

Eurochild Key Messages on Cyberbullying to feed into the EU Action Plan against cyberbullying



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September 2025

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Context

Eurochild members have repeatedly raised that cyberbullying has become a strong and persistent phenomenon across the EU and beyond (see [Flagship sub-reports](#) on online safety). Similarly, in our [VOICE study](#), children in all participating countries (except the Philippines and Portugal) mentioned fearing cyberbullying or related concepts. In Europe, 51% of the children surveyed in the [Europe Kids Want](#) indicated that bullying was part of the biggest challenges to their mental health.

*As children and civil society echo the importance of this issue, the European Commission has committed to proposing an **EU Action Plan against cyberbullying**. This initiative should include an EU definition of cyberbullying, scaling up best practices across Member States, increasing cooperation with civil society and trusted flaggers, and encouraging a culture of reporting of cyberbullying incidents, which currently go largely undetected, and help-seeking behaviours.*

Research highlights the interconnected nature of cyberbullying and offline bullying, with studies showing that 95% of cyberbullying victims also experience physical, verbal or social bullying in real-life contexts¹. The impact is particularly pronounced among vulnerable groups, including girls, children with disabilities or special educational needs, Roma children and asylum seekers. While boys are more likely to engage in bullying behaviour both online and offline, girls are more likely to be victims of cyberbullying².

¹ Waasdorp TE, Bradshaw CP. [The overlap between cyberbullying and traditional bullying](#). J Adolesc Health (2015)

² Kasturiratna, K.T.A.S., Hartanto, A., Chen, C.H.Y. *et al.* [Umbrella review of meta-analyses on the risk factors, protective factors, consequences and interventions of cyberbullying victimization](#). Nature Human Behaviour 9, 101–132 (2025).

Children with disabilities, females, minorities and children with higher levels of anxiety, depression and anger are more likely to be subjected to cyberbullying, which can lead not only to an exacerbation of the symptoms, but also to engaging in bullying themselves, especially online³. LGBTQ+ students are more likely to become victims of bullying both online (25%) and in school (29%), compared to cisgender and heterosexual students (respectively 13% and 16%)⁴.

Contextual risk factors, such as unregulated school and family environments and unsafeguarded internet use, play a crucial role in teenagers engaging in cyberbullying⁵. Indeed, according to OECD's publication [How's Life for Children in the Digital Age](#), teenagers living with both parents report engaging in cyberbullying less often (10%) than those living with one parent or in another family situation (14%).

The most common forms of cyberbullying reported by children include mean or hurtful comments posted online (30%), exclusion from group chats (29%), rumours spread online (28%), and someone embarrassing or humiliating them online (27%)⁶. 17% of children received explicit images without consent, while 7% had their explicit images shared without consent⁷. Research shows that 25% of children do not know how to report cyberbullying⁸.

The impact of cyberbullying on children's mental health entails severe distress for both offenders and victims, while recurrent victims show depressive symptoms and problematic use of alcohol over time⁹. Additionally, victims of online rumours are 15 times more likely to engage in non-suicidal self-injury¹⁰. For girls, there seem to be an additional correlation between sexual cyberbullying and mental health¹¹.

Although cyberbullying remains a major concern for many countries, relevant **good practices** can be identified, as flagged in Eurochild's 2024 flagship report 'Children's Realities in Europe: Progress & Gaps'. Civil society organisations contribute significantly to gathering data on the lived experiences of children online and **raising awareness** on the topic. The organisation Children in Northern Ireland published a [youth-led research on the impact of](#)

³ [Umbrella review on the risk factors](#), 2025. Rose, C. A., & Gage, N. A. (2016). [Exploring the Involvement of Bullying Among Students With Disabilities Over Time](#).

⁴ Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S., [Data Summary and Trends](#), 2013-2023.

⁵ [Umbrella review on the risk factors](#), 2025.

⁶ Cyberbullying Research Center, [2023 Cyberbullying Data](#), sample of 5,000 middle and high school students (13-17) in the US.

