Violence against children in Europe

Position Paper

Eurochild
Putting children at
the heart of Europe

Violence against children in Europe

Ensuring strong child protection systems, where every child is protected from all forms of violence, is at the core of Eurochild's mission. While we play a key role in influencing EU and national legislative and policy frameworks, we also provide practical support to civil society organisations working directly to address violence against children. In particular, Eurochild and Terre des Hommes are implementing Daphne-CHILD, a three-year sub-granting and capacity-building programme to support 48 grassroots civil society organisations to tackle violence against children, supporting more than 23,000 children, 1,800 professionals, and 3,200 families across the nine participating countries.[1]

This position paper outlines key aspects of violence against children, including definitions, its impact on children, the settings in which it occurs, and the groups of children most affected. It also highlights relevant Council of Europe and EU frameworks. The paper includes country-level insights provided by Eurochild members and partners and concludes with recommendations based on their contributions and experiences on the ground.

Definition of violence against children

Every year, over half of the world's children experience violence.[2] Article 19 of the UN **Convention on the Rights of the Child** (CRC) mandates that every child must be protected from all forms of violence, including abuse, neglect, and exploitation, whether physical or non-physical. In **General Comment 13**, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child makes clear that violence includes both intentional and unintentional harm. Crucially, the Committee underscores that the phrase "all forms of physical or mental violence" leaves no room for any level of legalised violence against children.[3]

According to General Comment 13, protecting children from violence and implementing Article 19 requires a holistic, context-sensitive approach prioritising prevention, early identification, safe reporting, coordinated referral, child-sensitive investigation, tailored treatment, consistent follow-up, and rights-based judicial processes. Trained professionals, inter-agency collaboration, and ongoing evaluation must support these processes.[4]

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[1] Eurochild, & Terre des Hommes. (2025). Daphne-CHILD programme enters new phase with projects selected for funding.

[2] United Nations. (2020, June 18). Half of world's children experience violence every year, UN report finds. United Nations News.

[3] United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2011) General comment No. 13 (2011): The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence (CRC/C/GC/13).

[4] Ibid

Types of violence

It is estimated that at least 204 million children experience some form of violence in the *World Health Organization* European Region.[5] Over 850 children under 15 die each year as a result of severe maltreatment.[6] Underreporting, methodological challenges, and a lack of standardised data collection methods across countries hinder accurate data on violence against children. These factors contribute to significant gaps in understanding the full extent of the issue. The main types of violence against children occurring in Europe, often intersecting and co-occurring, are outlined below.[7]

Bullying can be defined as intentional and aggressive behaviour occurring repeatedly against a victim where there is a real or perceived power imbalance, and where the victim feels vulnerable and powerless to defend themselves. The unwanted behaviour can be physical, including hitting, kicking, and destroying property; verbal, such as teasing, insulting, and threatening; or relational, through the spreading of rumours and exclusion from a group. **Cyberbullying** involves the posting or sending of electronic messages, including pictures or videos, aimed at harassing, threatening or targeting another person.[8] Between 13% and 29% of 15-year-old students across different EU Member States report being frequently bullied.[9] In **Latvia**, Eurochild members highlight the need for greater investment in inclusive education free from bullying. A report from **Moldova** shows that 16-30% of students reported experiencing bullying in 2023.[10] 20 EU Member States have existing laws and policies to address cyberbullying.[11]

Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) is any representation, by whatever means, of a child engaged in real or simulated explicit sexual activities or any representation of the sexual parts of a child for primarily sexual purposes.[12] It also includes child sexual abuse material generated by means of technology, meaning the production, through digital media of any kind, of child sexual abuse material and other wholly or partly artificially or digitally created sexualised images of children.[13] The volume of CSAM shared online – both in the dark and open webs – points to the existence of a Child Sexual Abuse Crisis in Europe, which hosted over 60% of the content reported by *Internet Watch Foundation* in 2024.[14] Nearly 300,000 URLs contained at least one, and in many cases thousands, of images and videos depicting the sexual abuse of children. The previous year, online platforms reported over 100 million

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[5] World Health Organization. (2020, January 13). Violence against children: Tackling hidden abuse. World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe.

[6] Ibid

[7] The below definitions are originating from various sources and are listed alphabetically for clarity.

[8] United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children. (n.d.). Bullying and cyberbullying. United Nations.

[9] Eurochild (2024, June 19) *European Commission Recommendation to develop and strengthen integrated child protection systems.*

[10] Centrul Național de Prevenire a Abuzului față de Copii (CNPAC), & UNHCR. (2023). Raport privind consolidarea capacității actorilor locali în oferirea serviciilor de protecție a copilului.

[11] O'Neill, B., & Dopona, V. (2024). The Better Internet for Kids Policy Monitor Report 2024. European Schoolnet.

[12] International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children. (2022). Glossary of Terms.

[13] Greijer, S., & Doek, J. (2025) Terminology guidelines for the protection of children from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (2nd ed.). ECPAT International.

[14] Internet Watch Foundation (2024) Annual data & insights report 2024.

files (images and videos) to the *National Center for Missing & Exploited Children*.[15] Eurochild members from **Albania**, **Bulgaria**, **Hungary**, **Malta**, **Northern Ireland**, **Poland** and **Serbia** report a worrying increase in children's exposure to such content, alongside inadequate prevention and protection systems.[16] In **Hungary**, 850 out of 1,900 hotline reports in 2023 related to CSAM.[17]

Child trafficking is defined as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of children for exploitation purposes. This exploitation can take various forms, such as forced labour, sexual exploitation, illegal adoption, or involvement in criminal activities.[18] In **England**, the number of potential child victims of exploitation has reached record highs. In 2024, 44% of individuals who reported being exploited said the exploitation occurred during their childhood - a staggering increase of 138% since 2018.[19] **Child trafficking for involvement in criminal activities,** where children are coerced, manipulated or recruited to engage in illegal activities, has been on the rise, with victims often treated as offenders rather than protected.[20]

Corporal punishment refers to the use of physical force to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light, as a disciplinary measure. It includes acts like slapping, spanking, kicking, or degrading treatment. The Committee on the Rights of the Child[21] calls on States to prohibit all forms of corporal punishment, regardless of severity, and to ensure that their legal frameworks reflect this commitment. Many European countries, including **Belgium**, **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, **Czechia**, **Italy**, **Luxembourg**, **Switzerland**, **Serbia**, **Slovakia**, and **Türkiye,** are yet to prohibit corporal punishment in all settings.[22] In **Serbia**, CSOs have been advocating for the ban on corporal punishment but face pushback from groups advocating for 'traditional family values' and 'parental autonomy'.[23] In **Kosovo**, 72% of children reported experiencing corporal punishment despite its legal prohibition.[24]

Domestic violence means all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit, irrespective of biological or legal family ties, or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the offender shares or has shared a residence with the victim.[25] The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women

