sooäär from the Estonian Union for Child Welfare and Angela Caruana from the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society. We extend our special gratitude to the 134 children who participated in this process and shared their experiences, opinions and recommendations. We are very grateful for their time and invaluable input. Eurochild would additionally like to thank the staff members from the four NEFs who carried out the translation work for the consultations, which was crucial to facilitate the participation of a more diverse group of children.

Eurochild would like to extend its gratitude to Antonia Katić also for her collaboration with the Secretariat in developing the framework and methodology for the consultation. She worked closely with children from NEF Croatia to ensure the process was truly child-friendly. The finalised framework was then shared with all NEFs as a guidance tool, providing an accessible structure for reporting back. This enabled the Eurochild Secretariat to compile a comprehensive report reflecting children's perspectives.

The report was written by Laure Pailleau with support from Isabella Cervino, Stella Picca, Ally Dunhill, Carine Le Borgne and Mieke Schuurman. The report was edited by Laure Pailleau, Stella Picca, and Federica Marra and supported by Ciaran O'Donnell. Designed by Davide Rambaldi.

# A note on the methodology used to gather children’s views

The consultation process and this report aimed to grasp how children understand the causes, manifestations, and effects of mental health on their peers and/or other children, and to provide a space for children to voice their opinions, concerns, and finally, their ideas on what needs to change.

For this consultation, the National Eurochild Forums (NEFs) in Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, and Malta followed the methodology developed by the Eurochild Secretariat, with the support of Antonia Katić and children from NEF Croatia. The process was guided by detailed guidelines produced by Eurochild to ensure a meaningful and inclusive approach to gathering children’s views on mental health.

Consultations took place in **November and December 2024, with a total of 134 children aged 6-17** participating across the four countries. The discussions were conducted through **focus groups**, allowing children to share their perspectives in an interactive and supportive setting. The table below provides an overview of the consultation formats and the number of children engaged in each country.

## Overview of children consulted through focus group discussions

National Eurochild Forum	Number of children	Age groups
National Network for Children Bulgaria	10	14-16
Society “Our Children” Opatija, Croatia	16	10-17
Estonian Union for Child Welfare	90	12-17
Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society	18	6-17
Total = 134		

The consultations were conducted in the children’s language in the four NEF countries: Bulgarian, Croatian, and Estonian, with Malta carrying out the consultations in a bilingual manner, utilising both Maltese and English. The translation process – from English to the respective national languages and then back to English – was carried out by staff from the four NEFs, including the direct quotes provided by children and highlighted in this report.

Following [Eurochild’s child protection policy](#), informed consent was obtained from all participants and all applicable child protection and child safeguarding standards were upheld in this child participatory process. Each child was made aware that even after giving their informed consent, they could withdraw it at any time and choose not to answer any questions. **At no stage of this process were any of the children asked to, directly or indirectly, share possible personal experiences of mental health, past or present.**

As a final note, the authors recognise that certain methodological constraints restrict the wider quantification of the findings, including the differences in sample sizes across the four countries surveyed. However, the purpose of this consultation was to bring children’s voices into the conversation on mental health and serve as a reminder that children have a right to share their perspectives, voice their opinions and have their recommendations heard. Consultations such as those with the NEFs are a first step in mainstreaming child participation in civic dialogue. They highlight children’s invaluable input while simultaneously being engaged and empowered as actors of change in their lives and those of their peers.

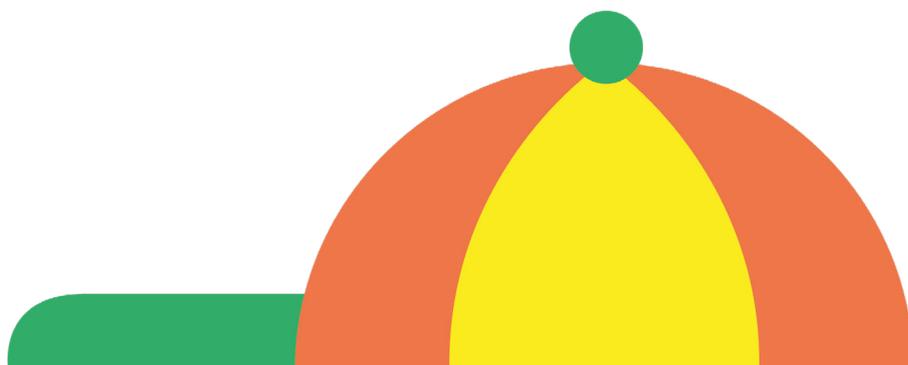
## Consultation with children on mental health – focus group discussion

The children who participated in the consultations were encouraged to explore and share their perspectives on mental health. The discussions were structured around six key questions, each forming a dedicated chapter in this report. Within each chapter, sub-questions were further developed to present the wider perspectives provided by the children.

Key questions:

- **How would you define mental health?**
- **What can affect children’s mental health?**
- **What is necessary for children to feel safe and comfortable to confide in someone?**
- **Who can you talk to regarding your mental health?**
- **Are there signs by which you can recognise someone is struggling in your environment?**
- **How can adults ensure children have good mental health?**

The answers to these six questions are not independent from one another. Instead, the above questions were made to provide children who participated in the consultation process with a disaggregated framework that would allow them to better express and explore their points of view in a detailed way and ensure that their views were reflected meaningfully.



# Eurochild's approach to the meaningful participation of children



**“Nothing for us without us.”**  
- Eurochild's Children  
Council members

Eurochild is committed to working towards a society where children grow up happy, healthy, confident, and respected as individuals in their own right. Our capacity building and advocacy are focused on several thematic areas, including child poverty, child participation and children's mental health and its impact on children from disadvantaged and vulnerable backgrounds. **Bringing children's voices to such conversations is crucial to this work.** Eurochild operates on the principle and belief that children are experts in their own lives and must be able to participate in decisions that affect them.

This is enshrined in Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 24 of the *Charter of the Fundamental Rights of the European Union*, and has been integrated into the *EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child* as Thematic Area 1<sup>2</sup>.

Participation serves a dual purpose. It improves the quality of decision-making by understanding the lived experiences of children, and ensuring that the evidence base for actions and strategies includes children's perspectives. At the same time, it contributes to the children's own holistic development by actively involving them in the decision-making process. This is done by creating a space that is often missing for their voices to be heard and for them to become actors of change – in their lives, in their families, in their communities, in their countries. Children's involvement in decision-making is a foundational pillar for healthy democracies and responsible citizenship.

Although child participation is increasingly recognised as an essential component of civil dialogue, the under-representation of children's voices in conversations is still pervasive. This holds true for conversations, analyses, and recommendations related to mental health, where the primary sources of qualitative data are often limited to caregivers, parents, guardians, governments and non-governmental officials and institutions, as shown in this [UNICEF Spain report](#) published in December 2024.

That is why the primary goal of this report is to bring into the conversation the voices of children, to hear their perspectives, acknowledge their experiences and consult them for their recommendations. After all, no one understands the realities of children's childhood experiences better than children themselves.



<sup>2</sup> The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child was itself co-created with children. For more information see: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-action-rights-child\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-action-rights-child_en)

# Introduction

Mental health is fundamental to children's well-being, shaping their experiences, relationships, and overall development. Mental health is not an isolated issue but is deeply interconnected with various aspects of children's lives, including their families, schools, friendships, and communities.

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. 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.

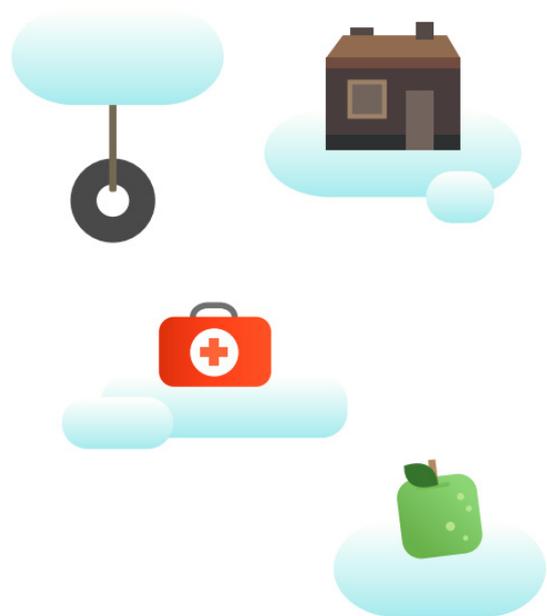
In the [Europe Kids Want report](#) (co-developed by Eurochild in 2024, based on consultations with over 9,200 children), mental health emerged as their biggest concern. Two out of three children identified school pressure as a major factor affecting their well-being. Despite growing awareness of its importance, children's perspectives on mental health remain underrepresented in policy discussions and support systems. This report aims to address this gap by amplifying the voices of children from four EU Member States - Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, and Malta - who have shared their insights, experiences, and recommendations on mental health.

