

# OUR EUROPE, OUR RIGHTS, OUR FUTURE

Children and young people's contribution to  
the new EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child  
and the Child Guarantee







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# Preface by the Child Advisory Board: Our Europe, Our Rights, Our Future

According to the data provided by thousands of respondents aged 11–17, all teenagers, regardless of their origin, religion or financial situation, want to participate in the decision-making process about things that concern them. On their behalf, we, the Child Advisory Board, call on politicians who should represent our interests to take our opinion into account and respect it in the same way as the opinion of adults. There are many topics that we want to draw focus to, but the ones mentioned here and in the executive summary are only a few important highlights of the report. We encourage you to read this report to get a better understanding of children's perspectives and their thoughts on decision making.

The topic of **mental health has been looked down upon for years**, even though many children around the world struggle with depression, anxiety or eating disorders. We worry about the future, school and loneliness, and this has a negative impact on our well-being and self-confidence. Currently, with the development of the pandemic and the global lockdown, the situation has worsened even further – we are afraid for the health of our relatives or the family's financial situation. For years, children have been showing how important the availability of psychological help is, but not many get this help and support. *This especially goes for sexual minorities and people with disabilities, among others.*

We also worry about education. Education is compulsory for children in European countries. This is not only an important obligation, but also a useful right. We spend many hours learning every day, regardless of whether the classes are held physically or online. However, we agree on one thing – that **school does not prepare us properly for the future**. We learn unnecessary and useless things, not practical when faced with reality. In addition, the large amount of homework and duties overwhelms us, negatively affecting our well-being and mood. The school that should be there for us doesn't want to listen to our needs and has become a place many of us don't want to go to. We would like to have more interesting lessons, more sports and art activities, but unluckily, we never have the opportunity to express our feelings.

Children are also concerned about equality. Equality is a common human right – it means that all people regardless of their faith, age or sexuality are treated equally. Yet, one third of **children living in Europe have been treated differently**, often negatively, due to their looks, gender, mental problems, sexual orientation or disability.

Additionally, because of our age, we are less heard by the government, even though **we would like to express our opinions on cases that are important to us**. Our age should not limit our contribution to participating in decision making! We have special needs that should be equally important and respected in the same way as older people's needs.

We urge all politicians to consider our views and needs when making decisions that concern us. As Albert Camus famously said, "Democracy is not the law of the majority but the protection of the minority". A democratic state should support **every** group in society, including children. True democracy is the representation of all groups, minorities and ethnicities in a region. Children are also a part of this population; therefore, their voices must be heard.

The Child Advisory Board

# Foreword

## by the European Commission

We often say that children are the future – but it is high time to recognise that children are already actors in their own right, in the here and now. This report **“Our Europe, Our Rights, Our Future”** could not illustrate it more clearly.

The way the world looks at children’s rights has substantially evolved in the past 30 years, also with regard to the right to participation. We are convinced that the inclusion of younger people in democratic processes is increasing and is different to previous modes of engagement. The European Commission supports children in fulfilling their potential as engaged, responsible citizens. For this to happen, participation in democratic life needs to start during childhood. It is every child’s right to express their views on matters that concern them, including the future they dream of and aspire to, and to have them taken into account. To ensure children’s involvement and contribution to building fairer societies, we also must tackle poverty and inequalities, breaking the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage.

The consultation for our upcoming comprehensive EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee benefitted from the contributions of over ten thousand children from both inside and outside the EU. The feedback we received through this report is truly inspiring; it raises alarm bells on important issues and is indicative of the quality of input we can expect from children when we engage with them in a meaningful and genuine way. We would like to express our deep gratitude to the children who have contributed to the child rights strategy and the child guarantee.

This consultation and the report **“Our Europe, Our Rights, Our Future”** are a real game-changer. They mark an important step for the European Commission towards greater participation of the younger generation in our policymaking. We are not in this for the short-term. We started last year with the European Forum on the rights of the child and we will continue on this path to establish a culture of child rights and child participation in the European Union. In this framework, we will insist on hearing the voices of children in the Conference on the Future of Europe.

The politics of today and tomorrow is made both for and together with our children. This is how we strengthen our democracies.

**Dubravka Šuica**

Vice-President for Democracy and Demography  
European Commission

**Nicolas Schmit**

Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights  
European Commission

**Didier Reynders**

Commissioner for Justice  
European Commission

# Foreword

## by the European Parliament Intergroup on Child Rights

Children's participation in decision making in all matters affecting them has gained ground in recent years. Today, the importance of listening to children and young people is recognized as fundamental to their human dignity and healthy development. Meaningful child participation requires that children have access to decision makers and that their views are taken seriously.

Allowing and encouraging children to participate in EU activities and giving them a voice in the preparation of decisions concerning them is a rich and rewarding experience for everyone and contributes to better, fit-for-purpose policies and legislation.

This consultation with children on the upcoming EU Strategy on Children's Rights and Child Guarantee is hoped to create a new chapter in which children are invited to contribute to decision making in the EU. Children played a crucial role in preparing and analysing the children's survey on the EU Strategy on Children's Rights and the Child Guarantee, to which 10,000 children responded.

Children are fully fledged citizens and represent a key constituency, not only because they have more at stake when it comes to decisions on their future, but also because they are strongly committed to and understand the values underpinning the European Union. Politicians and decision makers, therefore, must listen to their opinions. We expect to see the priorities of the children and the recommendations stemming from the analysis of their voices well reflected in the draft of the EU Strategy on Children's Rights and the Child Guarantee. **'Our Europe, Our Rights, Our Future'** is a Europe we build together with children.

The report carefully analyses the children's views and gives a deep insight into the reality – or sometimes the frustrations – a child faces when communicating and interacting in an adult-dominated world. One of the most worrying findings in this report is that 1 in 3 children in the EU has experienced some form of differential treatment. Equality, education and violence are the biggest priorities for every child. The children's consultations conclude that **equity and equality, education, protection from violence, mental health, and child participation should be the cornerstones of the EU Strategy on Children's Rights and the Child Guarantee.**

We thank the children for their valuable input to the EU Strategy on Children's Rights and the Child Guarantee, and we are grateful to the partners that have been involved, including UNICEF, Eurochild, Save the Children, World Vision and Child Fund Alliance, as well as all their national and local partners and members.

We all look to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as a source of inspiration. The EU Strategy on Children's Rights and the Child Guarantee should be based on this Convention, which has been ratified by all European countries and almost all other countries in the world.

One of the rights enshrined in the Convention is the right to participate – which, sadly, despite growing focus, is still far from being the norm. As one of the Portuguese children consulted said, *"Some adults think that their opinion is the one that is correct, and they don't listen nor respect what we are saying..."*

Our task is to help adult decision makers appreciate and understand how rich the contributions of children can be, and to make sure children's participation is the rule and not the exception in EU decision-making processes.

