Joint Statement: Children's rights at the heart of the upcoming Action Plan against Cyberbullying

September 2025

Introduction

In recent years, the European Union has made significant efforts to protect and promote children's rights online. These include implementing the Better Internet for Kids Strategy and recently adopting the Guidelines on the protection of minors under the Digital Services Act. However, online risks persist, and a robust, holistic and child-centered approach is needed to tackle them. OECD research has shown that the number of adolescents exposed to cyberbullying is increasing, with one in six 11- to 15-year-olds reporting experiences of cyberbullying in 2021–22.[1]

Cyberbullying can take many forms, such as insults, spreading rumours, posting offensive and humiliating photos and videos, and is often more vicious because offenders can hide behind digital identities. Cyberbullying can have short- and long-term mental and physical consequences for children. These consequences can include higher levels of depression and anxiety, emotional distress, suicidal ideation and attempts, and somatic complaints, as well as poorer physical health. It has been shown that these consequences not just happen in front of the screen but have a greater impact on a child's life and well-being.[2] The effects of cyberbullying often extend far beyond the screen. For many children, the emotional toll is long-

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[1] OECD, How's Life for Children in the Digital Age?, 2025.

[2] See for example: Save the Children Romania, The impact of cyberbullying on children's emotional wellbeing, 2025.

lasting and can contribute to social isolation, academic decline, and an increased risk of grooming, exploitation, and disappearance.[3] Children experiencing such harm need to be listened to, believed, and supported with compassion and care.

The upcoming EU Action Plan against Cyberbullying is an important next step in the ongoing commitment of the European Union to uphold children's rights in the online environment by strengthening online protection, amplifying children's voices, and ensuring early, trauma-informed, and coordinated responses to harm. Signatories welcome that the Action Plan will build further on existing initiatives, like the ones mentioned in the call for evidence, and commit to providing a harmonised definition of cyberbullying at EU level. However, it is also important that the Action Plan will align and complement with other EU initiatives, such as the Gender Equality Strategy, the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy, the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, the Victims' Rights Strategy, as well as the European Pillar of Social Rights which focuses on quality and inclusive education.

Key recommendations

Signatories welcome the approach by the European Commission, and further recommend the following:

1. **Strong prevention by empowering the whole community surrounding the child**

   - The promotion of **digital literacy** as well as **social and emotional skills** from an early age and adapted to the different stages of the life of children is a fundamental prevention mechanism of (cyber-)bullying. Additionally, training and awareness-raising campaigns should be available for **parents, caregivers and frontline professionals** (including teachers, social workers, health staff and police) to recognise the first signs of cyberbullying. Through targeted training, these adults and peers can better **recognise early warning signs**, respond with **sensitivity**, and provide **safe spaces** for children to disclose what they are experiencing.
   - The **links between offline and online bullying** should be considered to ensure effective early detection and prompt support, paying special attention to the educational and family environments of the child.
   - **Civil society organisations** must be supported and adequately funded for their role in connecting children, families, schools and institutions in prevention efforts. The role of **helplines and hotlines** should be further promoted and strengthened, and their operation should be enhanced to ensure accessible, safe, and confidential avenues for children to seek help.
   - **Public authorities in the education and social fields** should provide clear guidelines to education institutions (formal and non-formal) on setting up plans to address and prevent bullying, and how to work in partnership with community and (mental) health organisations.
   - **Online platforms**, including gaming platforms, should invest and ensure specific safeguards to protect children from cyberbullying, including age-appropriate safety features, especially

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[3] Missing Children Europe, CESAGRAM Project, 2024.

reporting tools, keyword blocking and content moderation technology. Special attention should be paid to how **emerging technologies** may facilitate cyberbullying, especially Artificial Intelligence and Virtual/Augmented Reality, which should be designed with child safety and privacy by default.

2. **Adequate and age-appropriate reporting and redress mechanisms**

   - Children must have **quick, simple, anonymous and accessible ways to report cyberbullying**. Online platforms must ensure that their reporting tools are accessible, especially for children with disabilities, and age-appropriate. Victims should receive **feedback** on the outcome of their report and platforms should ensure the **prompt removal** of harmful content and conduct. A Code of Conduct for online platforms on how to implement measures to prevent and respond to cyberbullying should be considered.
   - **Civil society organisations** often receive the first disclosures from victims. Their capacity to act swiftly and without barriers is essential and must be **adequately resourced**.
   - **Member States** should be encouraged to promote a culture of reporting and **positive bystander behaviours** in schools, educational systems, and sports and cultural associations.
   - **Member States** should be encouraged to **gather disaggregated data on cyberbullying** by age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and ethnicity to understand who is most affected and target prevention and support measures accordingly. The data collection should also look at how these factors can overlap and create additional vulnerabilities. Evidence-based policymaking depends on understanding the **lived experiences of the most affected groups**.

3. **Access to inclusive, trauma-informed and age-appropriate victim support services**

   - Access to **inclusive, age-appropriate, trauma-informed, user-friendly, free, confidential, sustained support services** should be available to all victims of cyberbullying. Children affected by cyberbullying, including those in residential care, require sustained support to reduce the risk of re-victimisation and further harm. This is why European and national helplines and hotlines must be recognised and securely funded to guarantee child-centred support.
   - Victim support must be coordinated across **health, education, justice, and social services**, and it must take into account the needs not only of the victims but, where relevant, the young perpetrators - many of whom may also be vulnerable or victims of abuse themselves. These multidisciplinary and interagency interventions should be in line with the **Barnahus model** and prioritise the best interests of the child in every response.
   - As cyberbullying crosses borders, the Action Plan must enable **cross-border victim support**, mutual recognition of protection measures and structured EU cooperation to ensure consistent, high-quality services.

Children are experts in their own lives and powerful agents of change. The meaningful and inclusive participation of children will contribute to the success of this Action Plan. Signatories therefore welcome the opportunity for children to share their insights, experiences and ideas via the EU Children's Participation Platform's online survey[4], and call for the continuous participation of children throughout the development, implementation and evaluation of the Action Plan. Policies that affect children's lives must be created **with them, not just for them**. This participatory approach is a cornerstone of **child rights-based policymaking**.

The Action Plan should action Member States, enable civil society organisations and urge online platforms to proactively protect children from cyberbullying. As organisations representing children and working on children's rights, the signatories are ready to play an active role in the further development and implementation of the Action Plan.

This statement has been endorsed by the following individual organisations:

1. 5Rights
2. Alliance for Childhood
3. ChildFund Alliance
4. Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE)
5. Child Rights International Network (CRIN)
6. COFACE Families Europe
7. ECPAT International
8. Educo
9. Eurochild
10. Hope and Homes for Children
11. IGLYO
12. Make Mothers Matter
13. Missing Children Europe
14. Save the Children
15. Victim Support Europe

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[4] EU Children's Participation Platform, Child-friendly survey Action Plan against cyberbullying, 2025.