[15] National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. (2024, January 30). Congress holds 'Big Tech' accountable in monumental child safety hearing.
[16] Eurochild (2025) *Bridging persistent gaps in children's rights online in Europe*
[17] Ibid
[18] European Parliament and Council of the European Union. (2024). *Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of 13 June 2024 amending Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims*.
[19] ECPAT UK & Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner. (2024). Child trafficking in the UK 2024: A snapshot.
[20] Eurochild (2025) *Flagship sub-report on child protection systems in Europe*
[21] United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006) General Comment No. 8: The right of the child to protection from corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment (CRC/C/GC/8). United Nations.
[22] End Corporal Punishment. (n.d.). *Global progress: Legality of corporal punishment*. Retrieved April 23, 2025, from
[23] Eurochild (2025) Flagship Sub-Report - Civil society organisations working with children in Europe Sub-report
[24] Eurochild 2025 Flagship Sub-Report on child protection systems in Europe
[25] European Parliament and Council of the European Union (2024) *Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence*

and girls Ms Reem Alsalem[26] has acknowledged that children who experience domestic violence are frequently subjected to further harm by the justice system. Harmful practices such as separating the child from the non-abusive parent or granting contact and visitation rights that fail to prioritise the child's best interests are common examples. The justice system could also perpetuate violence against the non-abusive parent and the children by invoking the **parental alienation syndrome**.[27] This concept, which the scientific community has now discredited, was introduced[28] to describe the children who were assumed to be manipulated by one parent[29] and refused to see the other parent. The parental alienation syndrome is widely used in courts to disregard children's testimony and present allegations of domestic violence by the child as resulting from the manipulation of the abusive parent,[30] thus leading to life-threatening decisions[31] for both the non-abusive parent and the child. It seriously impacts child victims, including those witnessing it. In **Romania**, there has been a notable rise in domestic violence cases involving children in recent years. Alarmingly, a new law on ''parental estrangement'' may result in children being removed from non-abusive parents, potentially exposing them to greater harm.[32] While there is a lack of official statistics on the number of domestic violence cases in **Bulgaria**, in 2022, the identified cases of domestic violence through the territorial units of the administration were 736, including 542 children.[33]

Gender-based violence refers to any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will and that is based on socially ascribed (i.e., gender) differences between males and females.[34] While girls and young women are more likely to experience sexual violence, trafficking, and early/forced marriage, boys can also suffer significantly, facing physical abuse and psychological harm tied to traditional gender norms, such as pressure to suppress emotions or act violently.[35] At the same time, boys are often overlooked as victims of sexual violence. In **Albania**, girls face heightened risks of violence and exploitation, while boys are often subjected to farm labour.[36]

[26] Reem Alsalem, Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences (2023) Custody, violence against women and violence against children: report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences

[27] Ibid

[28] Gardner, R. A. (1998). Recommendations for dealing with parents who induce a parental alienation syndrome in their children. Journal of divorce & remarriage, 28(3-4), 1-23.

[29] Herring, J. (2020) "Domestic Abuse and Children," in Domestic Abuse and Human Rights. Intersentia, 159–194.

[30] Birchall, J., & Choudhry, S. (2022). 'I was punished for telling the truth': how allegations of parental alienation are used to silence, sideline and disempower survivors of domestic abuse in family law proceedings, Journal of GenderBased Violence, 6(1), 115-13

[31] Jaffe, P.G. et al. (2014) 'Paternal Filicide in the Context of Domestic Violence: Challenges in Risk Assessment and Risk Management for Community and Justice Professionals', Child abuse review (Chichester, England : 1992), 23(2), 142–153

[32] Eurochild (2025) *Flagship sub-report on child protection systems in Europe*

[33] Eurochild (2023) Comprehensive contribution to the consultation on integrated child protection systems. European Commission.

[34] ECPAT International, Eurochild, & Terre des Hommes Netherlands (2024) *Speaking up for change: Children's and caregivers' voices for safer online experiences*. Down to Zero Alliance.

[35] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014) *Violence against women: An EU-wide survey. Main results report*. Publications Office of the European Union.

[36] Eurochild (2025) *Flagship sub-report on child protection systems in Europe*.

Grooming is the process of establishing/building a relationship with a child, either in person or through the use of the internet or other digital technologies,[37] in preparation for abuse, including sexual abuse, exploitation and radicalisation.[38] Grooming for sexual purposes is also referred to as **sexual solicitation**.[39] *The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children* reported a 300% increase of online grooming in 2023.[40]

Harmful practices include, but are not limited to, harmful cultural, religious, or societal practices such as child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), or initiation rites that cause physical or psychological harm to children and corporal punishment.[41] In **Bulgaria**, child marriage remains prevalent[42], and in **Serbia**, 57% of Roma women get married before the age of 18.[43]

Immigration detention includes any setting in which a child is deprived of their liberty for reasons related to theirs, or their parents', migration status, regardless of the name and reason given to the action of depriving a child of his or her liberty, or the name of the facility or location where the child is deprived of liberty.[44] As highlighted by the United Nations Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty, child detention can be a form of structural violence.[45]

Mental violence is any deliberate, unwanted and non-essential act, verbal and non-verbal, that harms or has a high likelihood of harming the development of a child, including long-term physiological harm and mental health consequences.[46] It is often described as psychological maltreatment, mental abuse, verbal abuse and emotional abuse or neglect. This can include conveying to children that they are worthless and unloved, inadequate, or valued only as long as they meet another person's needs. It may also involve causing children frequently to feel frightened or in danger.[47] Some level of emotional abuse is involved in all types of ill-treatment of a child, though it may occur alone.[48] For example, witnessing domestic violence or verbal bullying can also be defined as mental violence. 55 million children are estimated to experience emotional abuse in the World Health

[37] Greijer, S., & Doek, J. (2025). Terminology guidelines for the protection of children from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (2nd ed.). ECPAT International.

[38] RAINN. (2020, July 10). Grooming: Know the warning signs. Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network.; Greijer, S., & Doek, J. (2025) *Terminology guidelines for the protection of children from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse* (2nd ed.). ECPAT International.

[39] Ibid

[40] National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (2024) CyberTipline 2023 report.

[41] United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2011) General comment No. 13 (2011): The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence (CRC/C/GC/13).

[42] Eurochild (2025) *Flagship sub-report on child protection systems in Europe*

[43] United Nations Serbia. (2019, August 23). Child marriage and the issue of identity. United Nations.

[44] Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (CMW), & Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2017). Joint general comment No. 4 (2017) of the CMW and No. 23 (2017) of the CRC on State obligations regarding the human rights of children in the context of international migration in countries of origin, transit, destination and return (CMW/C/GC/4-CRC/C/GC/23). United Nations.