⁷ Pew Research Center, [Teens and Cyberbullying](#), 2022, sample of 1 300 13-17 y.o., US.

⁸ Ditch The Label, [The Annual Bullying Survey 2020](#), which surveyed 13 387 schools and colleges pupils in 2019-2020 in the UK. [Stop Cyberbullying Report](#), concerning 1 034 children aged 9-12 in the US, 2020.

⁹ Mark L, Värnik A, Sisask M. Who Suffers Most From Being Involved in Bullying-Bully, Victim, or Bully-Victim? 2019. Manuel Gámez-Guadix, Gianluca Gini, Esther Calvete, Stability of cyberbullying victimization among adolescents: [Prevalence and association with bully-victim status and psychosocial adjustment](#), Computers in Human Behavior, Volume 53, 2015 (sample of 680 Spanish adolescents).

¹⁰ Lanzillo, E. C., Zhang, I., Jobes, D. A., & Brausch, A. M. (2021). [The Influence of Cyberbullying on Nonsuicidal Self-Injury and Suicidal Thoughts and Behavior in a Psychiatric Adolescent Sample](#). *Archives of Suicide Research*.

¹¹ Baier, D., Hong, J.S., Kliem, S. et al. Consequences of Bullying on Adolescents' Mental Health in Germany: Comparing Face-to-Face Bullying and Cyberbullying. *J Child Fam Stud* 28, 2347–2357 (2019).

[social media on teenage girls](#), revealing experiences of cyberbullying and effects on mental health and self-harm, body image and self-esteem.

As **digital literacy and education** among children, parents and teachers is directly linked to the risk of cyberbullying, Eurochild's members in Serbia and Malta advocate for training of educators, and in Malta and Kosovo call to integrate digital literacy classes into the national curriculum¹². Education modules on online safety, the digital environment and digital literacy are already present in Belgium, Italy, Latvia and Poland¹³. In Ireland, the national strategy '[Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying](#)' aims at preventing and addressing bullying online and offline across schools, with an educational approach that promotes wellbeing, inclusion and student participation. Croatia has been implementing the [Child Assault Prevention program](#) for children and educators since 1999, conducting workshops on how to recognise and resist verbal, physical and sexual violence¹⁴.

Civil society also plays a crucial role in providing support to children and families. Safe Internet Centres across EU Member States are fundamental in supporting a holistic approach that includes helplines, hotlines, counselling for children and trainings to caregivers and teachers, as occurred in Albania, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Croatia, Greece, Italy and Portugal, among others¹⁵. In Croatia, civil society initiatives on prevention of cyberbullying, mental health and the safe use of the Internet have been the main drivers for the creation of national anti-cyberbullying policies¹⁶.

To ensure effective and sustainable initiatives, collaboration with the public sector proves crucial. In Serbia, the government established the National Contact Centre for Safety of Children on the Internet, which promoted awareness and safe use of the Internet; in Moldova, the Ministry of Education and Research promoted prevention initiatives through programs on online safety for teachers and children, and through a platform containing guidance for parents. In Greece, the Ministry of Education created an [official platform](#) that allows everyone to report cases of bullying online and offline, and a National Strategy for the Protection of Minors from Internet Addiction was recently published, although gaps are still present. Moreover, the Hellenic Police's Cybercrime Unit carries out awareness-raising activities in schools on good practices for using the Internet safely¹⁷. In 2024 the Croatian

¹² Eurochild 2024 flagship report on children in need across Europe, Children's Realities in Europe: Progress & Gaps, [Bridging persistent gaps in children's rights online in Europe](#), 7 (2024).

¹³ Eurochild 2024 flagship report on children in need across Europe, Children's Realities in Europe: Progress & Gaps, [Bridging persistent gaps in children's rights online in Europe](#), 8 (2024).

Telefono Azzurro Italy, Contribution to the EC Call for Evidence for the upcoming EU Action Plan against Cyberbullying, 2025.

¹⁴ Children's Rights Alliance Ireland and FICE Croatia, Contribution to the EC Call for Evidence for the upcoming EU Action Plan against Cyberbullying, 2025.