Children are the experts of their own lives. Their perspectives provide valuable insights into how mental health is understood, what challenges they face, and what changes they believe are necessary. By engaging directly with children through consultations facilitated by the NEFs, this report seeks to ensure that their voices inform policies and initiatives aimed at supporting their mental well-being.

Several recurring themes emerged from the consultations. Children highlighted the importance of safe and trusting environments where they feel comfortable expressing their emotions. Many emphasised the impact of peer relationships, school pressures, and family dynamics on their mental health. The role of adults - whether parents, teachers, or policymakers - was repeatedly mentioned as crucial in shaping children's mental well-being. Children also called for greater accessibility to mental health support, the de-stigmatisation of seeking help, and more inclusive policies that prioritise their needs.

This report serves as both a platform for children's voices and a call to action. By acknowledging and acting upon their insights, decision-makers can create

more responsive, child-centred approaches to mental health. Ensuring that children are not only heard but also actively involved in shaping solutions is essential in building a society where their well-being is truly prioritised.



# Children's general understanding of mental health



*Mental health means relationships, emotions, how to function in life, and the mindset for solving problems.”*

- Child from Estonia

The first question to introduce and lay the foundations of the consultation process to the children was: **‘How would you define mental health?’**. Their responses provided valuable insight into how children across different cultural contexts perceive mental well-being.

Across all four countries, the most common association when discussing the term ‘mental health’ was primarily **emotional well-being**, followed by **cognitive processing** and the **ability to cope with stress**. Many children described mental health as a reflection of their **thoughts, feelings, and overall state of mind**, emphasising its role in shaping daily experiences. For the children, good mental health was not just the absence of distress but rather an internal sense of **peace and stability**.

*“For me, mental health is when you have peace of mind and do not have to worry about problems.”*

- Child from Malta

## Various interpretations across countries

While children shared a broad understanding of mental health, their definitions also reflected distinct perspectives:

- **Biological and cognitive understanding:**  
In Malta and Estonia, mental health was often linked to brain health and cognitive functioning. Children from these countries described mental health as the way the brain operates and influences overall well-being.

*“I think we can use the definition: how healthy your brain is.”* - Child from Malta

*“Mental health is about how your mind and brain work.”* - Child from Estonia

- **Emotional resilience and everyday coping:**  
Children in Croatia and Bulgaria placed greater emphasis on emotional regulation and the ability to handle life's challenges. Their responses highlighted the children's understanding of the connection between mental health, emotional stability, and self-awareness.

*“Mental health is the well-being of a person that affects our thoughts and feelings.”* - Child from Croatia

*“It is about emotional stability and balance.”* - Child from Bulgaria

These perspectives reveal that while some children understand mental health through a **biological and cognitive lens**, others focus on **emotional resilience and self-regulation**. This distinction suggests that children's views on mental health are shaped by both **personal experiences** and **broader cultural narratives** about well-being. Recognising these differences is essential in designing child-centred mental health initiatives that resonate with children's lived realities.

## Components of good mental health

When asked what constitutes good mental health, children across the four countries identified three key components: **emotional stability, social connections, and self-confidence**. These elements were seen as essential for maintaining well-being and navigating everyday challenges.

*“Good mental health means self-confidence, security, and a support person.”*

- Child from Estonia

Some children emphasised the importance of **external influences** on mental health, recognising that well-being is not only shaped by internal resilience but also by the way individuals respond to life's circumstances.

*“It depends on how much we influence it and let the situations that happen to us influence it.”*

- Child from Croatia

Emotional literacy also emerged as a crucial factor in good mental health. The ability to **recognise, understand, and express emotions** was seen as key to maintaining balance and well-being.

*“Emotional literacy is part of good mental health.”*

- Child from Bulgaria

For some children, good mental health was not just about emotional stability and self-awareness, but also about **resilience** - the ability to manage stress, cope with difficulties, and **overcome challenges**.

They highlighted how personal experiences, particularly negative or traumatic events, could have long-term effects on mental well-being.

*“For me, when I talk about mental health, it’s saying how much you can handle with experience. If you are experiencing something bad, it is going to have a great impact on your mental health because of triggers and traumas later in life.”*

- Child from Malta

### Distinguishing mental and physical health

When asked to differentiate between mental and physical health, children acknowledged their distinct nature but emphasised their deep **interconnection**. Many children noted that while physical health issues are often more visible and widely acknowledged, **mental health struggles can be equally, if not more, devastating**.

*“There is a difference, for sure. Physical health is obviously important, but mental health can eat you up inside. With mental health you can have a lot of problems which can affect a lot of things, for example unfortunately suicide or self-harm. Physical health is also important because if you are obese or have health issues, you can’t do certain stuff. You can also get bullied. For example, if you use a wheelchair, you can get bullied or won’t find the help you need so there is a difference, but it can affect the brain as well unfortunately”* - Child from Malta

Children highlighted the **emotional and psychological toll** of mental ill-health, describing it as potentially more pervasive and internally destructive than physical health issues. Some mentioned severe consequences such as **suicide and self-harm**, stressing the importance of early intervention and support to address mental health distress.

Many also recognised how **physical health challenges**, such as obesity or disabilities, can negatively impact mental health, often through **bullying, discrimination, or social isolation**. This perspective underscores the interconnected nature of physical and mental health, where struggles in one area often worsen challenges in the other. This perspective was echoed in Estonia and Croatia, where children described how **mental distress can manifest physically**:

*“Mental health affects our whole body. If you are not mentally well, it weakens you and makes you physically unwell too.”* - Child from Estonia

*“Bad mental health can influence our physical state and vice versa. We need help and support everywhere. And it is okay not to feel okay. Children need to know that.”* - Child from Croatia

In Bulgaria, children particularly stressed that mental health struggles are often invisible, making it harder for adults to acknowledge their significance. They expressed frustration over the lack of awareness and recognition compared to physical health issues.

*“Mental health is something you cannot touch, you can only imagine it.”*- Child from Bulgaria

*“People pay attention when someone breaks a bone, but they ignore us when we are struggling mentally”* - Child from Bulgaria

Societal disparities in how mental and physical health are addressed was also reflected in the Maltese and Croatian contexts, where some children pointed out that mental health remains highly **stigmatised and under-prioritised** compared to physical health. Many felt that reaching out for help is often discouraged or dismissed, leading to **barriers in accessing affordable support**.

*“We do distinguish between mental health and physical health but I think that in Malta we don’t emphasise mental health enough. One of the main reasons is due to the stigma surrounding mental health, for example; when it comes to therapy or reaching out for help people are like, ‘Oh, I do not need this, I can figure it out by myself.’ Plus, mental health care and therapy is expensive, so if we could make it easier for people to reach out and get help, it would be very beneficial for people in Malta.”*

- Child from Malta

A recurring concern among children was the **lack of accessible mental health services**, especially when compared to physical healthcare. Children in Malta noted that while hospitals provide **free medical treatment**, seeking help for mental health often requires **paying for professional services**, making it inaccessible to many families.

*“I would like to add that with physical health you can always go to hospital as they offer free health services. With mental health, you have to go to a professional and pay a lot of money, and there are a lot of families in Malta that can’t afford it. We should have free mental health services as it is not fair to those who can’t afford it.”*- Child from Malta

Similar concerns were raised in Croatia, where children highlighted the **lack of mental health resources in schools**. They noted that while physical health is prioritised, through sport facilities for example, mental health support and discussions are often overlooked.