[45] United Nations. (2019). Global study on children deprived of liberty: Report of the Independent Expert leading the United Nations global study on children deprived of liberty, Manfred Nowak (A/74/136). United Nations General Assembly.

[46] United Nations Children's Fund. (2023). *International classification of violence against children*. UNICEF.

[47] United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2011) General comment No. 13 (2011): The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence (CRC/C/GC/13).

[48] Eurochild (2024, May) Child Protection Policy (Revised ed.).

Organization European Region.[49] In **Bulgaria**, a 2021 UNICEF study found that emotional violence was the most common form of abuse, affecting nearly 46% of children.[50]

Neglect or negligent treatment means the failure to meet children's physical and psychological needs, protect them from danger, or obtain medical, birth registration or other services when those responsible for children's care have the means, knowledge and access to services to do so.[51] According to the *Unified Registry of Child Abuse (RUMI)*, recording data across the **Spanish** regions of Ceuta and Melilla, neglect is the most common form of violence recorded by Child Protection Services.[52]

Physical violence is any deliberate, unwanted and non-essential act that uses physical force against the body of a child and that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, pain or psychological suffering. It involves the intentional or unintentional use of force that causes injury, and includes fatal and non-fatal violence.[53] It may involve hitting, smacking, shaking, throwing, burning, scalding, drowning, suffocating, or otherwise causing physical harm to a child.[54] 44 million children are victims of physical abuse in the *World Health Organization European Region*.[55]

Self-harm is the act of deliberately causing physical injury to oneself, [56]including eating disorders, substance use and abuse, self-inflicted injuries, suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts and actual suicide.[57] **Suicide** is the second most common cause of death among children and adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19 in the EU, accounting for about 17% of deaths.[58] Suicides among adolescents (15–19 years) are alarmingly high in Belgium,[59] while **Finland** reported a rate of 9.3 per 100,000 in 2021.[60]

Sexual abuse and exploitation of children[61] involves forcing or enticing a child to take part in sexual activities, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including abuse by penetration or non-penetrative acts (such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside clothing). They may also include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, sexual images, watching sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate

[49] World Health Organization. (n.d.). *Preventing child maltreatment*. WHO Regional Office for Europe.
[50] UNICEF Bulgaria (2021) *Study of violence against children in Bulgaria*.
[51] United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2011) General comment No. 13 (2011): The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence (CRC/C/GC/13).
[52] Eurochild (2023) Comprehensive contribution to the consultation on integrated child protection systems. European Commission.
[53] United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2011) General comment No. 13 (2011): The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence (CRC/C/GC/13).
[54] NSPCC. (n.d.). Physical abuse. National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.
[55] World Health Organization. (n.d.). Preventing child maltreatment. WHO Regional Office for Europe.
[56] UNICEF. (n.d.). What is self-harm? UNICEF Parenting.
[57] United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2011) General comment No. 13 (2011): The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence (CRC/C/GC/13).
[58] UNICEF. (2024). *The State of Children in the European Union 2024* (p. 3).
[59] Eurochild (2024) Children's mental health across Europe
[60] World Bank (2021) *Suicide mortality rate (per 100,000 population) – Finland*. The World Bank.
[61] In all European states, a child is defined as any individual under the age of 18, regardless of the age of consent in a given state.

ways, or grooming a child in preparation for abuse, including via the means of technology.[62] What distinguishes the concept of **child sexual exploitation** from other forms of child sexual abuse is the underlying notion of exchange present in exploitation.[63] Child sexual abuse includes **child sexual exploitation**,[64] which involves acts in exchange for something from a third party and/or the perpetrator. Child sexual abuse affects at least one in five children in Europe,[65] and one in every seven victims is under 6 years.[66] According to data from the *ANAR Foundation*, sexual abuse cases in **Spain** increased by 300% from 2008 to 2020.[67] Another concern is the lack of immediate and specialised mental health support for child victims in **Slovakia.**[68]

Structural or indirect violence refers to a form of harm embedded in the structures of society and manifests itself as unequal power, indirectly causes harm embedded in the social, political, and economic systems, laws, institutions, and social norms that govern society. It manifests through unequal power dynamics and systemic discrimination, including based on gender, ethnicity, disability, migration status, or parental status. This type of violence limits children's ability to realise their rights and reach their full potential.[69] Structural violence prevents children from meeting their basic needs, accessing opportunities, and living with dignity, leading to unequal life outcomes and perpetuating cycles of injustice and suffering across generations. The risks of poverty and social exclusion, affecting 24.9% of children in the EU,[70] are both a major risk factor for direct forms of violence against children and a pervasive form of indirect violence[71] in and of itself.

The worst forms of child labour include slavery and similar practices such as child trafficking, debt bondage, and forced labour (including the recruitment of children for armed conflict); child sexual exploitation, child sexual abuse material, or illicit activities like drug trafficking; and any work that is likely to harm the health, safety, or morals of children.[72]

Torture and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment includes violence in all its forms against children, used to extract confessions, to extrajudicially punish them for unlawful or unwanted behaviours, or to force them to engage in activities against their will. Such practices are typically carried out by police and law enforcement officers, staff of

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[62] Keeping Children Safe. (n.d.). Glossary.
[63] Greijer, S., & Doek, J. (2025). Terminology guidelines for the protection of children from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (2nd ed.). ECPAT International.
[64] Keeping Children Safe. (n.d.). Glossary.
[65] Council of Europe. (n.d.). 18 November: Day for the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse.
[66] Gewirtz-Meydan, A., & Finkelhor, D. (2020). *Sexual abuse and assault in a large national sample of children and adolescents*. Child Maltreatment, 25(2), 203–214.
[67] Eurochild (2023) Comprehensive contribution to the consultation on integrated child protection systems. European Commission.
[68] Eurochild (2025) Flagship Sub-Report on child protection systems in Europe
[69] Galtung, J. (1969) *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research*, Journal of Peace Research. 6(3), pp. 167-191.
[70] Eurostat. (2024, June 19). Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Statistics Explained.
[71] Allen, J. A. V. (2001) Poverty as a Form of Violence: A Structural Perspective. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment,* 4(2–3), 45–59.
[72] International Labour Organization. (1999). Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182). Please note that the term "prostitution" has been replaced with "child sexual exploitation" and "pornography" with "child sexual abuse material," in accordance with current developments in international law.

residential and other institutions, and individuals who hold power over children, including non-State armed actors.[73]

The impact of violence against children

Exposure to violence has wide-ranging effects on children. Even mild forms of corporal punishment can physiologically alter the development of a child's brain, affecting cognitive development, emotional regulation, and social behaviours.[74]

Children who experience violence are at increased risk of developing low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety. They may encounter challenges, such as substance abuse, self-harm, and mental health disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Violence can influence a child's ability to form healthy relationships, making them more susceptible to abusive dynamics, such as intimate partner violence or involvement in criminal activities[75] and bullying.[76]

Children exposed to violence are at an increased risk of health problems,[77] including chronic diseases.[78] Moreover, the stress associated with witnessing or experiencing violence can compromise the immune system, making these children more vulnerable to illnesses.[79]

Exposure to violence also disrupts a child's sense of safety, and as a result, they may develop coping mechanisms and maladaptive behaviour patterns, including withdrawal, hypervigilance, or increased aggression.[80] Furthermore, children who experience violence are at heightened risk of continuing the cycle of trauma, with the possibility of perpetuating the adverse effects on future generations.[81] Lifelong adverse consequences also include

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[73] United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2011) General comment No. 13 (2011): The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence (CRC/C/GC/13).