David Lega

Caterina Chinnici

Hilde Vautmans

Antonio Lopez Isturiz

Javier Moreno Sanchez

Evin Incir

Laurence Farreng

Dragos Pislaru

Milan Brglez

Michaela Sojdrova

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- Austrian Committee for UNICEF
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- ChildFund International
- ChildFund Japan
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- Children in Wales
- Child Rights Alliance England
- Children in Scotland
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- Dutch Children's Rights Coalition
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- Foróige, Ireland
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- German Committee for UNICEF
- Hope and Homes Ukraine
- Hintalovon Alapítvány - Hungary
- Hungarian Committee for UNICEF
- Icelandic Committee for UNICEF
- Irish Committee for UNICEF
- Italian Committee for UNICEF
- Johannahuset
- Kinder- & Jugendanwaltschaft Oberösterreich
- Largo, Romania
- Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society
- Mino Denmark
- National Coalition Germany - Network for the Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child
- National Network for Children, Bulgaria
- National Federation of Association for Child Protection - France
- National Youth Council of Ireland
- Netzwerk Kinderrechte Österreich
- Ombudsman for Children, Ireland
- Polish Committee for UNICEF
- Portuguese Committee for UNICEF
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- Save the Children Italy
- Save the Children Kosovo
- Save the Children Netherlands
- Save the Children Romania
- Save the Children Spain
- Slovene Committee for UNICEF
- Slovenian NGO Network ZIPOM
- Spanish Committee for UNICEF
- Swedish Committee for UNICEF
- Swiss Committee for UNICEF
- Together, Scotland
- Union of societies "Our Children" of Croatia
- UNICEF Albania
- UNICEF Bulgaria
- UNICEF Europe and Central Asia
- UNICEF Kosovo Programme
- UNICEF Romania
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- World Vision France
- World Vision Spain
- World Vision Ireland
- World Vision Romania

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# Executive summary

The perspectives and priorities of more than 10,000 children and young people, from within and outside the European Union (EU), are expressed powerfully throughout this report. While each child's life is unique, together the children provide a coherent and insistent set of messages that speak to being a child in 2020. They testify, yet again, to the imperative of listening to what children say and building economic, social, legal and policy frameworks that place the realization of their human rights at the centre of the work of the EU. Many common and urgent themes emerge: a third of the children and young people have experienced discrimination or exclusion; many are denied access to vital services; the education system is failing to meet the aspirations and expectations of too many children; high levels of violence continue in children's lives; and there is still a failure to listen to, respect and take into account children's views. And in all areas, children from the most marginalized groups face the gravest challenges.

Perhaps the most pressing finding, however, is that a fifth of children in the EU are growing up unhappy and anxious for the future. The causes are many and complex, but they are clearly linked to the lack of respect for and protection of children's rights. They highlight with great force that we are failing to create environments for optimum childhoods for far too many children. It is a clarion call for action. The findings do not provide all the answers, but they highlight the questions that point in the right direction, and that journey must be taken in partnership with children. Not only do children have a right to be heard, but their expertise and experience are a vital dimension in working towards a future in which their rights are respected. This report offers critical evidence to inform the EU policy agenda. It needs to be heard and acted on in both the

EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee.

## Knowing our rights

Encouragingly, **almost all respondents have heard about child rights**. A wide differentiation, however, emerges in their experience of how those rights are respected. Overall, most children feel that parents and, to a lesser extent, teachers, do respect them. The picture is less rosy when it comes to the wider society or other professionals, such as social workers, police or legal professionals, with only one in four children experiencing regard for their rights in these contexts.

## A Europe where everyone is included

One of the most worrying findings in this report is that **one in three children in the EU have experienced some form of differential treatment**, with girls far more likely to highlight not being treated equally. **More than half of children with disabilities (physical, intellectual, sensory or autism) or migrants, asylum seekers, ethnic minorities or identifying as LGBTQ+ have experienced some form of differential treatment<sup>1</sup>**. The findings testify to a keen sensitivity among the respondents towards issues of discrimination, even if they themselves do not experience it. Children commented on how they have seen other children face differential treatment or bullying as a result of multiple factors including race or ethnicity, gender (identity), sexual orientation, disability, school grades, religion, appearance, socio-economic background, language or place of residence (including living in care). School emerges as the environment where children face most differential treatment, with bullying from both teachers and students being raised as pressing concerns.

<sup>1</sup>Only 52.8 per cent of ethnic minority group children, 43.4 per cent of children with disabilities and 26.9 per cent of LGBTQ+ children say they were not treated differently than other children. Some of these findings are also reflected in the European Fundamental Rights Agency's recent [large-scale survey with LGBTQ+ minorities](#), including children and young people.

## Children engaging and being heard

Children want to be heard and to feel that adults listen to their views, experiences and priorities. This message emerges as a powerful demand from respondents from all countries and all backgrounds. The findings reveal that this happens far too rarely. While parents emerge as the adults most likely to listen to children, only around half of the respondents report that this happens regularly. Professionals, such as teachers, social workers and health professionals, are seen by some respondents as open to listening to children's views. However, although there is some variation across the different professions, only between one to two fifths are seen to regularly consult children. Furthermore, **more than half of the respondents from the EU feel they are never consulted by more distant authorities such as the local municipality or authority, the national government or the EU.** When reflecting on whether their opinion has made a difference, many respondents indicate that it depends on the topic. Interestingly, this is an area where some differences emerge from within and outside the EU. **The vast majority of the respondents from the EU express that their participation often does not make a difference.** By contrast, children in the wider European region view their participation more positively, with almost one in four feeling that their participation has made a difference.

## Growing up healthy

The experience of access to information related to health and well-being varies between age groups and across different aspects of health. Unsurprisingly, given that the data were gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic, children indicate that they are provided with more information related to hygiene safety than other areas of health and risk behaviour, such as the use of alcohol and tobacco, and sexual or mental health. However, in respect of information about these areas, there is a marked increase in access as children get older. For example, over 80 per cent of 17-year-olds in the EU report having access to information about sexual health compared with only a third among 11-year-olds.

**Nearly a third of children within the EU indicate that they lack access to all the health services they need,** with children from minority groups – including those who are migrant or LGBTQ+, with disabilities or from ethnic minorities – facing far greater difficulties. Children whose parents are not employed also document more significant barriers in accessing services. Respondents from the wider European region are more likely to report challenges in accessing services than their EU peers.

Mental health emerges as a widespread and significant concern. **Almost 1 in 10 respondents from the EU identifies as living with mental health problems or symptoms such as depression or anxiety, with girls far more at risk than boys, and older children reporting higher levels of problems than younger children.** Feelings of sadness or unhappiness are even more common, with **one in five respondents feeling sad or unhappy most of the time.** Yet again, children from minority groups fare far worse. For example, nearly half of LGBTQ+ children and a third of children with disabilities say they feel sad or unhappy most of the time. The causes presented for these alarming rates of mental health problems are complex but include anxiety about the future, bullying and challenges in coping with school. Interestingly, **respondents in the wider European region report feeling sad or unhappy less often than their peers in the EU.** That said, the reasons they describe for any mental health problems are broadly similar, with the notable exception that these children reveal greater anxieties about their families.

## Healthy food for a healthy body

Access to healthy food emerges as a greater problem for children from the wider European region where fewer have access to school meals and almost a quarter report that they only sometimes have enough to eat at home. By contrast, most respondents within the EU receive lunch at school and a higher proportion report having enough to eat at home. Nevertheless, it is a matter of concern that **even within the EU, potentially a fifth of children have inadequate access to food at times,** with the COVID-19 crisis intensifying the problem.

Notably, the most vulnerable group of children are from families of asylum seekers and those whose parents do not work. In both cases, higher rates of food insecurity are reported.

### Learning and developing skills for the future

It is encouraging to note that nearly three quarters of children feel positive about school. For the remaining quarter, however, a wide range of serious challenges are highlighted. In line with other studies, children document finding lessons hard, fights between students, loneliness, prejudice from teachers and bullying as issues of real concern. And again, **children from vulnerable groups, including in particular LGBTQ+ children and those with disabilities, face the most negative experiences at school because of differential treatment.**

Poverty affects educational opportunities for many children, posing financial barriers to essential aspects of their schooling. Of the children **within the EU, for example, nearly a third experience difficulties in paying for school trips, books, afterschool activities and transport.** These challenges not only diminish their future life chances, but also contribute to an experience of stigma and social exclusion. Worryingly, this figure rises to half of children from the wider European region, and three quarters of children globally report barriers in accessing education.