*“We don’t talk enough about mental health in our schools. Teachers are focused only on physical health.”* - Child from Croatia

### The importance of mental health

The children consulted emphasised the fundamental role of mental health in their **overall well-being**, highlighting its equal, if not greater, importance compared to physical health. Many expressed the view that mental and physical health are deeply interconnected, with one influencing the other.

**“Both mental and physical health are equally important.”** - Child from Croatia

Others reinforced this perspective by explaining that **maintaining good mental health is essential for ‘handling’ physical health challenges**. A child from Bulgaria shared: **“mental health is more important because when you can handle everything mentally, physical health can be easily achieved”**. Another child from Bulgaria elaborated: **“if a person is mentally unstable, they cannot handle difficult life situations”**.

A recurring theme among the children’s responses was the impact of mental health on physical well-being. A child from Bulgaria highlighted the link between mental resilience and recovery from illness, stating: **“if a person is sick, their physical health is threatened. The levels of physical stability are lower. But it is very important what the state of their mental health is. If a person is in a better mental state, this can enable the improvement of physical health”**. This perspective underscores the belief that emotional stability plays a crucial role in overcoming health challenges.

Similarly, a child from Estonia stressed the importance of peace of mind, explaining that: **“without peace, stress increases, and you are no longer ‘healthy’**”. This insight highlights the **detrimental effects of stress on overall well-being** and the necessity of fostering emotional balance to maintain good health.

Several children also linked mental health to key aspects of their daily lives, such as sports and personal growth. One child from Bulgaria remarked: **“it is the same with sport activities. Good mental health can support good sporting achievement”**. This statement reflects the understanding that **psychological well-being directly influences performance, motivation, and resilience**, demonstrating how mental health is not just about avoiding distress but also about enabling success.

Additionally, children recognised the long-term impact of both mental and physical health. As a child from Croatia explained: **“both mental and physical health can leave permanent marks on the lives of children, so they are equally important”**. This highlights the lasting consequences of neglecting mental health, reinforcing the need for comprehensive support systems that address both physical and psychological well-being.

The perspectives shared by children reflect a **nuanced understanding of health, acknowledging the importance of emotional and psychological well-being alongside physical health**. Their insights underline the **necessity of accessible mental health support and the need for policies that prioritise both aspects of well-being** to ensure that children grow up in environments that support their holistic development.

## Differences in mental health challenges for children and adults

A recurring theme across all four countries was the recognition that **children and adults experience mental health challenges differently**. While both groups face emotional struggles, their sources of stress, coping mechanisms, and levels of support **vary significantly**. Children pointed out that while adults often deal with work-related pressures and responsibilities, children struggle with **peer dynamics, self-identity, and a lack of control over their environment**.

**“Adults have more responsibilities and expectations, while children face group dynamics.”** - Child from Estonia

Many children observed that although adults face greater external pressures, they also tend to have more developed coping mechanisms to manage stress. A Croatian child pointed out that adults’ life experience gives them an advantage in handling difficulties, stating: **“adults can sometimes better deal with their problems because of their experiences and maturity, unlike many children who lack the support they need”**.

However, children also emphasised that the **mental health struggles of adults often have a direct impact on children**. A Croatian child shared: **“problems that adults have are connected to children’s lives because adults spread their frustrations to children”**. This highlights how **family stress, economic struggles, and parental mental health challenges** can create additional emotional burdens for children, making it even harder for them to manage their own well-being.

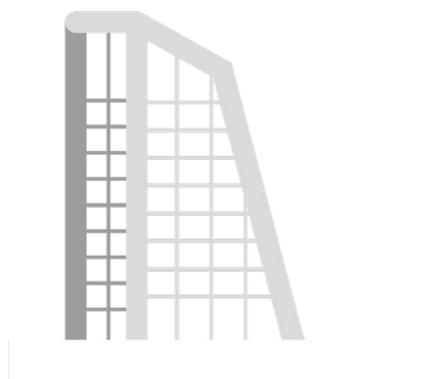
For many children, **uncertainty about their emotions and identity** was a central challenge. One Bulgarian child expressed this struggle stating: **“children do not know how to feel about themselves most of the time”**. This reflects how childhood is a critical period for self-discovery, emotional regulation, and social belonging, often making mental health struggles more confusing and overwhelming.

These perspectives highlight the **distinct nature of mental health challenges for children and adults**. While adults may face greater life responsibilities, children must navigate **peer pressure, self-identity struggles, and the impact of adult stress in their environments, all while often lacking the coping mechanisms and autonomy that adults possess**.

Addressing these differences requires age-appropriate mental health support systems that consider the unique emotional landscapes that children experience.

In conclusion, children across the four countries emphasise the fundamental role of mental health in

their overall well-being, often equating or even prioritising it over physical health. They highlight key factors like **emotional stability, self-confidence, resilience, and social support**, while stressing the **interconnection** between mental and physical health. Many children point to the stigma and lack of support for mental health struggles, making it harder for children to get help. They also recognise that while adults face greater responsibilities, children deal with **peer pressure, self-identity struggles, and have limited control over their environment**. Such insights call for greater awareness, accessible resources, and policies that prioritise mental well-being alongside physical health.



# Perceived threats to children's mental health



***A lot of kids have committed suicide due to their mental health in shambles. A lot of kids can get mental illnesses and never recover, all due to a bully or trauma from the past.”***

**– Child from Estonia**

Children's mental health is shaped by a **combination of internal and external factors**, from school-related stress and self-esteem struggles to the influence of family dynamics, peer relationships, and social media. Through consultations conducted in Estonia, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Malta, children provided deep **insights into the pressures they face, revealing both common concerns and country-specific nuances**. Their perspectives offer a clear picture of the challenges that threaten their mental well-being and highlight the support they need to navigate them.

## **Peer relationships and exposure to violence - bullying**

Across all four countries, children consistently identified bullying - **both physical and online - as one of the greatest threats** to children's mental health. Many described its long-lasting impact, emphasising that trauma and bullying can leave deep emotional scars.

In Estonia, two-thirds of the participants explicitly named bullying as a significant factor affecting their mental life, followed by **loneliness and excessive schoolwork**. The absence of support was also a key concern, as an Estonian child noted: ***“a child may have bad mental health due to bullying. This can be threatened if there's no support person to talk to”***.

In Croatia, children called for friendlier school environments where exclusion and violence are not tolerated. Many felt that **schools should take a stronger stance against bullying** and offer more emotional support. Similarly, Bulgarian participants pointed out that aggression and social isolation often signal deeper struggles, highlighting the need for intervention before these issues escalate.

Maltese children reflected on the difficulty of recognising **unhealthy peer dynamics**, particularly when bullying occurs within friendships. One child shared: ***“I didn't realise I was being bullied in the friend group until I left the friend group. Your friend picks on you, then he does it again and again until you realise it's not worth sticking around”***.

This illustrates how emotional manipulation and exclusion can be just as damaging as overt aggression.

These experiences highlight the urgent **need for stronger anti-bullying policies**, increased mental health support in schools, and safe spaces where children can seek help without fear of judgment. Participants emphasised that creating inclusive, respectful environments is essential to protecting children's well-being.

## **School pressure**

Across all four countries, children described school as a significant source of stress rather than support. The pressure to perform academically was frequently mentioned, with many describing school as a space of constant demands and high expectations that leave them feeling anxious and exhausted.

In Estonia, school was frequently identified as a determining factor in children's mental health, either positively or negatively. One group of girls shared: ***“school can be the cause of good or bad mental health. Children's mental health can be threatened by other people, but spending quality time with family can positively or negatively affect it”***. This highlights how school experiences interact with home life in shaping emotional well-being.

Children in Croatia shared similar concerns, particularly regarding the lack of guidance on how to manage school work effectively. One child noted: ***“many children feel the school pressure, which is influencing our mental health because we are not learning in schools how to study with understanding”***.

In Malta, children also felt that schools do not provide enough space for mental health discussions, reinforcing the notion that schools are often environments of stress rather than support. A child from Malta remarked: ***“we don't talk enough about mental health in our schools. Teachers are focused only on physical health”***.