[74] Shonkoff and Garner (2012) *The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress*. Paediatrics, 129(1), 232-246; Anda, R. F., Felitti, V. J., Bremner, J. D., Walker, J. D., Whitfield, C. L., Perry, B. D., Dube, S. R., & Giles, W. H. (2006) *The enduring effects of abuse and related adverse experiences in childhood*. European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience, 256(3), 174-186.

[75] Dutton, D. G., & White, K. R. (2013) *The abusive personality: Violence and control in intimate relationships*. Guilford Press.

[76] Lodge, J., (2014) *Children who bully at school*. Child Family Community Australia Paper No. 27.

[77] Aakvaag and Strøm (2019) *Does childhood exposure to violence have a lasting impact? A longitudinal study of revictimization, health, substance use, and social relations among young people who were subjected to violence during childhood;* Jaffee et al. (2018) *Childhood Maltreatment Predicts Poor Economic and Educational Outcomes in the Transition to Adulthood*, American Journal of Public Health. 108(9), 1142-1147

[78] Norman, R. E., Byambaa, M., De, L., Butchart, A., Scott, J., & Vos, T. (2012) *The global prevalence of intimate partner violence and sexual violence against women: A systematic review*. Lancet, 379(9811), 1261-1277.

[79] Anda, R. F., Felitti, V. J., Bremner, J. D., Walker, J. D., Whitfield, C. L., Perry, B. D., Dube, S. R., & Giles, W. H. (2006) *The enduring effects of abuse and related adverse experiences in childhood*. European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience, 256(3), 174-186.

[80] Widom, C. S. (2000) *Child abuse, neglect, and adult behavior: Research findings and implications for prevention*. In *The Effect of Childhood Abuse on Adult Relationships* (pp. 109-131). Springer.

[81] Finkelhor, D. (2011) Prevalence of child victimization, abuse, crime, and violence exposure. In J. W. White, M. P. Koss, & A. E. Kazdin (Eds.), Violence against women and children, Vol. 1. Mapping the terrain (pp. 9–29). American Psychological Association; Finkelhor, D. (2008) Childhood Victimization, Violence, Crime, and Abuse in the Lives of Young People.

lower educational attainment, [82] lower levels of adult economic well-being, and reduced life opportunities.[83]

While the primary reason to tackle violence against children is a moral imperative grounded in human rights, the cost of inaction extends to broader societal and economic consequences. As highlighted by the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, Dr Najat Maalla M'jid, failing to act leads to higher costs in healthcare, justice, and social welfare services, as well as increased enrollment in special education and grade repetition. It also reduces productivity, labour market participation, and tax revenues, while negatively impacting human development and hindering the achievement of international development targets. National-level estimates of the overall direct and indirect costs of violence are as high as 11% of the national gross domestic product.[84]

Settings where violence against children can occur

Children can be exposed to violence in their most familiar environments - including the home, school, recreational or sports settings, and in their experiences online. Violence can occur in places that should be specifically designed to protect children, such as alternative care settings or settings for children on the move. While these settings can pose risks, they also hold the potential to foster resilience, empowering children to recognise, prevent, and protect themselves from harm.

Alternative care

Children placed in alternative care settings, such as foster homes, residential care, or institutions, are particularly vulnerable to violence before, during, and after placement. Many have already faced abuse or neglect in their previous living situations, and some continue to experience further harm while in alternative care. The risk of violence and exploitation can be exacerbated by inadequate protection measures and a lack of reporting mechanisms, with some children falling victim to trafficking[85] or abuse from individuals who are meant to protect them. A 2023 report highlighted systemic sexual abuse within state-run institutional care (SiS) in **Sweden**. Children's reports of abuse were often ignored, and mandatory reporting laws were not consistently followed.[86] While comprehensive data on the prevalence of abuse among children in alternative care in **Hungary** is lacking, existing reports and expert analyses indicate that this is a significant concern.[87]

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[82] Fry et al (2018) The relationships between violence in childhood and educational outcomes: A global systematic review and meta-analysis, Child Abuse Neglect, 6-28.

[83] Thielen et al. (2016) *Long-term economic consequences of child maltreatment: a population-based study*, European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 25(12), 1297-1305.

[84] UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children (2025) *Building the investment case for ending violence against children: Toolkit*.

[85] Eurochild (2023, March 27) *Contribution to the European Commission consultation on fighting human trafficking*.

[86] World Childhood Foundation. (2024, April 24). Sexual abuse of children in state-run institutional care.

[87] Hintalovon Child Rights Foundation. (2024). Children's rights report 2023.

Communities

Children growing up in under-resourced communities, neighbourhoods, socially unstable environments, and those with a high level of criminality can face an increased risk of violence. Poverty and marginalisation can push children into exploitative situations, including forced labour or criminal activity. In **Sweden**, due to growing concerns, children involved in criminality became one of the target groups of the European Child Guarantee.[88]

Digital environment

As traditionally unregulated spaces designed for adults, digital environments expose children to a wide range of forms of violence, including child sexual abuse and exploitation, cyberbullying, harmful content, commercial exploitation and addiction, among others. In **Spain**, **Hungary**, **Albania** and **Malta**, our members alert that violence against children, including sexual violence, is increasingly present online.[89] In many cases, digital environments exacerbate existing vulnerabilities or situations of harm; in others, they create new pathways to harm that have specific impacts on children's overall well-being. Emerging and widely adopted technologies, such as artificial intelligence and end-to-end encrypted channels, intensify the potential risks for children.

The increasing amount of time spent online and the early initiation of children demand greater attention to their online safety. Children show concern about the negative effects of online environments on their well-being, including addiction, isolation and mood disorders, often linking it to experiences of sexual abuse and exploitation, cyberbullying, and privacy issues.[90] In **Malta**, approximately 15% of children aged 3 to 11 have experienced some form of online abuse, with 83% exposed to cyberbullying and 26% encountering sexual abuse. At the same time, the internet can serve as a powerful tool for learning about rights, recognising abuse, and accessing support, particularly for children living in remote areas or those who are discriminated against, such as LGBTQI+ children.[91]

> "If you want to be safe online, you shouldn't be on social media!"
>
> - Child from the Netherlands[92]

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[88] Eurochild (2024) Sweden's 2024 biennial report on the implementation of the Child Guarantee – an overview.