The findings on the relevance and value children perceive of their education send out the most significant warning signal. A marked trend emerges indicating that as children get older, they are increasingly likely to feel that their education is not providing them with the tools and skills they need for the future. Building and sustaining friendships constitute one of the most valued aspects of school, but the curriculum content and culture of school are less rewarding for many children. They would like more emphasis on, for example, life skills, art subjects, sports and children's rights, and a greater commitment to listening to and respecting children's perspectives and views. The findings strongly suggest that **school systems do not sufficiently meet the needs of children in the 21st century.**

### Children's living environments

Although a majority of respondents indicate that their **neighbourhood is safe for play, multiple difficulties are highlighted** by many children, including a lack of good public transportation, and, for girls in particular, no provision of relevant activities and dangers associated with going out at night. Indeed, all minorities report night-time dangers. Only a minority of children with disabilities feel that their neighbourhood is accessible.

**Overall, children from the wider European region are more critical of their living environments compared to children in the EU,** and those from outside Europe see them in an even less favourable light.

### Risks and opportunities of the digital age

Given the hugely important role that the internet plays, it is a matter of concern that nearly half the children report problems in relation to connectivity. The most common issues identified include concerns about privacy, the price of devices and a poor signal at home. It should be noted that if half of the children responding to the survey report barriers to accessing the internet, these challenges are likely to be even more pronounced among children who were not able to respond because of lack of connectivity. For example, a third of children in Romania have no access to online learning<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, the responses are likely to be skewed towards those without connection difficulties. Unsurprisingly, children from countries outside Europe face more significant barriers to accessing the internet.

However, on a more positive note, and contrary to much popular opinion, children do not report experiencing upsetting or distressing events online very frequently, although it is more common for girls and the likelihood of exposure increases with age. Less than a third of girls have experienced troubling online content compared with a fifth of boys, although for LGBTQ+ children, the exposure rises to nearly half facing upsetting incidents at least every month.

<sup>2</sup> Eurochild (2020), [Growing up in lockdown: Europe's children in the age of COVID-19](#).



## Play, arts and culture

**Nearly a quarter of the children from the EU report that sometimes they do not participate in play, sports, cultural or arts activities because their parents cannot afford them**, rising to half of children from many marginalized groups, including migrant children and those with disabilities<sup>3</sup>. Such exclusion has profound implications for children's overall development, social opportunities and self-esteem. The picture is more troubling for children outside the EU, where nearly half indicate being excluded from such activities because of financial constraints.

## A childhood free of violence

The consultation process focused not on children's actual experience of violence but, rather, their perspectives on what actions are needed to address violence. **Better support to victims of violence** is given most emphasis, with strong support for many other measures including better legislation and school programmes on addressing violence, and changes in attitudes towards children with a greater willingness by adults to listen to them. **Children also express frustration of lack of action on preventing bullying in school**. Previous child consultations affirm the priority that children attach to the importance of tackling violence against them in the home, at school, in the neighbourhood and online. The COVID-19 crisis has made action on violence against children even more pressing, with emerging research indicating that the impact of the pandemic may have exposed up to 85 million more girls and boys worldwide to physical, sexual, and/or emotional violence in the first three months of the lock-down<sup>4</sup>.

## A climate for future generations

Only **25 per cent of respondents in the EU think that the EU should prioritize climate action to protect child rights**. This figure is

lower than findings in other recent surveys that reveal children placing a very high priority on measures to address climate change and the wider green transition<sup>5</sup>.

## The impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on the lives of children globally. On the negative side, children highlight missing their friends during lockdowns, **being bored, missing their teachers (particularly young children), stress related to money, conflict with parents and family members, mental health problems, fear about getting behind in studies and fear about the future**. Older respondents also report spending too much time on social media and lacking space in the home. These challenges are intensified for many children from minority groups. However, there have been unexpected benefits for many children, such as having more time with their family, being able to do schoolwork at their own speed, and engaging more in creative activities.

The challenges appear to have been greater for children outside the EU. They document many of the same challenges and positives, but a greater proportion highlight that the pandemic is the most difficult experience in their lives right now. Concerns about money is a dominant issue, affecting a quarter of these children because of the economic impact of COVID-19. However, the financial impacts of the pandemic can be felt in the lives of children in the EU as well – as a result, in some EU countries, placements in alternative care are expected to increase by as much as 30 per cent since the onset of the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> From learning loss to violence, the pandemic is likely to have multiple long-term impacts on the lives of children, both within the EU and globally. It is estimated that 150 million additional children will fall into poverty because of the economic impact of COVID-19<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Similar findings have been found in a UNICEF [U-Report survey to young migrants](#) in Europe in December 2017, where only 47 per cent of respondents said they were involved in recreational activities where they live.

<sup>4</sup> World Vision (2020), [Our Research, Our Rights. Ending violence against children through the lens of child researchers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Indonesia, Nicaragua, Romania and Sierra Leone](#), and World Vision (2020), [A perfect storm: Millions more children at risk of violence under lockdown and into the 'new normal'](#). Recently, more connections have been made on the [devastating links between increased violence against children and climate change](#).

<sup>5</sup> See UNICEF U-Report poll on climate change, July 2020, and U-Report poll ahead of the COP25 meeting, November 2018. See also World Vision (2020), ['Talk less and act more, the world needs help': Children front and centre of climate action](#).

<sup>6</sup> Eurochild (2020), [Growing up in lockdown: Europe's children in the age of COVID-19](#).

<sup>7</sup> Save the Children and UNICEF (2020), [Impact of COVID-19 on multidimensional child poverty](#).

# Recommendations

## Overall recommendations

**Equity and equality, education and protection from violence, as well as child protection and child participation, should be the cornerstones of focus for the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee.** They should include clear mechanisms and targets on how the two will substantially address legal, policy and spending gaps in these areas, both internally and externally.

Hence, we are calling the European Commission to promote children's rights in the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee and ensure that the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee prioritize:

- **Equal treatment for all children with particular attention to children in vulnerable situations.** According to children's feedback from EU Member States and third countries, it is clear that both the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee should focus on promoting children's rights and ensuring that children grow up in inclusive societies. According to the results from this study, it seems that children with disabilities, LGBTQ+ children, children in migration, children belonging to ethnic minorities and children growing up in low-income families are the ones most often discriminated against. Both frameworks should pay attention to these groups of children. They should prioritize closing the EU legal non-discrimination gap and urge EU Member States and partner countries to prioritize the rights of the most vulnerable children in national policy and legislation, ensuring that all children enjoy treatment equal to how their peers are treated. In particular, the Child Guarantee should urge EU Member States to take all appropriate measures to secure these children's equal access to free health care, decent housing, adequate nutrition, free education, free early childhood education and care, and leisure activities. Finally, and as an outcome from the results of this study, children without parental care should be particularly supported. The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee should call on EU Member States and partner countries to take all appropriate measures to strengthen families and prevent children's admission to the child protection system, unless this is in the best interest of the child. Once in the care system, children should be placed in quality family-based or family-like environments in which they receive individualized care.
- **Equal access to quality education for all children from early childhood education and care until secondary education.** Education should be free for all children and, whenever needed, children should be supported to participate equally in the educational procedure. Education should also be of good quality. Children should be consulted on the lessons provided in schools and their views should shape the education curriculum. School settings should also provide children with a safe environment to learn and should promote an inclusive culture. Schools should adopt a zero-tolerance approach towards bullying. Teachers, as well as other professionals, should be trained to protect children in the school environment. Children with disabilities as well as children in migration should be supported in following mainstream education.