Bulgarian children further emphasised that a heavy school workload and the stress of academic expectations directly impact mental health. They noted that schools lack emotional support structures, leaving **students feeling overwhelmed**.

These perspectives highlight how **school is often a source of stress rather than support across all four countries**. Academic pressure, lack of guidance, and insufficient mental health discussions contribute to feelings of anxiety and exhaustion. Children emphasised the need for schools to foster supportive environments that prioritise well-being alongside education.

### Self-esteem and personal struggles

The struggle for self-esteem and validation was another recurring theme across all four countries. Many children spoke about the **pressure to fit in** and how their self-worth is often shaped by friendships, social standing, and external expectations.

In Estonia, children highlighted how **friendships** can serve as both a protective and a **risk factor** for mental health. One child explained: *“a child may have good mental health thanks to friends, but bad mental health due to school and bullying is also possible. This can be threatened if there’s no support person to talk to”*.

Children in Croatia also expressed concerns about peer relationships, emphasising the impact of **physical appearance and social judgement**. One participant stated: *“our physical appearance is also a big problem and the way others see us and what they say to us influences our mental health”*. This reflects how societal and peer expectations can shape a child’s self-perception.

In Bulgaria, children emphasised emotional stability as a key factor in mental health, noting that **self-awareness and resilience** are essential for navigating challenges. Meanwhile, Maltese children shared experiences of struggling with peer validation, particularly during adolescence, when the **pressure to conform** is especially strong. One Maltese child remarked: *“it depends on the people you socialise with. If your friends don’t respect your decisions, then don’t hang out with them anymore. But it’s difficult because when you’re in school you try to fit in”*.

These insights show that children across all four countries struggle with self-esteem, often shaped by friendships, **social status, and societal expectations**. Many highlighted the pressure to fit in and the impact of **peer validation** on their mental health. Building resilience and fostering supportive environments are essential in helping them navigate these challenges.

### Social media

Children recognised social media as both a **source of knowledge and a significant risk** to mental well-being. While it provides a space for connection, awareness, and entertainment, it also fosters **bullying, unrealistic comparisons, and addictive behaviors**.

**Online gaming and social media platforms were identified as vulnerable spaces** where bullying occurs, often affecting children’s self-esteem, by comparing themselves to the idealised images they see online, striving to match unrealistic standards, which negatively impacts their self-esteem. A child from Bulgaria noted: *“people show the most beautiful image they can, sharing only their successes, which leads to competition”*.

Participants highlighted the **dangers of anonymity**, which enables harmful behavior with little accountability. In Estonia, two-thirds of participants identified bullying—both online and offline—as the greatest threat to their mental health, with social media playing a key role.

Children also raised concerns about social media **algorithms promoting harmful content**. Even when inappropriate material is reported, **delays in removal** allow it to continue affecting child users. A Croatian child emphasised the need for safer online spaces, stating: *“we need more friendly environments where violence is not accepted or tolerated”*.

These insights highlight the importance of **digital literacy programmes** that empower children to critically navigate online spaces, as well as parental education on monitoring and supporting their children’s digital experiences.

### Family dynamics

Family plays a crucial role in shaping children’s mental well-being, serving as both a source of support and, at times, a source of stress.

*“Your parents should be there for you. Sometimes your parents can cause a bit of your mental health problems.”* – Child from Malta

*“My mother is a teacher and she is preoccupied by so many problems coming from her students. This doesn’t mean that she is not giving me attention but I prefer to protect her and share with other people.”*  
– Child from Bulgaria

In Estonia, children pointed to family dynamics as a key factor in determining mental well-being. One group of children noted *“bad or good mental health is caused by family and school. A child’s mental health can be threatened by a bad role model, friends/family”*.

Croatian children echoed similar concerns, with one child pointing out that: ***“problems that adults have are connected to children’s lives a lot because adults spread their frustrations to children.”*** This highlights how **parental stress can affect young people**, making it difficult for them to find emotional stability at home.

In Bulgaria, some children described family issues as a key contributor to mental health struggles. Others mentioned that **in the absence of strong family support, they seek validation elsewhere.**

Similarly, in Malta, children reflected on the dual role of family - sometimes as a source of comfort but, in other cases, a significant source of distress.

These perspectives underscore the **profound influence of family on children’s mental health.**

While a supportive home environment can foster resilience and emotional well-being, family-related stress, parental struggles, and a **lack of open communication can contribute to anxiety and insecurity.** These findings highlight the importance of equipping families with the tools and awareness needed to create safe, nurturing spaces where children feel heard, valued, and supported.

To conclude, the issues raised in this chapter mirror global research on child mental health. Reports from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and UNICEF confirm that excessive academic stress, social media pressures, and family dynamics significantly shape youth mental well-being. The impact of social media, in particular, is well documented, with studies showing how exposure to unrealistic beauty standards and cyberbullying can exacerbate self-esteem struggles. The findings from Estonia, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Malta align closely with this research, reaffirming the **urgent need for targeted support and intervention.**



# Creating safe and trusting spaces for children to confide



***“We need to have a person of trust who will help us deal with problems, critics, stress”***  
– Child from Croatia

Children need spaces where they can openly express their thoughts and emotions without fear of judgment. Trust is fundamental in these spaces - whether it is trust in people or trust in the environment itself. **When children feel safe to confide, they are more likely to seek support**, develop resilience, and navigate challenges effectively. However, **when trust is missing, it can lead to feelings of isolation, increased stress, and difficulties in handling criticism or emotional struggles**. In the consultation, children emphasise the importance of trusted relationships, open communication, and environments that encourage honesty, respect, and emotional well-being.

## People you trust

A person of trust is essential for children to feel safe in sharing their emotions and concerns. The role of a trusted person extends beyond just listening; it is about providing guidance, reassurance, and a sense of security in moments of doubt or hardship. Without such a person, children may struggle to express their emotions in a healthy way.

Many children naturally turn to their families for support. One child from Croatia highlighted this by stating: ***“I trust the most in my family. So our surroundings should be familiar and honest”***. When home environments are built on trust, children feel more comfortable expressing their struggles and seeking advice. However, not all children have strong family support systems, making it even more important for other figures - teachers, mentors, or friends - to step into that role.

Beyond individual relationships, the overall attitude of adults toward children plays a crucial role in shaping trust. Another child from Croatia explained: ***“the environment should be open. Adults working with children need to be open, friendly, respectful, and honest in order to give those kinds of values to children. Children today don’t know how to face criticism or loss, because our society in general nurses dishonesty and competitiveness. Our role models have a big influence on us”***.

This observation points to a broader societal issue: when children grow up in environments that prioritise competition over emotional support, they may find it difficult to cope with failure or challenges. Adults, particularly those in education and caregiving roles, must actively work to counteract this by **fostering honesty, encouragement, and constructive feedback**.

The emphasis on trust suggests that it is not something that happens automatically—it must be built over time through consistency, reliability, and genuine care.

***“I can always trust my aunt, who has always been there for me. She is a very reasonable person and shares most of the same viewpoints as I do. Trustworthy people handle my problems well, they listen to me and understand me. They are very kind, and I’m not afraid to talk to them.”*** – Child from Estonia

## Places where you can confide

Having a trusted person is important, but so too is the presence of safe and open spaces where children can feel secure. A child from Croatia shared: ***“in my family, we are all open and honest, which makes me feel safe. Schools should be like that”***. This highlights a key contrast: while some children grow up in environments where honesty and openness are encouraged, others may not experience this in their schools or wider communities. Schools, as places where children spend a significant portion of their lives, should be **environments where they feel supported, not judged**.

Another child from Croatia stressed the need for a positive and trusting environment, stating: ***“our environment should be positive, friendly, and trusting so that we always have a responsible person in who we can confide in. Building trust is essential, especially with parents”***. This highlights the key role adults play in creating safe and trusting places for children.