[89] Eurochild (2025) *Bridging persistent gaps in children's rights online in Europe*

[90] ECPAT International, Eurochild, & Terre des Hommes Netherlands (2024) Speaking up for change: Children's and caregivers' voices for safer online experiences.

[91] Eurochild (2025) *Bridging persistent gaps in children's rights online in Europe*

[92] ECPAT International, Eurochild, & Terre des Hommes Netherlands (2024) Speaking up for change: Children's and caregivers' voices for safer online experiences.

Home

The home can be both a place of safety and a place where children are particularly vulnerable to violence, often from those they trust most, such as parents, close family, or caregivers. Violence within the family has historically been tolerated for various reasons, including the widespread belief that parents always act in the best interests of their children and that family privacy should take precedence over children's rights. In many cases, violence within the home is normalised, which can lead children to internalise harmful beliefs that they "deserve to be mistreated." Moreover, underreporting of abuse remains a significant issue due to stigma, fear, and the complexities children face when attempting to disclose such experiences. According to the data from the *Agency for Child Protection*, 80% of reported cases of violence in **Bulgaria** occur within the homes of children.[93]

Schools

Schools are often sites where children are exposed to violence, including bullying, harassment, verbal and sexual abuse. This can come from peers, teachers, or school authorities. Despite these risks, schools have the unique potential to protect and empower children. Educational institutions and professionals therein can teach children to recognise and report cases of violence while fostering an environment of trust and support. By understanding critical concepts such as consent and their rights, children can be better equipped to identify when they are being mistreated and seek help. For instance, **Wales** has developed strong school safeguarding guidance to address and prevent violence. In **Ukraine**, mental health support in education is crucial to address trauma from violence and loss.[94] In contrast, in **Albania**, school management issues and bureaucratic hurdles hinder school psychologists from referring abuse cases to child protection services, resulting in underreporting and missed interventions.[95]

Settings for children on the move

Children on the move, who are migrating, within or between countries, either voluntarily or involuntarily, due to conflict, persecution, or natural disasters, are especially vulnerable.[96] These children face heightened risks of sexual violence, trafficking, exploitation, and neglect, often exacerbated by the lack of protection, weak law enforcement, and unstable living conditions. Limited access to education, healthcare, and psychosocial support further amplifies their exposure to harm. This is especially true for unaccompanied minors and their placement in detention centres, which is a common practice across the EU. Strengthening safeguards and promoting integration for children on the move is essential to ensuring their safety.

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[93] Eurochild (2023) Comprehensive contribution to the consultation on integrated child protection systems. European Commission.
[94] Eurochild (2024) Children's Realities in Europe: Progress & Gaps. Eurochild.
[95] Eurochild (2025) *Flagship sub-report on child protection systems in Europe*
[96] United Nations Children's Fund. (2023) *Children on the move: Key terms, definitions and concepts*. UNICEF.

In the **Netherlands**, children seeking asylum are sometimes placed in overcrowded or unsuitable shelters, while **Spain** has been criticised for inadequate reception conditions for unaccompanied minors. In **Greece**, children face poor living conditions in *Closed Controlled Access Centres on the Aegean islands*.[97] Migrant children in **Cyprus**, **Malta**, and **Poland** encounter challenges accessing essential services. In **Belgium**, unaccompanied minors and asylum-seeking children lack sufficient support.[98]

Sports environments

Sports can be a source of empowerment for children, fostering teamwork, confidence, and resilience. However, children in sports also face significant risks of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, often due to insufficient safeguards and child protection policies within sports organisations.[99]

The most affected children

While all children are at risk of violence, regardless of their background, other factors can influence the nature and frequency of violence. Vulnerable children may face significant challenges, from prevention and identification to reporting, treatment, and follow-up, as well as increased vulnerability online. These children might experience barriers in accessing support due to factors like discrimination, lack of awareness, or limited resources. They may struggle to communicate their needs, face biases during investigations, or lack the necessary protective factors to ensure their safety and recovery. Their vulnerabilities are also often exploited by online platforms and advertisers for profit. Below, we outline the groups of children most exposed to violence.

Children experiencing homelessness face an increased risk of violence, including sexual abuse, exploitation, and involvement in illegal activities, due to their vulnerable status and lack of protection. According to FEANTSA estimates, in 2023, 400,000 children in the EU and the UK experienced homelessness, including those living rough, in night shelters, or temporary accommodations.[100]

Children in conflict zones are at high risk of violence, including recruitment by armed forces, sexual violence, and exploitation, due to the instability and dangers of conflict areas. The 2024 Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to the General Assembly Virginia Gamba highlights a 21% increase in grave

[97] Eurochild (2025) *Flagship sub-report on child protection systems in Europe*
[98] Ibid
[99] Brackenridge et al., (2010) *Protecting Children from Violence in Sport: A Review with a Focus on Industrialized Countries*. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre ; Hartill, M., Rulofs, B., Allroggen, M., Demarbaix, S., Diketmüller, R., Lang, M., Martin, M., Nanu, I., Sage, D., Stativa, E., Kampen, J., & Vertommen, T. (2023). Prevalence of interpersonal violence against children in sport in six European countries. Child Abuse & Neglect, 146, 106513.
[100] Fondation Abbé Pierre & FEANTSA. (2024). Ninth overview of housing exclusion in Europe.

violations against children in conflict situations in 2023, including sexual violence, abduction, and deaths.[101]

Children[102] in contact with the justice system and **children whose parents are in contact with the justice system** may experience violence and discrimination both within the justice system and from society. These children may face stigma, isolation, and a lack of appropriate support services, which can further undermine their well-being and increase their risk of future involvement in the justice system.

Children in poverty often face neglect, exploitation, and increased vulnerability to various forms of abuse due to a lack of resources and social support.[103] Inequalities and a lack of adequate resources, such as nutritious food, safe housing, healthcare, and access to quality education, combined with limited social support systems, place these children at risk of harm.

Children living in remote areas may experience isolation, limited access to resources, and difficulties seeking help due to geographical or cultural barriers, making them more vulnerable to violence. **Moldova** is one example where children in rural areas face heightened risks of exploitation due to the limited infrastructure for child protection.[104] In **Romania**, 57% of children subjected to abuse, neglect, and exploitation come from rural areas.[105]

Children participating in peaceful protests often face severe repercussions, including physical violence, stigmatisation, and pre-detention. This is happening in **Serbia** in 2025.[106]

Children with a migrant background are at risk of trafficking, exploitation, and abuse due to their displacement and lack of legal protections or safe environments. In **Finland**, a new law allows border guards to push back migrants at the Finland-Russia border without processing asylum claims. These children put also children at higher risk of going missing. Between 2021 and 2023, the cross-border journalism project *Lost in Europe* uncovered that 51,433 child migrants went missing after arriving in European countries—a significant rise compared to their 2021 findings, which reported at least 18,000 unaccompanied minors missing between 2018 and 2020.[107]

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[101] United Nations. (2024, June 3). Children and armed conflict: Report of the Secretary-General (A/78/842–S/2024/384).