- **Measures to stop violence against children.** Protecting children from all forms of violence should be considered a cornerstone of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child should call on the European Commission and EU Member States, as well as partner countries, to ban all forms of violence against children and prioritize combatting violence against children in EU and national legislation and policies. EU Member States and partner countries should design and implement programmes aimed at preventing violence against children or in supporting children to recognize and report incidents of violence. Child protection systems must be strengthened to provide individualized support to child victims of violence.
- **Children's participation in decision making.** Child participation must be embedded in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee. Both frameworks should call on EU Member States and partner countries to develop structures that will allow children's meaningful participation in decision-making procedures. The European Commission should also develop relevant mechanisms that will allow children in the most vulnerable situations to participate in decision-making procedures.
- **Children's access to mental-health support.** Almost 1 in 10 respondents to this survey report living with mental health problems such as depression or anxiety, and a fifth of respondents indicate that they feel sad most of the time. Children have reported that they feel this way due to stress to perform well at school, stress over their future, and difficult relationships with family and friends, often due to discrimination. The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee should urge EU Member States and partner countries to address the significant barriers faced by discriminated groups with higher risks of mental health needs and to direct financial resources towards strengthening mental health services and ensuring that they are free, accessible and of good quality. EU Member States and partner countries should also invest in preventive measures, such as supporting children's access to sports and leisure activities, and in education systems that are inclusive and promote acceptance. Finally, both frameworks should call on EU Member States and partner countries to design and deliver awareness-raising activities to tackle stigma around mental health problems.

## Knowing our rights

Most of the children, in particular in the older age range, have heard about children's rights, but they do not feel that their rights are largely respected by adults, in particular by professionals in society. In other focus group consultations with children<sup>8</sup>, there were similar findings and children called for better child rights education for children and professionals.

The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child should call on:

- EU Member States and partner countries to provide child rights education in schools and preschool settings. This could form part of civic education classes. Professionals working with children should receive training and be fully aware of children's rights and ways of promoting them.
- The European Commission to invest more in its communication tools to reach children and inform them about how the EU protects and promotes children's rights. EU communication should target children directly, not just adults, in its internal and external communication.

<sup>8</sup> RAND Europe and Eurochild (2021, forthcoming), European Commission Study on children's participation in the EU political and democratic life.





## A Europe where everyone is included

The prevalence of discrimination and unequal treatment testified to by the children in this consultation is not new information and has been corroborated by many in-depth and large-scale research reports, for example by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. It is in line with previous child consultations<sup>9</sup> conducted by the participating organizations, which show that discrimination is a decisive factor impeding the realization of fundamental children's rights.

The EU has a legal basis and mandate (e.g. EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, EU non-discrimination directives) to address inequalities based on the factors mentioned by the children. The existing legal gaps need to be closed urgently, and the child focus of existing mechanisms should be reviewed:

- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child should emphasize the need to enlarge the EU's policy and legal possibilities to address discrimination against children. The non-discrimination directives must be extended horizontally and be more child focused. Children reinforce the need to focus on equality and equity in EU action. Existing non-discrimination legislation should provide more child-specific mechanisms.
- The Child Guarantee should ensure that children from minorities, children in migration, children with disabilities, children growing up in poverty and children growing up in the alternative care system – who are, as the results of this study would suggest, often the ones most discriminated against – have access to the same quality and inclusive key service areas as their peers.
- Accordingly, the Child Guarantee should call on EU Member States to design a wide spectrum of programmes, from strengthening existing services to awareness-raising activities and education to breaking stereotypes and supporting parents in providing for their children, with the aim of supporting children in vulnerable situations to enjoy the same rights as all other children.

<sup>9</sup>World Vision (2017), [Will you hear us? It takes listening to children to end violence against them.](#)

## Children engaging and being heard

The case for giving urgent attention to the concerns raised by children in this report are powerful. First, being heard and taken seriously is a fundamental right of every child. Second, the findings affirm those raised in many other consultations and constitute a growing and insistent demand from children. Third, strengthening awareness of and commitment to democratic institutions and processes through the experience of meaningful participation is an ever more pressing need in today's world. And finally, effective decision making in respect of laws, policies and services cannot be achieved without being directly informed by children themselves. The distress and suffering documented throughout this report is testimony to the failures in getting these things right for children. Accordingly, we would make the following recommendations:

- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee should each include a specific reference to the need, key methodologies and definition of meaningful, rights-based child participation, strongly encouraging more accountability to children and more consultation and participation in EU processes.<sup>10</sup>
- Both initiatives should call on the European Commission as well as EU Member States to develop structures that will support the meaningful participation of children in the most vulnerable situations in decision making. At least 20 per cent or a minimum percentage of vulnerable and marginalized children should be included in each EU child participation mechanism.
- Both initiatives should call on EU Member States and third countries to direct financial resources and ensure meaningful and child-rights-based participation in decision-making processes at local, national and EU levels.
- Both initiatives should call for strong and compulsory accountability and feedback mechanisms for children after they have participated in decision-making processes.
- EU Member States and third countries should invest in teacher training and in awareness raising activities about children's participation in decision making.

On the Child Guarantee, EU Member States should

- Ensure that children – especially those in vulnerable situations – participate in the development as well as the monitoring and evaluation of the multiannual national strategies and the Child Guarantee Action Plans.<sup>11</sup>

On the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, EU Member States should

- Ensure rights-based, meaningful and inclusive participation of children in decision-making processes that affect their lives at local, national and EU levels and in partner countries dedicated to the participation of vulnerable, marginalized and younger children.
- Ensure children from EU Member States and third countries are involved in discussions related to implementing the Strategy.

<sup>10</sup> See also the [Joint Position Paper on a Comprehensive EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#), July 2020.

<sup>11</sup> As proposed by the European Commission in its [road map proposal for the Child Guarantee](#).



## Growing up healthy

The levels of unhappiness highlighted in this consultation give cause for grave concern and prompt a range of questions that need to be addressed. For example, does the scale of mental health problems cited reflect a significant rise in the actual levels of unhappiness, or could it be explained by children now having a greater language through which to articulate their emotions, along with more acceptance and less stigma? Do changes in social attitudes and awareness provide any explanation for differences in different regions of the world? Are there wider social changes in children's lives, for example, lengthier periods of economic dependency, greater disparities in wealth, more educational pressures, exposure to social media, a sense of vulnerability in the face of climate change, changes in family structures, or increased aspirations that affect well-being? Certainly, the scale of the problem implies a need for more than the improved provision of mental health services, important though that is. It demands a far deeper investigation into the underlying causes.

- The Child Guarantee should address access to free health care and community-based support services, including mental health provision, in particular for children in the most vulnerable situations and their families, and recognize the role of schools and social and community services in offering children the support they need. It should call on EU Member States to:
  - » Direct EU financial resources and national budgets to strengthen national health care, education and social care services and structures, ensuring that children in vulnerable situations have access to free health care and access to community-based mental health and psychosocial support.
  - » Provide financial support to low-income families, ensuring extra costs of health-care provision and medication are covered.
  - » Support low-income families in accessing extra health support, such as children's access to specialized support (e.g. speech therapists). Often these services are facilitated through schools and social services.
  - » Design and deliver health-care services within school settings for all children (annual health screenings as well as in-house mental-health support).
  - » Ensure that children in rural areas have access to the health care they need. Ensure frequent doctors' visits in these areas and facilitate children's access to urban areas to seek specialized support when needed.
  - » Address the significant barriers of discriminated groups with higher risks of mental health needs and less support resources (for example, children with disabilities, children in migration suffering from severe distress, children exposed to violence, and LGBTQ+).
  - » Direct financial resources to awareness-raising activities to tackle stigma around mental health problems. Children should be informed of services and resources should be directed to ensure that children in need have access to free-of-charge mental health and psychosocial services.
  - » Direct efforts to understanding the underlying causes of children's mental health problems to design effective strategies to combat them.