However, the absence of a safe space to confide in can be deeply challenging. One child from Croatia shared their personal experience: ***“I several times didn’t have anyone to confide in, so it was hard, but it helps to build your character in general and strengths. But it is not easy and is not for everyone”***. This quote highlights the resilience that some children develop when they lack support, but also acknowledges that not everyone can navigate these challenges alone. This is why **schools, communities, and families must take active steps to create environments where children always have someone they can turn to.**

In conclusion, creating safe and supportive spaces for children to confide requires both trusted individuals and environments that foster openness. When adults model honesty, respect, and empathy, children are more likely to internalise these values and feel comfortable seeking support. **Schools should not only focus on academic success but also on emotional well-being, ensuring that children feel heard, understood, and supported.**

The experiences shared by children make it clear: **trust is essential**, and it must be actively built and actively maintained. Whether at home, in school, or in the broader community, every child deserves to have a safe space where they can confide, seek guidance, and develop the emotional resilience needed to navigate life’s challenges.



# Finding support: resources and system to support children's mental health



***“Parents think we are just being dramatic”***  
– Child from Bulgaria

Mental health is a crucial aspect of children's well-being, yet many struggle to find the proper support when needed. Across Estonia, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Malta, children have different experiences in seeking help for their mental health. This chapter explores whom they turn to for support, how accessible professional help is, the role of schools, and what changes they believe are necessary to improve mental health support systems. By amplifying their voices, we can better understand the gaps and opportunities in ensuring every child receives the care they deserve.

## **Who do children talk to when they need support?**

Across Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, and Malta, children identified different sources of support for their mental health challenges. Family, friends, teachers, and professionals were the most commonly mentioned, but accessibility and trust varied widely between countries.

In Estonia, many children mentioned that they first turn to their friends when facing difficulties: ***“friends understand because they are going through similar things”***. However, some highlighted that not all friendships offer emotional security: ***“I talk to my best friend, but sometimes I feel like I am bothering them with my problems”***.

In Croatia, family was a primary source of support, though the level of comfort depended on the relationship with parents: ***“I talk to my mom because she listens and doesn't judge. But some of my friends can't talk to their parents at all.”***

Children in Bulgaria also mentioned family but expressed concerns about generational gaps in understanding mental health: ***“parents think we are just being dramatic or that we should just ‘be strong.’ That makes it harder to talk to them”***.

In Malta, some children noted that they prefer talking to teachers or school counsellors, especially when family support is lacking: ***“teachers can be more understanding than parents because they see how we are every day”***.

## **How easy is it to access professional mental health support?**

Children across the four countries expressed difficulties in accessing professional mental health support, citing long waiting times, stigma, lack of awareness about available services and lack of trust in whether professionals will tell parents/caregivers.

Croatian children mentioned that professional support is available, but many are hesitant to seek it because of stigma: ***“there is still a stigma around going to a psychologist. People think you must be ‘crazy’ if you need help”***.

Maltese children pointed out that while there are support services, confidentiality concerns can prevent them from seeking help: ***“I worry that if I talk to a counsellor, they might tell my parents, and I don't want that”***.

In Estonia, children described challenges in getting timely support: ***“if you need help, you have to wait months for an appointment. By then, things can get much worse”***.

In Bulgaria, awareness of mental health professionals was lower, with some children unsure where to go for help: ***“we have school psychologists, but I don't know how to reach them or if they would really help”***.

## **What role do schools play in supporting children's mental health?**

The role of schools in mental health support varied across the four countries. Some children found school environments helpful, while others felt that more needed to be done.

Bulgarian children, children emphasised that schools should take mental health more seriously: ***“teachers focus on grades, not how we feel. There should be more space to talk about mental health in class”***.

In Estonia, children highlighted the need for more understanding teachers: *“some teachers tell you to just ‘focus on school’ instead of helping when you’re struggling”*.

In Malta, children found school counsellors useful but noted that some students hesitate to approach them: *“there is support, but people don’t use it because they don’t want others to know they’re struggling”*.

Croatian children appreciated the efforts of some schools but wished for more direct support: *“we have some mental health workshops, but they should be more frequent and practical”*.

### **What changes would help children feel more supported?**

Children across all four countries suggested ways to improve mental health support. More accessible professional help, greater understanding from adults, and reducing stigma were common themes.

Estonian children called for mental health support to be more widely available in schools: *“every school should have a psychologist that we can talk to anytime, not just by appointment”*.

In Croatia, children emphasised the need for awareness campaigns to reduce stigma: *“if mental health was talked about more openly, maybe people wouldn’t be afraid to ask for help”*.

Bulgarian children suggested training teachers to be more supportive: *“teachers should learn how to help students when they notice we are struggling”*.

Maltese children wanted more peer support systems: *“maybe if we had peer mentors, it would be easier to talk about our problems without feeling judged”*.

To conclude, the insights from children in Estonia, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Malta highlight the challenges and opportunities in supporting mental health. While friends, family, and schools play key roles, there are still **significant barriers to accessing professional help**.

**Stigma, lack of awareness, and concerns about confidentiality prevent many children from seeking the support they need.**

Addressing these gaps requires a **collective effort** from parents, schools, policymakers, and mental health professionals. By listening to children’s experiences and recommendations for all four countries, we can work towards a more inclusive and supportive mental health system that meets their needs.



# Recognising children's struggles and promoting mental well-being



*“It is not easy to see if someone is struggling. Children are good in hiding their problems.”*

– Child from Croatia

**Understanding the signs of mental health struggles and how to support those experiencing them is vital for fostering a compassionate and proactive community among children.** This chapter explores the various ways children recognise when someone is struggling with mental health, the challenges they face in supporting others, and the positive habits they can adopt to maintain their well-being.

Participants highlighted **behavioural and emotional changes**, such as sudden shifts in mood or energy levels, as **key indicators of mental health challenges**. They also emphasised the **therapeutic role of hobbies, time spent in nature, and supportive friendships** in maintaining mental health. The conversation further delves into how children perceive their role in helping peers, the emotional burden this responsibility can create, and the gaps in knowledge that limit their ability to offer appropriate support. Lastly, the need for increased awareness and education on mental health is discussed, emphasising the importance of equipping children with tools to navigate these challenges effectively.

## Indicators of mental health challenges

Participants across all four countries identified that behavioural and emotional changes might indicate someone is struggling with mental health issues. They described **sudden shifts in mood, energy levels, or cognitive function** as potential warning signs, highlighting the importance of recognising deviations from an individual's usual behaviour.

One participant explained that a significant change in energy levels and mood shifts, such as someone who is usually energetic changes in behaviour, such as a loss of energy, can be a key indicator that someone is experiencing mental health challenges.

*“When a person is acting differently. For example, if someone is usually energetic and that energy is suddenly gone, it makes you wonder, ‘What has happened here?’”*

This observation highlights the importance of recognising deviations from an individual's baseline behaviour as potential warning signs.

Children observed that changes in behaviour, such as withdrawing from activities, avoiding social interactions, or showing aggression, might indicate mental health struggles:

*“I had a friend that always got good grades, was quite quiet and obedient. One day she changed completely. She started misbehaving during lessons, hanging out with friends who have a bad reputation. So, one's behaviour changes a lot. You can also change to be more quiet, reserved, want to be left alone, sleep more. So, it varies.”* - Child from Malta

This quote provides a detailed account of how mental health struggles can manifest in diverse ways, from becoming withdrawn to acting out. This perspective highlights the variability of responses to mental health issues and highlights the importance of understanding **individual contexts** to identify when someone might need help.

Another Maltese child described experiencing **“fogginess in the brain”** suggesting that mental health struggles are not always visible but can also be cognitive and manifest as difficulty concentrating or making decisions. This insight broadens the understanding of mental health indicators beyond visible behaviours, emphasising the internal challenges individuals may face.

## Challenges in supporting peers in need

Participants also recognised that some children often hide their emotions, making it difficult to identify those in need. *“It depends on how the person projects their mental health. Some people keep it to themselves and keep going on normally, but on the inside they have problems but it depends. Again, it is up to the adults”*.

This child from Malta points out that not all individuals outwardly display signs of mental health issues. This nuanced observation emphasises the need for adults to engage with children proactively and sensitively, as some may internalise their struggles and hide them from others.

Some children shared personal experiences supporting their friends through bullying and exclusion, acknowledging the challenges of offering help.