¹⁵ Eurochild 2024 flagship report on children in need across Europe, Children's Realities in Europe: Progress & Gaps, [Bridging persistent gaps in children's rights online in Europe](#), 7 (2024). FICE Croatia, the Smile of the Child Greece and Telefono Azzurro Italy, Contribution to the EC Call for Evidence for the upcoming EU Action Plan against Cyberbullying, 2025.

¹⁶ FICE Croatia, Contribution to the European Commission Call for Evidence for the upcoming EU Action Plan against Cyberbullying, 2025.

¹⁷ The Smile of the Child Greece, Contribution to the European Commission Call for Evidence for the upcoming EU Action Plan against Cyberbullying, 2025.

government revised the Protocol on Addressing Violence among Children and Youth, which provides a national framework for safeguarding children and ensures inter-agency cooperation. Furthermore, the Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence in Schools 2020-2024 encompasses trainings for teachers, digital incident tracking and awareness-raising campaigns, while the National Plan for Children's Rights 2022-2026 focuses on digital safety, peer violence prevention and support for vulnerable groups¹⁸.

In Ireland the Department of Education adopted new [national procedures](#) to prevent and address bullying behaviours in schools, informed by the views of children and young people, parents, schools and the wider education community. Additionally, The [Dublin City University Anti-Bullying Centre](#) developed Ireland's only research-based [anti-bullying and online safety programme](#) for primary and post-primary schools across the country. The project is designed to build capacity among students to understand their own behaviour, be able to recognise bullying and online safety risks, and be confident in how to report and seek support when needed¹⁹.

In Italy national laws were revised to strengthen prevention and the role of schools²⁰. In Ukraine policies addressing some aspects of cyberbullying were adopted, while in Türkiye the Ministry of Family and Social Services provides trainings on online threats, and established a Social Media Working Group²¹. However, a comprehensive approach to address cyberbullying at national level still lacks in many EU countries, for example through concrete measures in national online safety regulations or strategies.

¹⁸ FICE Croatia, Contribution to the European Commission Call for Evidence for the upcoming EU Action Plan against Cyberbullying, 2025.

¹⁹ Children's Rights Alliance Ireland, Contribution to the European Commission Call for Evidence for the upcoming EU Action Plan against Cyberbullying, 2025.

²⁰ Telefono Azzurro Italy, Contribution to the European Commission Call for Evidence for the upcoming EU Action Plan against Cyberbullying, 2025.

²¹ Eurochild 2024 flagship report on children in need across Europe, Children's Realities in Europe: Progress & Gaps, [Bridging persistent gaps in children's rights online in Europe](#), 8 (2024).

Recommendations

Comprehensive approach

- Recognise the continuum of offline bullying and cyberbullying to adopt a comprehensive approach and the responsibility of all actors (parents, schools, public authorities);
- Recognise that a preventive and effective approach to cyberbullying and offline bullying should pay attention to the learning²² and familial environments of the child²³, as well as any specific emotional and mental health conditions²⁴ that may be driving the cyberbullying behaviours;
- Recognise the need for a multi-layered approach, combining legislative actions enhancing corporate responsibility and criminal liability, education initiatives and support mechanisms and reporting procedures as well as strengthening helplines and hotlines;
- Provide for a EU-wide definition of cyberbullying, one that can encompass a wide range of forms of violence such as revenge porn, blackmail, stalking, sexual extortion, impersonation, social exclusion and doxing, and including considerations of frequency, reach (*a single post widely shared can constitute cyberbullying*) and power relationship which may be different online and offline.

Protecting vulnerable children

- Provide targeted support and resources to groups disproportionately affected by cyberbullying: girls, LGBTIQ+ children, children from vulnerable backgrounds, including children living in poverty and children with disabilities, and children suffering from mental health conditions (i.e., anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, etc.);

Education and participation

- Enhance digital and emotional literacy and responsible technology use for children, including training on emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and virtual reality;
- Enhance parents' and teachers' digital literacy skills, with a focus on tools allowing them to recognise, prevent and address cyberbullying;
- Foster a culture of reporting and positive bystander behaviour online, by providing school training on reporting procedures and showing low-risk ways of showing support;

²² Hinduja, S. & Patchin, J.W. Developing a Positive School Climate: Top Ten Tips to Prevent Bullying and Cyberbullying. Cyberbullying Research Center, (2018).