- Access to health services free of discrimination and financial barriers should be addressed in the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. The Strategy should call on:
  - » Partner countries to invest EU financial resources (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), The Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)) and national budgets in children's access to affordable, accessible and gender-sensitive health care and mental-health support.
  - » Partner countries to invest in awareness-raising activities about children's access to health care and mental-health support.
  - » The European Commission to ensure that at least 20 per cent of all EU official development assistance is spent on human development, including access to health care and nutrition, with a focus on reaching children so they can survive, thrive and develop their potential.

## Healthy food for a healthy body

- The Child Guarantee should call on EU Member States to:
  - » Provide universal, free healthy school meals and/or free fruit and vegetables in early childhood education and care and in primary and secondary education. In the case that the provision of the meals cannot be universal, make sure that the meals provided to children in need are given in a non-stigmatizing way.
  - » Support parents in need through non-stigmatizing financial benefits or through in-kind support to provide nutritious meals to their children. Support should also be accompanied by information about healthy eating habits and healthy ways of cooking.
  - » Design and deliver public awareness-raising campaigns about the benefits of healthy eating.
  - » Restrict the sale and marketing of unhealthy food products in and around schools.
  - » Promote a healthy eating culture inside school and include educational activities on healthy food in school curricula.
- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child should call for EU external relations to place more emphasis on concrete action plans for nutrition and not reduce investment.







## Learning and developing skills for the future

- The Child Guarantee should call on EU Member States to:
  - » Direct EU financial resources and national budgets to strengthen education systems and ensure that early childhood education and care and education are free and accessible to all, especially to children with disabilities, children growing up in poverty, children growing up in segregated environments (e.g. Roma children, children growing up in institutional care settings) and children in rural areas.
  - » Invest in infrastructure, staff recruitment, budgetary formulae and teacher training to support the access of children with disabilities in mainstream education – from early childhood education and care to secondary and vocational education.
  - » Ensure that families – especially those in vulnerable situations – are not burdened with extra or hidden costs (e.g. school trips, books, meals). When this is not possible, low-income families must be financially supported in a non-stigmatizing way to pay for any additional costs (for example, school trips, supplementary meals) that they cannot afford.
  - » Address the issue of quality education, not only access to it. Education settings must provide children with education material that is relevant to their needs. Children should be supported in sharing their views regarding the school curricula and their views should be considered.
  - » Address the issue of equity and school safety for girls and boys. All children, no matter their gender, sexual orientation or background, should participate equally in education. Education settings must be inclusive, and children must feel safe in their schools. Schools should adopt anti-bullying strategies and teachers and other professionals working in education settings must be trained in creating an inclusive environment for all children and supporting children in vulnerable situations.
  - » Support children in accessing free extra-curricular activities within the school setting, such as free educational support. This can be especially helpful for children that do not have the resources to receive private tutoring after school.
  - » Support children in accessing good quality distance learning. As seen from the results of the study, especially for children in vulnerable situations, distance learning education is often impossible. Member States must support low-income families in purchasing IT equipment or support them by covering costs for an internet connection. Distance learning must be inclusive and adapted to the needs of children with disabilities. They must be supported in accessing distance learning as they have been particularly affected by the closure of schools.
  - » Adapt early childhood education and care and education to help parents maintain their work or find employment.



- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child should call on:
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to address the relevance of education and the large number of children who find that school curricula do not correspond to what they need for life.
  - » EU Member States to prioritize the quality of teaching and learning over study hours. Recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies<sup>12</sup> have demonstrated that long study hours do not correlate with good learning outcomes. Children should be empowered to share their views on the school curriculum.
  - » EU Member States, partner countries and the European Commission services to direct EU financial resources and national budgets to strengthen education systems, ensuring that all children, especially those at risk of dropping out, equally participate in formal education. Financial resources should also be directed to strengthening children's access to online education.
  - » European Commission and partner countries to commit to prioritizing, expanding and continually support education in emergencies.

<sup>12</sup> OECD (2018), [PISA 2018. Insights and interpretations.](#)



## Children's living environments

It was difficult to reach children in most vulnerable situations due to COVID-19 and time restrictions as well as a lack of IT equipment or internet connectivity that children growing up in poverty or social exclusion face. In the results of the consultation, 96 per cent of children interviewed in the EU live with their parents and 89 per cent live at home. However, this sample does not represent children in certain vulnerable situations across the EU. Many children inside and outside the EU grow up homeless, on the streets, in institutional care settings or in inadequate housing conditions, and children with disabilities live in places that are not always accessible. Therefore, to ensure that the recommendations in this study also cover children in need, we have included recommendations that correspond to the needs of children in most vulnerable situations that do not live in adequate housing together with their parents.

- The Child Guarantee must call on EU Member States to:
  - » Support low-income families and minority groups financially and with in-kind support to maintain their house or to advance their living conditions.
  - » Financially support families with children with disabilities to adjust their living space so it is fully accessible.
  - » Invest in social housing. Parents with children must be prioritized in accessing social housing. Social housing should not be constructed in segregated areas.
  - » Make sure that parents with children at risk of eviction or already homeless are not placed in homeless shelters but in temporary accommodation that resembles a family environment, until a permanent solution is found.
  - » Support children in accessing housing while they transition from the alternative care system to independent living. Provide children with financial benefits and/or free-of-charge housing along with counselling/guidance services.
  - » Support the transition from institutional to family- and community-based care. Make sure that children are placed in quality family-based care (e.g. foster care) or when this is in their best interest, in family-like care (e.g. small group homes). Small group homes must resemble a family environment and children should have their own room.
- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child must call on EU Member States and partner countries to:
  - » Develop policies and run services that will ensure that all children, no matter their background, have access to decent housing. Child victims of violence, children in institutional and alternative care as well as children in conflict with the law should be further supported through targeted measures, ensuring that they have decent living conditions and are not placed in segregated or stigmatizing settings.
  - » Recognize the vulnerability of girls in the public sphere and develop policies to respond to their feeling of safety.





## Play, leisure and culture

- The Child Guarantee should call on EU Member States to:
  - » Address accessibility of leisure and cultural activities for children from low-income families and children in migration/belonging to ethnic minority groups, both as rights in and of themselves and as a means to strengthen children's mental health and overall well-being.
  - » Direct EU financial resources and national budgets to design and provide leisure activities free of charge for all children at the local level and especially in municipalities with low-income families.
  - » Develop free-of-charge extra-curricular activities in education settings, allowing all children to participate in them.
  - » Provide parents non-stigmatizing extra financial support to give children access to extra-curricular activities.
  - » Set proper benchmarks and standards, emphasizing the public health impact of safety and access to appropriate sport and leisure.
- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child should acknowledge the importance of children's access to play and leisure activities as a key element of children's overall well-being and based on Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and should call on EU Member States and partner countries to invest more in safe environments and leisure access.