One Croatian child explained: **“I helped my friend who needed support because of bullying and it was hard to help”**, reflecting the difficulty of knowing how to provide the right kind of support. Another child from Croatia acknowledged that not everyone is ready to accept help, **“not everyone wants help. A lot of children are smiling, but sad. We should find a way to reach those children, both children and adults”**.

Similarly, Maltese children expressed uncertainty about how to assist peers struggling with mental health issues, revealing a significant gap in education and awareness. While many children are eager to support their friends, they often feel ill-equipped to offer meaningful help or guide them toward professional resources. This underscores the need for targeted education and training programmes that empower children with the skills and knowledge to recognise mental health challenges and provide appropriate support.

### **Strategies for maintaining mental health and well-being**

Participants in Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, and Malta identified a range of activities and practices that help them maintain good mental health, with a strong emphasis on sleep, sports, hobbies, and supportive social interactions.

Estonian children highlighted the importance of sufficient sleep, with two-thirds of participants emphasising its role in overall well-being. Engaging in hobbies and sports was another common strategy across all four countries, with children mentioning activities such as reading, drawing, tennis, sewing, football and bracelet-making as ways to relax and manage stress.

Beyond physical activities, children underscored the importance of social support. Many expressed that talking to a trusted person plays a crucial role in maintaining good mental health, particularly when facing difficulties. In Estonia, children also recognised the impact of technology, noting that excessive phone and social media use can negatively affect well-being. One child explained: **“children can take care of their mental health by not creating situations that could lead to problems”**.

Spending time in nature was another strategy children in Estonia, Bulgaria and Malta found helpful, with several emphasising its calming and restorative effects. This perspective aligns with a broader understanding of how natural environments can reduce stress and improve mental well-being. Additionally, **faith and spirituality** emerged as sources of comfort for some children in Croatia and Bulgaria, who found support in religious texts and their faith communities.

**“Church helps me a lot to deal with my issues.”**  
– Child from Croatia

Through these insights, children across Europe demonstrate a strong awareness of the factors that contribute to mental health and well-being, highlighting the importance of both personal habits and supportive environments in fostering resilience.

To conclude, children’s voices offer profound insights into the realities of mental health and the diverse ways they cope with emotional challenges.

Their perspectives reinforce the importance of fostering safe environments where children feel heard and supported. By encouraging open dialogue, promoting healthy habits, and ensuring access to supportive communities, adults can empower children to take care of their mental well-being and help others who may be struggling.

Equally important is the genuine interest of those around them - teachers, caregivers, and peers - in their well-being. A simple check-in, like a teacher asking a child how they’re doing after noticing a change in behaviour, can make a meaningful difference.

Small acts of care and attention help create a culture where children feel valued and understood, paving the way for the next steps in supporting their mental health.

# Role of adults in supporting children’s mental health



**“Adults should realise their influence on our lives.”**

– Child from Croatia

**“We are not 2 separate groups: children and adults. We are all part of the same society”** – Child from Croatia

**“Adults should remember they were once children.”**  
– Child from Croatia

Children’s mental health is shaped not only by their personal experiences but also by the support structures surrounding them. Adults—whether parents, teachers, social workers, or policymakers —play a crucial role in fostering environments that promote emotional well-being and resilience. A child from Malta emphasised this point stating that: **“adults’ reactions should not be to shout at you but to listen and stay calm”**.

This chapter explores the role of adults in supporting children’s mental health, drawing insights from the experiences of the four countries involved in this study on how to better support and understand children, particularly in the context of mental health and well-being. One of the key aspects discussed was the importance of adults recognising children’s mental health struggles as legitimate and serious. Children’s statements reflect a deep awareness of the gap between adults’ perceptions and the realities of children’s mental health. Adults often underestimate children’s emotional struggles, dismissing their concerns as trivial or exaggerated. This creates a barrier to open communication and exacerbates children’s feelings of isolation.

**“I think that adults need to realise that us children, we also have mental health issues which should not be taken lightly.”** – Child from Malta

## The role of parents and caregivers

**“To maintain children’s mental health, it starts with the parents. Train them on how to be supportive parents.”** – Child from Estonia

**Parents and caregivers are the first line of support for children’s mental health.** A nurturing home environment, open communication, and emotional availability significantly influence a child’s ability to cope with stress and adversity. One child from Bulgaria stated: **“I prefer parents to ask me questions related to my life even when I look well and stable. This will create a relationship with confidence and when the problems arise, I will be more motivated to share”**.

Across the four countries, **differences in cultural attitudes toward mental health impact how families approach emotional well-being.** In some contexts, mental health remains a sensitive topic, leading to reluctance in discussing emotions or seeking professional help. In contrast, other countries have adopted more open approaches, encouraging parental engagement in mental health education and equipping caregivers with the necessary tools to support their children. Parental support networks and family therapy initiatives have proven beneficial in breaking down stigma and fostering stronger emotional bonds within families.

Children themselves have expressed the importance of parental support in their mental health. As one child in Malta shared: **“when my parents listen to me and take my feelings seriously, I feel safe and less anxious”**.

## The role of schools and educators

**“Schools should be required by law to have a psychologist/counselor, where students can talk.”**  
– Child from Estonia

Schools are fundamental to children’s mental health, providing both academic and emotional support. Teachers and school staff should be able to identify early signs of distress, offer guidance, and refer students to appropriate support services. In some countries, structured mental health programmes within schools have been introduced, however, disparities exist on how mental health is addressed in educational settings.

While some schools offer dedicated counselors and peer support programmes, others lack resources, leaving teachers without adequate training to manage children's emotional difficulties. A child from Croatia stated: ***“we need more educated adults”***.

Strengthening school-based mental health initiatives and equipping educators with mental health first aid training are essential steps toward ensuring a holistic approach to student well-being.

As previously discussed, most children consulted identified school as one of the biggest threats to their mental health. Many expressed a desire to “change the school system” by reducing homework and tests to alleviate the pressure they face. A child in Estonia also emphasised the need to lighten workloads and ease academic demands to better support children's mental well-being: ***“a system where children are not forced to perform, speak publicly, or stand out if they have a lump in their throat and truly can't that day”***.

### **The role of policymakers and public health initiatives**

***“The government could make psychologists or mental health specialists available for free to young people, so more young people could get help.”***

– Child from Estonia

Government policies and public health initiatives set the foundation for nationwide mental health support systems. Investments in child and adolescent mental health services, anti-stigma campaigns, and accessible psychological support contribute to a more supportive environment for children. In some countries, mental health policies have been integrated into national child welfare strategies, however, children emphasised that there is a lack of awareness about existing policies.

A Bulgarian child stated that: ***“not everybody is aware of the current laws to protect children's mental health. Young people should be educated in terms of the laws because they are difficult to understand”***.

Nonetheless, challenges remain in securing consistent funding, expanding access to services, and addressing disparities between urban and rural areas. Children in Estonia expressed frustration over the lack of free mental health resources, demanding that: ***“therapy should be free for those under 18”*** and that: ***“something should be done to make it easier to see psychologists/psychiatrists and doctors”***.

In conclusion, the findings from this consultation underscore the essential role of adults in shaping children's mental health through their support, understanding, and advocacy. Across all four countries, children consistently highlighted the need for greater empathy, **recognition of their struggles**, and concrete actions to create a more supportive environment. Parents and caregivers play a fundamental role in fostering **emotional security**, while teachers and

**school staff must be equipped** to recognise and address students' mental health needs.

At the systemic level, **children are calling for significant changes, particularly within the education system**, where academic pressure is a major stress factor.

Their recommendations emphasise the need to reduce excessive workloads, integrate mental health professionals in schools, and create safe spaces where they feel heard and supported. Moreover, children urge policymakers to take their concerns seriously by investing in accessible mental health services, strengthening child protection frameworks, and ensuring that support is available to all, without delay, regardless of socioeconomic background.



# Children's recommendations for decisions-makers: what needs to change?



*“Children have a right to the best possible health care and that includes our mental health.”*  
– Children from Croatia

As part of the consultation, children were asked to share their recommendations on improving mental health support based on the following question:

- What are the most important things adults should know about children's mental health?
- What can parents or guardians do to support children's mental health?
- What can teachers or school staff do to support children's mental health?
- Do you know any existing legislation and policies that provide a framework for mental health prevention?
- What would you tell your government (decision-makers) to change to better support children's mental health?