[102] In all European states, a child is defined as any individual under the age of 18, regardless of the minimum age of criminal responsibility.

[103] Bywaters, P., Skinner, G., Cooper, A., Kennedy, E., Malik, A. (2022) *The Relationship Between Poverty and Child Abuse and Neglect: New Evidence*. University of Huddersfield.

[104] Eurochild (2025) *Flagship sub-report on child protection systems in Europe*

[105] Eurochild (2023) Comprehensive contribution to the consultation on integrated child protection systems. European Commission.

[106] Eurochild. (2025, April 14). *The rights of children under threat in Serbia*. Eurochild.

[107] van den Hof, E. (2024, April 30). More than 50,000 unaccompanied child migrants have gone missing after arriving in Europe. Lost in Europe.

Children with an ethnic background[108] often face violence linked to discrimination, including racial profiling, hate speech, bullying, and discriminatory practices. Nearly one in four respondents to a survey by the *European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights* said that someone had made offensive or threatening remarks to their child in person due to the child's ethnic or immigrant background. Among parents of African descent, 8% reported that their child had experienced physical abuse, such as hitting, hair-pulling, or kicking. Compared to 2016, more respondents of African descent now report that their children have faced racism at school in the past 12 months.[109] In **Slovakia**, there is evidence of police officers beating and threatening to shoot Romani children for not respecting quarantine measures.[110]

Children with disabilities are three to four times more vulnerable to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse as they may have difficulty communicating their experiences or seeking help[111], The risk is particularly severe for those with intellectual or developmental disabilities—research indicates that up to 68% of girls and 30% of boys in this group may experience sexual abuse before turning 18.[112] According to UNICEF, in **Bulgaria**, 35.9% of children with disabilities have experienced physical violence compared to 15.9% of children without disabilities.[113]

LGBTQI+ children are particularly vulnerable to bullying, physical violence, and emotional abuse, especially in non-affirming environments. According to a 2023 survey by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) of people aged 15 or older who identify as LGBTI, 5% reported being physically or sexually attacked in the previous year. The share of respondents experiencing hate-motivated violence over the past five years increased from 11% in 2019 to 14% in 2023.[114]

While all children are at risk of violence, regardless of their background, the nature and frequency of that violence can be shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, disability, ethnicity, migration status, or socio-economic background. An intersectional lens reveals how overlapping forms of discrimination and disadvantage can amplify a child's vulnerability to violence.

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[108] This term generally refers to children whose parents or family members have a different national or ethnic origin from the majority population in the country where they reside. This can encompass various aspects, including ancestry, cultural heritage, language, and shared traditions.
European Commission. (n.d.). Person with a migratory background. European Migration Network Asylum and Migration Glossary. Retrieved May 7, 2025

[109] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2023). Being Black in the EU: Experiences of people of African descent.

[110] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2024) *Addressing racism in policing*. Publications Office of the European Union.

[111] Eurochild et al. (2024) *Europe Kids Want Survey*, where almost half (49%) of children with disabilities report discrimination based on their disability. www.eurochild.org/uploads/2024/04/EuropeWeWantReport2024.pdf.

[112] UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children. (n.d.). *Children with disabilities*. United Nations.

[113] Eurochild (2023) Comprehensive contribution to the consultation on integrated child protection systems. European Commission.

[114] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2024). *LGBTIQ equality at a crossroads: Progress and challenges*. Publications Office of the European Union.

Council of Europe framework on violence against children

The Council of Europe offers a strong legal and policy framework to protect children from all forms of violence, combining prevention, protection, and access to justice.

The **Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022–2027)**[115], developed in consultation with various civil society organisations, including Eurochild, outlines six strategic objectives, including ensuring freedom from violence for all children. It promotes integrated national responses and multi-agency coordination to tackle violence in all settings.

The **Lanzarote Convention (2007)**[116] criminalises all forms of sexual violence against children, requiring states to prevent abuse, protect victims, and prosecute perpetrators. It is monitored by the Lanzarote Committee, which conducts country visits and reviews national implementation through monitoring rounds. Civil society organisations, children, and other stakeholders can contribute to these assessments by submitting alternative reports or participating in consultations.

The **Istanbul Convention (2011)**[117], focuses on violence against women and domestic violence, and recognises children as direct and indirect victims. It mandates that states provide support for child victims, including those witnessing it. Monitoring is carried out by GREVIO (Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence), an independent body that assesses compliance through country reports and site visits.

The **European Convention on Human Rights (1950)**[118], through the case law of the **European Court of Human Rights**, affirms states' positive obligations to protect children from violence under Articles 3 (prohibition of torture) and 8 (right to private and family life).

The **Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (2005)**[119] includes key provisions to protect child victims of trafficking, ensuring child-sensitive procedures and specialised support given their heightened vulnerability. The implementation of the Convention is monitored by GRETA (Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings), which regularly evaluates how states meet their obligations

The Council of Europe has also issued relevant policies, including recommendations on developing integrated strategies for protecting children from violence[120], on creating

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[115] Council of Europe (2022) *Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022–2027): Children's rights in action: from continuous implementation to joint innovation.*

[116] Council of Europe (2007) *Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention).*

[117] Council of Europe (2011) *Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention)*.

[118] Council of Europe (1950) *European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).*

[119] Council of Europe. (2005). Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings.

[120] Council of Europe. (2009). *Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)10 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on integrated national strategies for the protection of children from violence.*

reporting systems for incidents of violence against children[121] and on child-friendly justice[122]

EU framework on violence against children

While primary responsibility for operating the child protection systems remains with individual Member States, all of which are binded by the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child, the EU plays a complementary and influential role. It supports national efforts through legislative measures, funding programmes, and cross-border cooperation.

The EU's legal and policy framework reflects a strong and sustained commitment to protecting children from violence and exploitation, particularly through prevention, support services, and legal safeguards. A key milestone was the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, which amended the founding treaties and formally established the protection of children's rights as a fundamental objective of the EU.

In particular, **Article 3(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)** obliges the Union to promote the rights of the child in both internal and external policies. Additional provisions in the **Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)** further reinforce this role. **Article 79 TFEU** provides the legal basis for a common immigration policy, including measures to combat human trafficking and safeguard unaccompanied minors. **Article 83 TFEU** empowers the EU to set minimum rules on the definition of criminal offences and sanctions in areas of serious cross-border crime, such as child sexual exploitation and trafficking. **Article 89 TFEU** facilitates enhanced judicial cooperation among Member States, particularly in combating transnational crimes that impact children.