## Risks and opportunities of the digital age

- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child must address the issue of children's safety in the online world. It should call on the:
  - » European Commission, EU Member States and partner countries to take all measures necessary to ensure that children's rights are protected online.
  - » European Commission, EU Member States and partner countries to advance their legislation and policies to safeguard and promote children's rights in the online world. EU regulations and national legislation concerning children must be reviewed, considering children's rights and their protection in the digital world.
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to safeguard children's data and use them in a transparent way in full respect of the best interests of the child. Tech companies must be monitored regularly and should be held accountable for how they collect and process children's data.
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to empower and enable tech companies to contribute to protecting children from online sexual abuse while respecting children's rights.
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to promote children's education in media literacy, in accessing the digital world, in recognizing online threats, inappropriate behaviours and disinformation, and in protecting themselves. Teachers as well as parents should be informed and trained in empowering children in recognizing their digital rights and protecting themselves in the digital environment.
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to emphasize the protection of children belonging to minority groups. Girls should be further protected.
  - » European Commission to place stronger emphasis on urging online platforms, games and apps to address children's rights, including privacy and safety by design.
  - » The European Commission to put children's participation and empowerment at the heart of EU policies (e.g. Updated Skills Agenda for Europe) and initiatives (Safer Internet Days and the Safer Internet Forum) and ensure that children in vulnerable situations also have their voices heard.
- The Child Guarantee should call on:
  - » EU Member States to support children in accessing the digital world. Children in vulnerable situations should be provided with free IT equipment and families should be supported with lower charges for internet provision.

## A childhood free of violence

Globally, violence against children is prevalent – in the home, at and on the way to school and in the neighbourhood, as well as through violent conflicts. According to long-term studies, World Vision estimates that more than 1 billion children around the world experience violence every year. UNICEF has estimated that 300 million children experience violent discipline from their caregivers regularly.<sup>13</sup> Extensive child consultations, including research led by children across Europe and globally, reiterate that ending violence against them in the home, at school and in the neighbourhood, including cyber bullying, is identified by children as a key priority.<sup>14</sup>

Research also shows that COVID-19 measures may have exposed up to 85 million more girls and boys worldwide to physical, sexual and/or emotional violence in the first three months of the lockdown. World Vision predicts that many of the 13 million extra child marriages alerted to UNFPA will occur in the time immediately following the crisis, with at least 4 million more girls married in the next two years and many never returning to school.<sup>15</sup>

Ending violence against children is one of the key concerns raised by the children consulted. The European Commission must make the eradication of all forms of violence against children a cornerstone of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and should call on:

- EU Member States and partner countries to take all appropriate measures to ban all forms of corporal punishment against children, and to explicitly condemn and commit to ending harmful practices, including child labour, child trafficking, gender-based violence, female genital mutilation, and early and forced child marriage.
- EU Member States and partner countries to promote anti-bullying strategies. Teachers and professionals working at schools should be educated in a zero-tolerance approach towards school bullying and in ways of preventing it.
- EU Member States and partner countries to invest in a child protection system-strengthening approach, including prevention and early intervention to tackle all forms of violence against children.
- EU Member States and partner countries to develop and implement programmes that will better support child victims of violence, in line with the EU's Victims' Rights Directive
- The European Commission to adopt or strengthen the implementation of policy frameworks that will contribute to preventing violence against children or supporting child victims of violence. For example, the new strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse and the New EU Strategy towards the Eradication of Trafficking in Human Beings can play a significant role in addressing violence against children.
- EU Member States and third countries to develop or strengthen national legislation on preventing violence against children and fully implement the above-mentioned EU policies.

<sup>13</sup> UNICEF (2017): [A Familiar Face: Violence in the lives of children and adolescents](#).

<sup>14</sup> See for example World Vision (2020): [Our Research, Our Rights, Ending violence against children through the lens of child researchers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Indonesia, Nicaragua, Romania and Sierra Leone](#).

<sup>15</sup> World Vision (2020): [A perfect storm: Millions more children at risk of violence under lockdown and into the 'new normal'](#). Recently, more connections have also been made on the [devastating links between increased violence against children and climate change](#).

## A climate for future generations

Children's voices on climate change in this consultation are quite limited in number and cannot be representative. Yet, both in the EU and globally, we see an unprecedented amount of child activism on climate change concerns. There is no doubt that a significant number of children want to be active and want to be heard on the future of the planet, which is their future. On the other hand, global climate change discussions and policies rarely include a focus on the indirect impacts of climate change on children's lives and their rights, or make child activism heard. The EU, given its new priorities on the European Green Deal internally and in external action, could set a signal on creating a stronger child focus in its climate change approaches and initiatives.

- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child should call on:
  - » The European Commission to mainstream children's rights in all EU policies relevant to fighting climate change and protecting the environment.
  - » The European Commission to develop formal mechanisms to support children's and young people's rights-based participation in discussions and decision making on climate change.
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to advance their efforts to protect the environment and tackle climate change and mainstream children's rights in upcoming or existing relevant legislation and policies.
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to develop or strengthen awareness-raising activities related to climate change and environmental protection. Countries should examine the possibility of adding education material to school curricula related to environmental protection, climate change and its impact on children and future generations, and ways to act.
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to mainstream children's participation in decision-making procedures. Children should be empowered to meaningfully participate in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of relevant climate and environmental policies.
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to direct EU financial resources and national budgets to communities affected by climate change so they can adapt their living conditions.



## The impact of COVID-19

- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee should call on:
  - » The European Commission, EU Member States and partner countries to focus on any public health crisis response and its effects on children. Children often bear the brunt of the negative, indirect impact of COVID-19 measures that exasperate inequalities, increase violence, threaten livelihoods and have taken millions of children out of school, of which many, particularly girls, will never return. The European Commission, EU Member States and partner countries should analyse the effects of planned COVID (or other health) measures on children from the beginning and design measures to ameliorate the negative impact on children.
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to adopt measures to mitigate experiences of increasing poverty and inequality caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. EU Member States and partner countries should take measures to ensure that online education is accessible to all, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. National authorities should also ensure that children continue to receive the support that they used to receive when schools were open. For example, some children have gone hungry as a result of school closures. Finally, families across the world must be supported as they have already experienced increased levels of poverty due to the economic crisis caused by COVID-19.
- The Child Guarantee should call on:
  - » The European Commission and EU Member States to take an integrated approach to tackling child poverty and support children growing up in poverty to access quality and affordable services, and support parents' access to resources in line with the 2013 Investing in Children Recommendation. As indicated from the results of this study, children in migration, children from ethnic minorities and children whose parents are not working are particularly worried about their family's finances, which do not allow them to have opportunities equal to their peers'. Therefore, the European Commission should consider the strong links between parents' unemployment and access to services in its Child Guarantee proposal.
  - » European Commission and EU Member States to create synergies between the Child Guarantee and the Youth Guarantee. Many children participating in this survey are worried about jobs in the future.<sup>16</sup> Linking the Child and the Youth Guarantee could be useful to further identify and reach young people in need of support and to improve the transition from education to work.

<sup>16</sup> Children shared the same concern in the [Europe Kids Want survey](#).

# Main Report





# Introduction and rationale

In preparing for the new **Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2021–2024**, the European Commission decided to set a new standard by inviting children living in Europe and beyond to share their views and influence how the strategy would be shaped and what topics it would prioritize.

To this end, the European Commission called on five child rights organizations – UNICEF, Eurochild, Save the Children, World Vision and Child Fund Alliance – to facilitate consultations with children across Europe and beyond. The consultation was designed to also inform the European Commission's important work on the **Child Guarantee**, which seeks to ensure that every child in Europe at risk of poverty or social exclusion has access to essential public services such as health care, education, early childhood education and care, decent housing and adequate nutrition.

The consortium received no funding from the European Commission for this endeavour and has completed this report as a contribution to child-focused EU policy based on the joint mandates to propagate and facilitate meaningful child consultation and participation; reflect the voices of children directly and have them involved in the set-up and consequently the review of the consultation report; and influence the design and content of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee to address the needs and rights violations most pressing for children. The consortium reviewed the results diligently and included, where relevant, reference to its experience of working with millions of children worldwide and what other larger child consultations conducted by the organizations have highlighted. Based on its collective experience, evidence, research and policies, the consortium sought to include recommendations that reflect the voices of the children consulted and translate these impressions into measures the European Commission could adopt within its mandate.