The aim of asking the children to share recommendations on these questions was threefold.

Firstly, these recommendations demonstrate that **meaningful child participation is essential to policy discussions on all aspects that impact the children's lives**. Their range and insight illustrates that children are experts in their own lives and that no one can understand their reality better than they can. Therefore, when their voices are missing from conversations on matters that affect them, the policy debate is effectively not fully informed and thus leads to decisions that often have no positive impact on the lives of children. The plans designed and the actions taken by decision-makers can only be fully informed if they are in part shaped by children's voices and recommendations.

It is, secondly, a **harmful misconception that by not having conversations with children on potentially sensitive issues – such as mental health – we are shielding them from exposure to potential harm** and the harsh realities of the world. Children are acutely aware of what is happening around them and how it affects them and their peers – as is evident in this report. By excluding them from such conversations, we deny their agency.

Thirdly, we wanted to **hear and understand what measures children in the four EU Member States recommend to inform Eurochild's policy** and advocacy work on mental health. As a network representing children's rights, we have a responsibility to make sure that children's recommendations are documented and shared with decision-makers to push for meaningful change. The National Eurochild Forums are one of our greatest tools at local and national levels to do precisely that. The children's recommendations are highly insightful and provide a diverse range of recommendations that relate to their local and national realities.

To help identify patterns, the authors have chosen to present these **recommendations** by country, thematically grouping children's quotes into four overarching areas:

- **What adults should understand about children's mental health** – children's reflections on how adults perceive or misunderstand mental health issues, and what attitudes or awareness they should develop;
- **How adults can better support children's mental health** – children's advice for parents, teachers, and other adults on practical actions they can take to nurture children's mental well-being;
- **What needs to change**: children's vision for mental health support – children's ideas and suggestions for systemic, structural, or legal changes – whether in healthcare, schools, or broader policy – to better support their mental health;
- **Children's messages to society** – standout quotes, reflections, or calls to action from children that capture the emotional core or broader societal message they want to send.

## Bulgaria

- **What adults should understand about children's mental health**

Bulgarian children highlighted the need for adults to recognise that children experience stress and responsibilities just like adults do. They also stressed the importance of treating children as partners in conversations, and of creating an environment where children feel safe and respected.

*“They should be aware that we are preoccupied by many things as much as they are.”*

*“We can be partners when speaking about topical issues – we also have knowledge and resources.”*

*“Children's opinions should be respected in order to be able to share personal things.”*

- **How adults can better support children's mental health**

Children from Bulgaria stressed the role of teachers in supporting mental health. They suggested that teachers be more flexible and considerate of students' emotional needs, as this fosters trust and encourages children to seek support when necessary.

*“The role of the teachers is also very important. It is crucial for teachers to be able to act as partners and to show respect. One of my teachers shared that we can do the same things as her and vice versa. These are her rules.”*

*“One of my teachers is also able to provide a personal approach. She is often asking about the way we feel even if we look great. This makes the connection between us closer. As a result of that you can share when you need support.”*

*“It is important for teachers to be able to make jokes and to understand that sometimes you can postpone part of the lesson for tomorrow if students do not feel well. I have a teacher who did that. She has the ability to think of our needs.”*

*“There is no need to put pressure on everything.”*

Bulgarian children also recognised the key role played by parents. They underlined the importance of consistent interest and communication, fostering a relationship where children feel safe and encouraged to share their feelings.

*“I prefer parents to ask me questions related to my life even when I look well and stable. This will create a relationship with confidence and when the problems arise I will be more motivated to share.”*

*“They [parents] should be interested in children's life”*

- **What needs to change: children's vision for mental health support**

Several children from Bulgaria advocated for structural changes in schools, including individualised approaches and smaller class sizes to better support both learning and emotional well-being.

*“The number of students in a class should be reduced.”*

*“People should be included in a class not because they shared, for example, more knowledge and skills but because they have the same interests and talents.”*

[referring to creating classes based on shared interests instead of knowledge and skills] *“I know that in our school the management board is trying to do such a thing but it is not that easy when you are living in times in which the main value is success.”*

*“Not everybody can follow the same school requirements even when we want to.”*

Bulgarian children also highlighted the need for greater awareness and understanding of laws:

*“Not everybody is aware of the current laws. Young people should be educated in terms of the laws because they are difficult to understand without effort.”*

*“Laws are perceived as something which is incomprehensible in a way.”*

## Croatia

- **What adults should understand about children's mental health**

Children from Croatia began by recognising the significant influence of adults on children's lives. Based on this, Croatian children highlighted the importance of trust, understanding, and empathy. Some also encouraged adults to reflect on their own childhood experiences to better relate to the challenges faced by children today.

*“Adults should realise their influence on our lives.”*

*“Adults spend so much time with us. They should get to know us.”*

*“Trust is what children need the most.”*

*“Adults should remember they were once children. They had similar problems as we have so help us, don't look away. Try to understand.”*

*“We are not 2 separate groups: children and adults. We are all part of the same society.”*

- **How adults can better support children’s mental health**

Croatian children stressed the need for adults to be better educated about mental health. They placed a particular focus on how parents should guide children to help them navigate potential issues.

*“We need more educated adults.”*

*“People should learn how to nurture children better and help them get solutions to their problems. Parents need to learn to be parents.”*

- **What needs to change: children’s vision for mental health support**

Croatian children called for systemic changes, particularly to ensure access to quality healthcare and mental health services. They also suggested reforming the school system to reduce pressure on students.

*“Children have a right to the best possible health care and that includes our mental health. Help children not to feel such a big school pressure. Change and modernise our schools to become friends of children.”*

### **Estonia**

- **What adults should understand about children’s mental health**

Children from Estonia emphasised the importance of adults being more attentive and compassionate toward children’s mental health. Thus, they highlighted the need for adults to listen to children and pay closer attention to their emotions and well-being.

*“Listen to children who have experiences with mental health issues.”*

*“More attention should be given to how children feel.”*

*“Be compassionate, help when needed.”*

- **How adults can better support children’s mental health**

Estonian children emphasised the importance of empowering children rather than creating feelings of inadequacy. A key focus was on the role of parents, who should be supported through education and, if necessary, access to family therapy.

*“Have special people children can talk to.”*

*“Don’t create a feeling of inability in children, like I’m worse than them.”*

*“To maintain children’s mental health, it starts with*

*the parents. Train them on how to be supportive parents. If needed, family therapy should be considered because poor mental health in parents affects their children.”*

- **What needs to change: children’s vision for mental health support**

Several Estonian children advocated for structural changes in schools. Many expressed the desire for a more balanced, less stressful school environment. Some also stressed the importance of improving access to psychological support in schools.

*“Less homework and tests.”*

*“School should start later and schoolwork should be improved, as it has been the same for 100 years.”*

*“I wouldn’t let teachers schedule multiple tests on the same day, and there should be a place where you feel safe.”*

*“I would reduce their pressure and expectations.”*

*“Improve the relationship between school and hobbies, because if a child is good at sports, it might become hard for them in school, both in terms of time and other ways.”*

*“Make every school anti-bullying.”*

*“Schools should be required by law to have a psychologist/counsellor, where students can talk.”*

Estonian children also proposed legislative measures to improve mental health support for children. Some focused on increasing accessibility to mental health services, while others stressed the importance of child participation in mental health-related lawmaking.

*“I would make sure the Health Insurance Fund is available for all.”*

*“I would make it so kids under 18 get free therapy sessions twice a month if needed. The mental health of kids is important, so I would enforce this rule strongly.”*

*“Respect children, protect them. I would bring a child to the parliament to talk about what children are missing.”*

- **Children’s messages to society**

The messages launched by Estonian children reflect a deep understanding of their rights and the support they need to thrive. These voices call for a future where children’s fundamental rights are not only acknowledged but protected through accessible healthcare, nurturing environments, and respectful relationships.