The **EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021)**[123], adopted in 2021, after consultation with children and civil society organisations, including Eurochild, highlights the need to combat violence against children and strengthen child protection. Under Strand 3, it underscores that integrated child protection systems are key to preventing and addressing violence. The **EU Better Internet for Kids+ Strategy (2022)** compiles best practices and outlines initiatives to enhance children's online experiences, focusing on the pillars of protection, empowerment, and participation.

The **Revised Anti-Trafficking Directive (2024)**[124] ensures early identification of child victims, cross-border cooperation, and specialised support for children, as well as a child-sensitive approach in legal proceedings. The Directive includes key amendments that Eurochild and other allies have long advocated for**,** including transparent and harmonised referral

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[121] Council of Europe. (2023). *Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)2 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on strengthening reporting systems on violence against children.*
[122] Council of Europe. (2010). *Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on child-friendly justice.*
123 European Commission (2021) EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child.
124 European Parliament and Council of the European Union. (2024). Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of 13 June 2024 amending Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims.

mechanisms for early victim detection and ensuring a child-sensitive approach throughout identification, reporting, and legal proceedings.[125]

The **Victims' Rights Directive (2012)**[126], currently under revision, seeks to establish clear protections for victims of crime. At Eurochild, we have been monitoring and influencing this legislative file to strengthen the measures to protect child victims.[127]

The **Directive on Combating the Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children and Child Sexual Abuse Material (2011)**[128], currently being revised, sets out measures to harmonise the criminal and prevention frameworks of Member States regarding child sexual abuse and exploitation. Eurochild is collaborating with partners in the European Child Sexual Abuse Legislation Advocacy Group coalition to ensure that child sexual abuse offences are defined broadly to encompass the use of digital technologies, and that penalties for offences, both online and offline, are aligned.

The **Digital Services Act (2022)**[129] requires online platforms to take swift action against illegal content, including CSAM, and implement sufficient safeguards to ensure high levels of safety, privacy, and security for children on their platforms. At Eurochild, we monitor and influence the implementation, including the EU Guidelines on minor protection, as well as the risk assessment reports and mitigation measures proposed by online platforms to protect children.

The **Directive on Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (2024)**[130] ensures comprehensive protection, support, and justice for victims of domestic violence, with a focus on children witnessing it.

The Interim Regulation on combating child sexual abuse (Derogation measure)[131] **– until April 2026**, enables online platforms to voluntarily detect CSAM temporarily, pending the adoption of the **proposed Regulation to combat child sexual abuse (2022)**.[132] Eurochild is actively advocating for a strong legal framework that effectively holds online platforms

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125 https://eurochild.org/news/the-revised-eu-anti-trafficking-directive-strengthen-measures-to-protect-child-victims/
126 European Parliament and Council of the European Union (2012) Directive 2012/29/EU establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime (Victims' Rights Directive).
127 Eurochild. (2024, June 5). The revision of the EU Victims' Rights Directive: An opportunity to strengthen the rights of child victims.
128 European Parliament and Council of the European Union (2011) Directive 2011/93/EU on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography.
129 European Parliament and Council of the European Union. (2022). *Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 on a Single Market for Digital Services (Digital Services Act)*
130 European Parliament and Council of the European Union (2024) *Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence*
131 European Union (2024) Reg ulation (EU) 2024/1307 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2024 amending Regulation (EU) 2021/1232 on a temporary derogation from certain provisions of Directive 2002/58/EC as regards the use of technologies by providers of number-independent interpersonal communications services for the processing of personal and other data for the purpose of combating online child sexual abuse. Official Journal of the European Union, L 2024/1307, 14 May 2024.
132 Eurochild. (2022, October). Eurochild response to European Commission consultation on the proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down rules to prevent and combat child sexual abuse (COM(2022)209).

responsible for detecting, reporting, and removing all child sexual abuse content from their services.

The **EU Enlargement Package** is an annual set of country reports through which the European Commission assesses the progress of candidate and potential candidate countries towards meeting EU accession criteria. Violence against children is primarily addressed under **Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights)** and **Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security)**. These chapters assess legal and institutional measures to prevent and respond to abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence.[133]

The **Daphne Programme** was launched in 1997 with the aim of preventing and combating violence against children, young people, and women. Through this initiative, the EU provides funding for projects that raise awareness, support victims, and strengthen civil society organisations working on the ground. The programme addresses all forms of violence, including domestic and sexual violence, female genital mutilation, and online harassment.[134]

The **European Child Guarantee** urges Member States to ensure effective access to essential services for vulnerable children. Among its target groups are children in precarious family situations, including those living in households affected by domestic violence. The initiative also addresses some of the underlying social and economic conditions that may increase the risk of violence against children, such as poverty and social exclusion. Eurochild, which has championed the initiative since 2015, continues to lead civil society efforts to ensure its effective implementation and monitoring. Having tracked the development of National Action Plans[135], Eurochild also publishes the overviews of the biennial reports on their implementation.[136]

The European Commission's Recommendation on integrated child protection systems (2024)

The European Commission Recommendation on integrated child protection systems[137] is a key reference policy for child protection in the EU. The Recommendation is based on extensive consultation and collaboration with various stakeholders, including input from Eurochild[138] and a mapping exercise conducted by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency. While the Recommendation is addressed to EU Member States, it also provides inspiration for the EU enlargement countries.

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[133] Eurochild. (2024, May 10). *Strengthening children's rights in the EU accession process*.
[134] European Parliamentary Research Service (2024) Violence against children in the European Union, Current situation
[135] Eurochild (2022). *Child Guarantee National Action Plans at a glance*.
[136] Eurochild. (2024). Biennial reports on the implementation of the European Child Guarantee.
[137] European Commission. (2024). *Commission Recommendation (EU) 2024/1238 of 23 April 2024 on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interests of the child*.
[138] Eurochild. (2024, June 19). European Commission Recommendation to develop and strengthen integrated child protection systems. Eurochild.

The Commission adopts a zero-tolerance approach to all forms of violence, including corporal punishment. It also calls for addressing discrimination, particularly for marginalised children and those on the move. Ensuring protection both offline and online, promoting inclusive education, and providing accessible health and mental health services are identified as essential components of an effective child protection system.