It also made reference to the joint calls of the 29 child rights organizations gathered in the EU Child Rights Action Group (which includes the five child rights organizations tasked with this consultation), which was submitted to the European Commission in July 2020.

The children and the five child rights organizations who have prepared this report would like to express their deep gratitude to the European Commission. By inviting children to influence the new EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee, the Commission brings life and true meaning to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, especially Article 12 on children's right to participate in decision-making processes influencing their lives.

The findings in this report show that while many child rights are realized for children in Europe, some groups are left behind. Climate change, digitalization and increasing mental health problems pose new challenges to realizing child rights in Europe and beyond. Despite best efforts, in part because of COVID-19 restrictions and the limited timeframe for the consultations, reaching the hardest-to-reach children with no access to online participation forms (e.g. children living on the streets or asylum-seeking children) remained difficult outside of the focus groups that were held to inform these consultations. This is an important conclusion in and of itself and merits larger future efforts by all.

The participating children and the five child rights organizations are finalizing this report as the 31st World Children's Day is celebrated. This report, which is the product of the collaboration between the European Commission and its youngest constituents – children living in Europe – is a testimony to how far the European countries have come in fulfilling their responsibilities under the Convention on the Rights of the Child – and where there is room for improvement.

There is work ahead for all, but these consultations will be a first step in the right direction. It is hoped that this example encourages other governmental organizations and institutions to open the door for child participation and invite children and young people to contribute to decisions affecting their lives.

## **A short note on methodology**

The findings in the report are informed by consultations with around 10,000 children in the EU (approximately 82 per cent), European countries outside the EU (15 per cent) and other countries in the world (3 per cent), which took place in September and October 2020. To reach as many children and young people as possible, an online survey was launched in more than 30 countries and in 20 languages.

The survey was complemented by more than 50 in-country focus group discussions with children, both face-to-face and online, which served to gather anecdotal evidence and statements from children. A more detailed description of the methodology can be found in Annex I, and a breakdown of participation by country in Annex IV. A wide range of local offices and partners participated in organizing these consultations and in disseminating the questionnaire in their networks. A full list of all organizations involved can be found in the Acknowledgements section. In addition, World Vision organized a separate global child consultation on climate change that included questions on the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. This report includes those results.

### **Working with and for children**

The consultations with children were guided by the nine basic requirements of meaningful, safe and ethical child participation. According to these, participation must be:

1. Transparent
2. Voluntary
3. Respectful
4. Relevant
5. Child-friendly (adequate time and resources, approaches adapted to children's capacities)
6. Supported by adults with appropriate training
7. Inclusive
8. Safe and sensitive to risk
9. Accountable

To ensure children were given a voice in both the planning and implementation of the consultations, as well as in writing the report and presenting the findings to the Commission, the five organizations joined forces with children already working with UNICEF and Eurochild. This regional Child Advisory Board consists of around 20 children from European countries and has played a vital role in:

- Developing the questionnaires used for the online and focus group consultations;
- Reviewing the findings and prioritizing recommendations;
- Writing the foreword of the report;
- Presenting findings to the European Commission;
- Planning and implementing the launch of the report.

### **Working with and for ALL children**

To ensure that consultations were as inclusive as possible and that the report findings are representative and reflect the full reality of children living in Europe, special attention was paid to reaching groups of children that are often forgotten in such consultations. To this end, the five organizations identified six groups of children in vulnerable and marginalized situations, with the aim of reaching them in at least two European countries of different socio-economic context:

- Children with disabilities
- Migrant/refugee children
- Roma children
- Children in care
- LGBTQ+ children
- Children living in poverty

Consultations with these groups of children have provided in-depth insight as well as more nuanced findings and recommendations in the report.

A more detailed account of the inclusion of minorities and vulnerable groups and participation in focus group discussions can be found in Annex I.

### **Representativeness of the report findings**

When reading the report findings and recommendations, it is important to note that girls were more represented among respondents (65 per cent) than boys (30 per cent), as is the case in many consultations with children. As mentioned earlier, the overall results of these consultations represent especially the experiences of children living in the EU.

As the findings and recommendations build heavily on the online questionnaire, it is also more reflective of the views and experiences of older children (aged 11–17) who have access to the internet and who are active on platforms and in networks where the online questionnaire was disseminated.

It is important to note that the lack of access to and by higher numbers of children from vulnerable groups is in and of itself a child rights issue across the EU. **If the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee aim to be inclusive, effort must be made to explore how more vulnerable children can be reached and more access given to them to voice their opinions.**

In addition to the above-mentioned consultation channels, this report reflects inputs from other consultations and research where relevant. A full list of these resources is included at the end of the report.









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EVERYONE MUST  
KNOW CHILDREN'S  
RIGHTS

# Knowing our rights

## Knowledge of and respect for child rights

The consultations paint a positive picture of basic child rights awareness with well over **95 per cent of respondents from in and outside the EU stating that they have heard about children's rights**, and only slightly lower in the rest of the world. Girls report slightly higher levels of awareness than boys. Awareness also seems to increase slightly with age, albeit this is not consistent across age groups. Furthermore, **there are no significant differences between different groups of children apart from asylum seekers and migrants, out of whom almost 13 per cent have not heard about child rights**<sup>17</sup>. However, despite the challenges they have faced, many of them feel that their rights are better known and respected in Europe than in their countries of origin. Better access to education in Europe is mentioned as one example of this. Interestingly, some children indicate that they had heard about the concept of child rights but had little real knowledge about what they are. Some children express the view that they feel rights are better respected in Europe than elsewhere, with rights often seen as something that protects children who, for example, work or do not have access to education.

**The majority of respondents in the EU have learned about child rights in school (83 per cent), but the family (47 per cent) and online sources (44 per cent) are also important sources of information, although somewhat less so outside Europe.** Books, friends, professionals and organizations working for children are all mentioned by 10 to 15 per cent of the respondents as sources of information, with organizations playing a more significant role in the world beyond Europe. Television, social media, children's

participatory bodies (e.g. child or youth councils) and children's own initiative to learn about rights are also frequently mentioned.

**The differences among respondent groups are not significant, apart from LGBTQ+ identifying children, who seek information online more frequently than others.** The older the children, the more likely they are to find out information about child rights online.

**"I am often told about the rights. The school has a poster with the Convention. And I had a notebook where the rights were written on the back cover. This is very important for the country, this Convention."**

(Focus group participant living in care, Ukraine)