*“I would support them [children] in every way possible because children are our future.”*

*“Children have the right to free treatment.”*

*“Children have the right to healthcare, life, and family.”*

*“Children must be respected.”*

*“Every child should have an environment where they feel good.”*

*“Children should have free homes, warmth, and clothing.”*

*“Find caring families for children in foster care.”*

*“More tests for mental struggles, so we can intervene early and find solutions sooner (so the child has to suffer less).”*

## Malta

- **What adults should understand about children’s mental health**

Children from Malta started by recognising how frustrating and damaging it can be when their struggles are dismissed or misunderstood. They therefore highlighted the importance of adults truly acknowledging and validating children’s mental health needs.

*“I think that adults need to realise that us children, although adults have mental health issues, we also have mental health issues which should not be taken lightly. They need to realise that taking them lightly would influence and would make it harder for children to deal with mental health issues later in adulthood. So if they can address the issues at an earlier stage when they develop, I think that would be the best.”*

*“It’s not a joke. It’s too often that adults just play it up like we’re exaggerating or just trying to get attention. It is very frustrating and it is contributing to a lot of mental health issues because so many times, the family is why children suffer from mental health issues. They need to realise that it is the child’s right to have their mental health problems tended to.”*

*“Adults were raised during very different times. They grew up in harsher environments [...]. A person’s natural instinct is to fall back on how they were raised. This is why children our age often go to other children to open up because they understand them. When you try to confide in an adult, their first reaction is usually shouting, because that’s how they were raised. [...] The best option is to go to someone professional and hope they can connect with kids on their level.”*

- **How adults can better support children’s mental health**

Maltese children urged adults to listen with patience and empathy, avoiding overreactions that could push children away:

*“They should not overreact.”*

*“So, the adults’ reactions should not be to shout at you but to listen and stay calm.”*

*“Adults should be educated. They would be more proactive.”*

Children from Malta also emphasised the importance of supporting those who stand by individuals facing mental health challenges. One child pointed out that early intervention can make a significant difference:

*“Support for the friends of persons that are going through problems with their mental health. If I knew beforehand, I could have helped him better and found a solution.”*

Children from Malta placed strong emphasis on the role of parents. Children highlighted the importance of spending quality time together and building trust. They also called for more training and support for parents to better understand children’s mental health challenges.

*“My mum and I reserve Sundays for one another. I don’t go out with my friends, and she doesn’t make any plans either. You bring children into the world to take care of them, not to abandon them. You created the child, and you have to be responsible for them. You need to build a bond with your child so they eventually open up to you. It needs to come from the parents, to create that bond and find the time. Even though life moves fast, there is always time you can make for your child.”*

*“I think parents should get better training themselves. They should be able to tackle most common problems. It should be mandatory and extended to modern-day things like social media.”*

*“We had a live-in and the parents were invited to join during the final day and our school principal created this activity where we had to express what we don’t like about our parents’ actions and vice versa and then share our thoughts. She then was giving us advice on what us and the parents could do to address these situations.”*

Children from Malta also emphasised the key role of teachers in supporting children’s mental health. They shared how approachable and compassionate teachers can make a lasting difference, and advocated for more mental health training and support within schools.

*“Personally, all the teachers who used to teach me and still teach me are people I still talk to today. For example, I had two teachers I could tell how I felt and share what was going on... The important thing is to always find a way to keep a smile on your face. A smile is a very precious thing. When you smile, people will approach you.”*

*“For counsellors, it is especially important to be more available, but even teachers should know what happens in class. If a teacher is able to recognise certain signs in class, she could be the one to address it.”*

Finally, Maltese children recognised the value of alternative support systems, such as youth workers and mentors, who can offer guidance and foster non-judgmental conversations about mental health.

*“At college, we have enrichment programmes which are led by a youth worker in which basically they create activities that I think will help the student. The youth worker can better understand and prepare certain activities.”*

- **What needs to change: children’s vision for mental health support**

Children from Malta highlighted the financial barriers to accessing mental health services and extracurricular activities that support wellbeing. They called for more affordable or subsidised options, particularly in schools.

*“Invest in mental health services. For example, schools could offer enrichment programmes or sports for students, as not everyone can afford them. Considering that families already pay school fees, they could introduce an option to pay a small amount, like 20 euros a year. While it wouldn’t be entirely free, it would make sports and after-school activities more accessible. This is especially important because some schools are expensive to attend.”*

*“Making mental health services accessible is very important. We have already established how expensive these services can be. The government could at least subsidise them, which would be a good alternative for people and children who want to talk about their mental health.”*

*“Free mental health support. They should subsidise things.”*

**Accessibility of mental health services were also linked to legal barriers that prevent them from accessing the help they need.**

One child referred to the issue of parental consent and the difficulty of using anonymous services without raising suspicion:

*“The problem is that you then come to a point where*

*you don’t know what to tell the parents. If the child goes out for instance to football the parents would know when and where they are. So how are you going to help children use an anonymous service without creating suspicion? Ultimately, if the child is underage, you can’t have him without his parents’ consent. There are a lot of factors that you just can’t avoid. That is why there is this perspective where such programmes need to be done at school because at school it is obligatory and you would have to pay attention.”*

Another child highlighted issues related to gender identity and official documentation:

*“In my experience, I always had this gender identity problem... I asked if I could change the name of my hoodie, and they told me no because on the documents it says [name].”*

Maltese children also emphasised geographical barriers, pointing out how physical distance from services can prevent access:

*“To be more available (professionals), especially in localities because if they are a drive away and parents can’t... being local makes it more accessible.”*

Finally, children from Malta proposed creative and practical ways to integrate mental health support into the school system—making it more visible, interactive, and engaging.

*“I know some schools that have animal therapy. So you have the animal, and the children can interact with the animal.”*

*“Is there an app on school tablets for mental health-related issues? Why not?”*

*“Students should be free to choose from a list of options of what they want to do.”*

- **Children’s messages to society**

Children from Malta raised concerns about how economic inequality affects their ability to take care of their mental and physical wellbeing. From healthy food to psychological support and extracurricular activities, they stressed that many of the things that help children thrive are simply unaffordable for many families.

*“Money is key nowadays. With money, you can own a phone, pay for a psychologist, eat better food.”*

*“For instance, if you go to fast food, it will be processed, but it will be cheaper. If you go and get a salad, McDonald’s would be much cheaper than good, nutritional food.”*

*“The prices of after-school activities. If they are not that expensive, more people would be able to afford it”*

***“At school even if you wanted to buy food, you cannot because there is nothing except for vending machines.”***

Maltese children also stressed the importance of shifting societal attitudes around therapy and mental health. They expressed a desire for therapy to be seen as normal and valuable, while acknowledging how hard it can be to change deep-rooted family beliefs.

***“To not encourage the whole idea that therapy is not something normal and sort of promote it.”***

***“It would be attacked from a family level to end the stigma, but it is difficult to change a mentality.”***

***Finally, yet importantly, children from Malta advocated for restructuring work schedules to improve family time and support children’s emotional needs, suggesting the example of a 4-day workweek.***

***“I would tell them to normalise a 4-day week. They did it in Iceland, and it made life a lot more efficient.”***



## Call To Action

### What children want adults to do about mental health:

- **Listen and show empathy**  
Children ask adults to really listen, be present, and recognise that children also experience complex emotions and challenges. They want to be treated with empathy and compassion - not ignored or dismissed.
- **Learn to identify the early signs of mental health problems**  
Children call on adults - especially parents and teacher - to get the right training to recognise the early signs of mental health challenges to ensure timely intervention. This helps make sure children get support as soon as they need it.
- **Ensure schools care about mental health and well-being**  
Children want schools to support mental health, and not just care about grades. They ask for trained professionals in schools who are easily accessible and offer confidential support. They ask for less pressure from schoolwork, and more time for rest, play, hobbies, time in nature, and friendships.
- **Make mental health support easy to access**  
Children want mental health services that are free, available, and designed for children. They ask for free therapy and counselling to be easy to access, especially in schools.
- **Break the stigma**  
Children want adults to help end the shame around mental health. They ask for awareness and education so both adults and children understand mental health better. It should be okay to ask for help without fear or judgment.



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Eurochild advocates for children's rights and well-being to be at the heart of policymaking. We are a network of organisations working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. We influence policies, build internal capacities, facilitate mutual learning and exchange practice and research. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the foundation of all our work.

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