At the heart of the Recommendation is the recognition of children as rights-holders, whose best interests must be a primary consideration, ensured through the full implementation of EU and national child protection legislation. However, many countries face practical and legal challenges. In **Spain**, for example, the *Organic Law 8/2021*, which aims to protect children from violence, including the establishment of a Central Information Registry, has yet to be fully implemented. Its national strategy to eradicate violence against children also requires adequate financial investment to be effective. **Kosovo**'s 2019 Child Protection Law and **Moldova**'s National Programme for Child Protection still lack the necessary secondary legislation and clear operational mechanisms for enforcement.[139]

The Recommendation strongly emphasises prevention, a critical element in addressing the root causes of violence and ensuring early support. This is particularly relevant given the challenges reported across Europe. For instance, **Türkiye**'s child protection system suffers from delayed interventions and insufficient monitoring, while **Slovakia** has yet to adequately prioritise the prevention of violence against children. Similarly, **Estonia** lacks investment in early intervention, **Croatia** faces gaps in early support services, and **Portugal** struggles with weak coordination between the justice and child protection systems.[140]

The Commission highlights the important role of civil society organisations to deliver child protection services and preventive support. However, in many European countries, CSOs are facing major challenges. For example, the *Central Union for Child Welfare* in **Finland** has raised concerns that recent funding cuts are too severe and too rapid, threatening their ability to deliver critical services such as mental health support, anti-bullying programmes, and responses to domestic violence.[141]

The Commission urges countries to implement effective reporting and response systems. This resonates with recommendations from Eurochild's members in **Romania**, who stress the need for a national mechanism to identify violence against children alongside clear reporting processes, professional training, and public awareness campaigns.

The Recommendation calls for strengthening child participation and ensuring child-friendly justice systems. In **Spain**, this is pressing in cases involving sexual violence, where court procedures can be traumatising. **Slovenia** experiences delays and insufficient prioritisation of the child's best interests in judicial processes, while in **Slovakia,** repeated interrogations and long waits for mental health services further harm child victims. In **Italy,**

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[139] Eurochild (2025) *Flagship sub-report on child protection systems in Europe*
[140] Ibid
[141] Ibid

the duration of legal proceedings remains a concern for safeguarding children's well-being.
[142]

The Commission highlights that integrated systems require effective inter-sectoral collaboration. Yet, many countries face structural fragmentation. In **Bulgaria**, coordination at the local level remains a key gap, and **Slovakia** continues to report challenges in multidisciplinary cooperation. At the same time, fragmentation and lack of coordination between key actors hinder **Greece**'s child protection services, resulting in delays and inefficiencies.[143]

The Recommendation also outlines the need for adequate funding and resources for child protection systems and ongoing professional training for those working with children. However, many countries face challenges in ensuring this. While **Estonia** struggles with high workloads and low salaries for social workers, **Ireland** faces difficulties recruiting and retaining social workers due to insufficient resources. **Romania** lacks continuous professional development for child protection professionals, impacting service quality.[144]

Eurochild recommendations

Eurochild offers the following recommendations to the European governments to be implemented with the support and guidance of the European Institutions:

1. Address child protection implementation gaps

Ensure the effective implementation of child protection legislation and strategies by addressing funding gaps and action plans. Strengthen cooperation with local and regional stakeholders to guarantee consistent policy application across regions. Establish robust monitoring systems to track progress and assess the impact of interventions. Ensure the transposition and effective implementation of all relevant United Nations, European Union, and Council of Europe frameworks into national law.

2. Strengthen legislation to protect children from all forms of violence

Strengthen the enforcement of child protection laws and improve reporting mechanisms, focusing on preventing domestic violence, corporal punishment, abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and child sexual abuse, both offline and online. Interventions must adopt a holistic, child-centred approach prioritising prevention, early detection, safety, recovery, and reintegration.

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[142] Eurochild (2025) *Flagship sub-report on child protection systems in Europe*
[143] Eurochild (2025) *Flagship sub-report on child protection systems in Europe*
[144] Ibid

3. Invest in child protection systems

Ensure sustainable funding for child protection services at all levels, in line with the objectives of the European Child Guarantee. Investment is needed to address staffing shortages, reduce turnover, and improve worker professional development opportunities. Adequate resources are necessary for effective risk identification, adequate response, and continuous access to support services. Invest in disaggregated data collection to ensure tailored response and prevention is crucial.[145]

4. Eliminate discrimination

Guarantee equal access to child protection services for marginalised groups, such as children with migrant and ethnic backgrounds, those with disabilities, and those in rural areas. Services must be inclusive and adapted to the needs of vulnerable children, addressing barriers and combating discriminatory practices within child protection systems.

5. Develop integrated child protection systems

Implement integrated child protection systems that promote coordination among the health, education, social protection, online support, and justice sectors. These systems should recognise the connections between online and offline vulnerabilities as well as facilitate seamless cooperation and information-sharing among professionals to provide comprehensive care. Specific safeguarding and reporting mechanisms should be present in settings where children are present, such as hospitals, schools, extracurricular facilities, sports clubs, churches and online platforms. A multidisciplinary approach ensures timely and holistic support for each child, in line with the European Commission Recommendation on integrated child protection systems.

6. Ensure prevention and early intervention

Focus on proactive child protection systems that prioritise prevention over reactive measures, by tackling the root causes of violence. Efforts should include promoting positive parenting, providing early family support, and strengthening community-based protection. Effective early interventions identify vulnerabilities and offer targeted assistance before situations escalate.

7. Empower children and strengthen reporting and identification processes

Promote a child-centred approach where all stakeholders, including professionals, parents, caregivers, and peers, work together to protect children from violence. Improve offline and online identification and reporting mechanisms by ensuring accessible, child-friendly channels such as helplines and hotlines. Training should empower the adults of trust in children's life, including teachers and community members, to recognise early signs of violence and respond sensitively, ensuring children's safety and well-being. Children should also be empowered by raising awareness about violence and informing them on how to

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[145] Eurochild. (2025, April 4). Securing Europe's future: Eurochild's vision for investing in children in the 2028–2034 EU Multiannual Financial Framework.

seek help. Informal education on violence against children, including in the online environment, should be carried out by professional providers.

8. Uphold children's rights in the justice system

Ensure the justice system is child-friendly by developing age-appropriate procedures and safeguarding children's rights. Public awareness, accessible reporting mechanisms, and clear referral protocols are vital. Legal professionals should receive specialised training in child-sensitive judicial procedures, prioritising reintegration over punitive measures and to avoid secondary-victimisation of children.

9. Protect children's rights in the digital environment

> *"We should be included in designing a platform."*
>
> *- Children from Croatia[146]*

Adopt and adequately enforce legal frameworks that ensure children's protection, empowerment and participation in digital environments. These frameworks should require companies to design services in line with child rights to protect against online violence, including child sexual abuse, cyberbullying, and online exploitation, including data abuses and behavioural manipulation. Ensure online platforms comply with existing requirements to protect children online, especially the *Digital Services Act*.

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[146] Eurochild, ECPAT International, & Terre des Hommes Netherlands. (2024). Speaking up for change: Children's and caregivers' voices for safer online experiences.