²³ Shao I., Al-shoaibi A., Testa A. *et al*, The Association between Family Environment and Subsequent Risk of Cyberbullying Victimization in Adolescents. *Academic Pediatrics*, Vol. 24, Issue 6 (2024).

²⁴ Perren S., Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger E., Malti T., Hymel S. Moral reasoning and emotion attributions of adolescent bullies, victims and bully-victims. *British Journal of Development Psychology*, 30 (2012).

- Foster early and victim-centred mediation initiatives to create spaces of dialogue and exchange among children, including those engaging in cyberbullying behaviours;
- Ensure meaningful child participation in developing policies and programs at school, community and institutional levels.

Platform accountability and safety-by-design

- Ensure simple, accessible and child-friendly cyberbullying reporting tools and transparently report on the prevalence, use, enforcement actions and response times;
- Provide safeguards aimed at protecting children from cyberbullying (i.e., tools to filter or block comments, accounts or posts) and at preventing cyberbullying attitudes (i.e., reflection prompts before posting potentially harmful content);
- Engage in effective moderation, including prompt harmful content removal and proactive detection of cyberbullying content and behaviours, paying special attention to violence against vulnerable children (i.e., gender- or racial-based);
- Regulate recommender systems to prevent the creation of echo chambers, rabbit holes and harmful communities, i.e., by using dispersion techniques that diversify the content recommended to children;
- Invest in improving the effectiveness and adaptability of technology to fight cyberbullying, especially addressing the challenges of the contextual nature of cyberbullying language;
- Gaming platforms should strengthen measures against hate speech and cyberbullying in chats, establish clear consequences systems for repeated offenders and provide a one-click reporting tool that does not interrupt gameplay;
- Restrict the capacity of AI models to generate bullying content or provide advice for cyberbullying behaviours, and establish alert mechanisms for the user and/or the child's parents or guardians when cyberbullying related content is being generated or exchanged;

Build a stronger prevention and protection network

- Develop strong prevention programs at national level, including early intervention tools to address potentially harmful situations before escalation and identify triggers of offending behaviour;
- Recognise and increase the visibility and awareness of helplines and hotlines, ensuring their sustainable funding and supporting them to become trusted flaggers under the DSA;
- Develop and improve data collection at local and national levels, ensuring a systematic and coherent approach to avoid fragmentation, and including findings related to different age and gender ranges as well as different backgrounds.
- Encourage partnerships between the educational sector, NGOs and online platforms to address violence in schools and online, including on how to report cyberbullying and how to use the online platforms' safeguards for cyberbullying;

- Identify and upscale successful anti-cyberbullying initiatives across EU Member States, for instance by replicating successful national campaigns to raise awareness on problematic behaviors online²⁵.

Adequate victim support

- Strengthen and expand support systems for both victims and offenders of bullying and cyberbullying, ensuring accessible and comprehensive support in line with the Barnahus model²⁶;
- Ensure that support and reporting resources offered to children are age-appropriate, accessible and involve children in their design and assessment;
- Cyberbullying is a borderless form of violence — promote cooperation across EU Member States, to provide cross-border support and ensure harmful content is swiftly removed when hosted or disseminated in different countries.

For more information, contact:

Mieke Schuurman
Director of Child Rights and Capacity Building
mieke.schuurman@eurochild.org

Eurochild AISBL

Avenue des Arts 7/8, 1210 Brussels
Tel. +32 (0)2 511 70 83
info@eurochild.org – www.eurochild.org

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²⁵ For reference, the European Parliament Briefing (2025) '[Tackling cyberbullying at regional/local level](#)'

²⁶ The [Promise Elpis project](#) shares that Barnahus is receiving an increasing number of cases of online sexual violence or that have an online element.