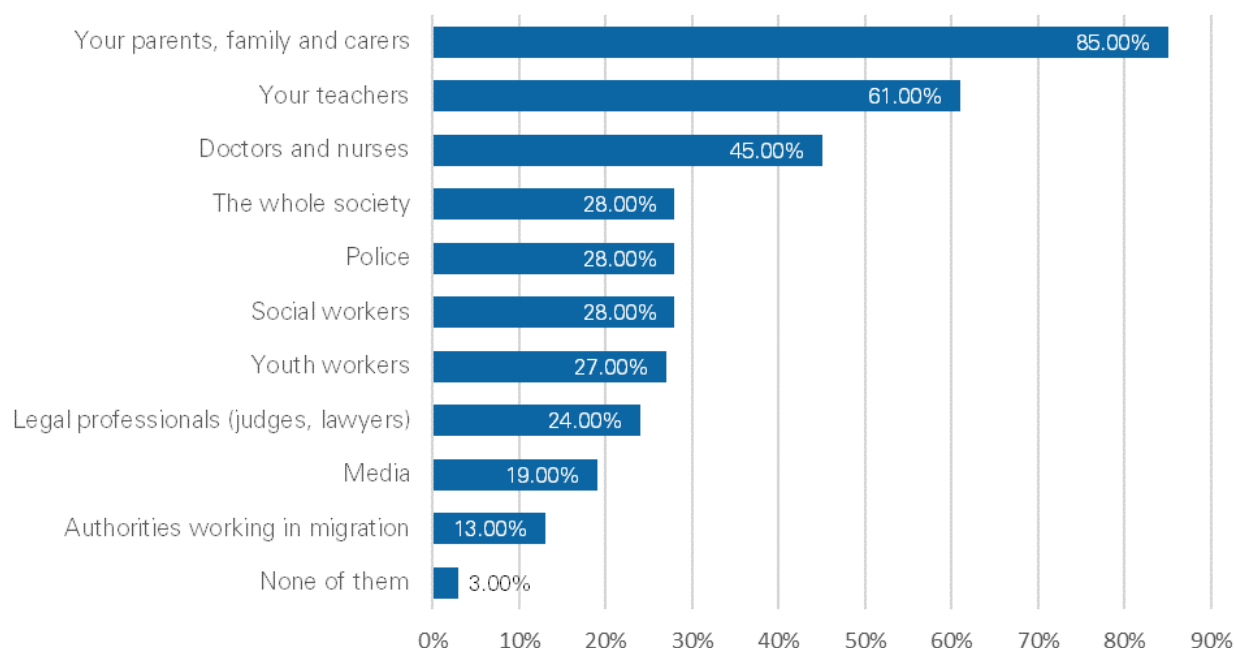
Despite these positive findings, however, children mention that their rights are rarely talked about and not well understood by adults.

Within the EU, children overall feel that parents (85 per cent) and teachers (61 per cent) respect their rights, but **only around every fourth child feels that their rights are respected by broader society**, with boys responding more favourably (33 per cent) than girls (27 per cent). Similarly, children report that other groups of professionals such as social workers, youth workers, the police, legal professionals, authorities working in migration and the media are less likely to respect their rights. Differences between different groups of children are not significant. These assessments of adults are exemplified

<sup>17</sup> Similar findings were found in UNICEF's [U-Report survey to young migrants](#) in Europe in July 2018, where the majority of respondents had not heard about the Convention nor were aware of their rights as minors.



**Chart 1. EU Countries:** In your personal life, which of the following adults respect that, as a child, you have rights? (Tick all that apply)



by the focus group discussions in Croatia, where children complain that doctors and health professionals only communicate with parents and barely speak to children. In general, comparable findings emerge in countries outside the EU. However, some differences arise. In Albania, for example, some participants refer to parents forcing their children to drop out of school to work or beg or limiting the lives of girls more than boys – sometimes because of economic necessity, sometimes because of tradition. In addition, some children are critical of the differential treatment that adults demonstrate towards children they know, including teachers and health professionals.

The relatively low levels of awareness and respect for rights may well derive from lack of child rights training for many professionals. In addition, it may reflect the nature, type and level of interaction between different professional groups and the majority of children and young people. Notably, older children tend to view different professional groups more favourably, which may indicate that they are more often addressed directly on issues concerning them than their younger peers.

## Knowledge of the EU and its work to protect child rights

Within EU countries, knowledge of the EU increases substantially with age, rising from 88 per cent of 11-year-olds to 98 per cent of 17-year-olds. However, **understanding of the role and work of the EU is limited among all children.** In focus group discussions, children mention, for example, development aid (“Campaigns to collect school supplies or food for disadvantaged countries”), and in some groups they confuse the EU with international organizations such as UNICEF. Some children express surprise about EU’s work on children’s issues (“Nobody told us, we thought the EU as only for the adults and the laws”). Those who have heard about

**“Some adults think that their opinion is the one that is correct, and they don’t listen nor respect what we are saying.”**

(Inputs from a focus group of children living in poverty, Portugal)

the EU's work are positive about it ("The EU works to help people").

Among asylum seekers, refugees and migrant children, levels of understanding and knowledge of the EU are lower than in other groups.

High levels of awareness are also found among children in the wider European region, with 93 per cent of respondents saying they know what the EU is. However, this may reflect the nature of the respondents, with children interested in the EU more likely to respond to a survey related to it. Compared to peers in the EU, children from other parts of the European region are slightly less keen to receive information related to the EU online (71 per cent) or in school materials (51 per cent), which may reflect the lesser presence and relevance of EU-related subjects.

Understandably, children outside of Europe are significantly less aware of the EU (66 per cent) compared to their European peers. Focus group discussions with children in the wider world indicate that children have very limited understanding of the concrete work that the EU does to protect child rights. Most participants have not heard about the EU's work, while some mention things such as foreign aid. Those who have heard about the EU's work are positive about it.

Children express interest in learning more about the EU's work to protect children's rights, with over 80 per cent of the respondents in the EU proposing that the internet is the most useful mechanism, while 56 per cent suggest it should be through school and 36 per cent via television. Older children are particularly interested in finding information online. Girls are slightly more interested in learning about the EU at school compared to boys. Other options proposed by respondents include social media and online platforms (e.g. YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Wikipedia, podcasts), online courses, debates and discussions between children, NGOs, excursions and youth clubs. Outside Europe, more than a third of children mention written leaflets and television as preferred sources of information about the EU, but online material is still the preferred option.

**"The EU as a force that unites many countries of the world for peace, cooperation, equality between people, funds projects for organizations working to protect the rights of children."**

(Focus group participant, Albania)

## Recommendations

Most of the children, in particular in the older age range, have heard about children's rights, but they do not feel that their rights are largely respected by adults, in particular by professionals in society. In other focus group consultations with children<sup>18</sup>, there were similar findings and children called for better child rights education for children and professionals.

- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child should call on:
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to provide child rights education in schools and preschool settings. This could form part of civic education classes. Professionals working with children should receive training and be fully aware of children's rights and ways of promoting them.
  - » The European Commission to invest more in its communication tools to reach children and inform them about how the EU protects and promotes children's rights. EU communication should target children directly, not just adults, in its internal and external communication.

<sup>18</sup> RAND Europe and Eurochild (2021, forthcoming), European Commission Study on children's participation in the EU political and democratic life.







# A Europe where everyone is included

Discrimination and exclusion are highlighted by children as a highly significant issue in the consultations in all countries. While most children within the EU report that they do not feel personally discriminated against, **one in three children has experienced some form of differential treatment.** Overall, slightly lower levels of concern are indicated in European countries outside the EU, while in the wider world, children report higher levels of discrimination. In all countries, **girls are less likely to say that they are treated the same way as other children** (62 per cent of girls compared to 75 per cent of boys in the EU). Children who do not identify either as boys or girls report even lower numbers: only 31 per cent of them feel treated the same way as other children.<sup>19</sup>

Interestingly, **older children report higher levels of differential treatment**, with the proportion rising from 54 per cent of 11-year-olds to 83 per cent of 17-years-olds. The underlying reasons are complex but may derive from greater awareness and understanding of discrimination by children as they grow older, the development of identities during adolescence that can lead to differential treatment, or more negative perceptions of adolescents within society. It may also reflect that children from minority groups responding to the survey are generally older. The most frequently mentioned reasons for differential treatment are appearance (19 per cent), gender (15 per cent), school results (8 per cent), sexual orientation (7 per cent) and mental health problems (6 per cent). Outside Europe, children also highlight appearance, gender, schoolwork

and ethnicity as the most common reasons for discriminatory treatment. Focus group participants from Ghana mention especially gender discrimination in their daily lives: household chores fall under the responsibility of girls, while boys have more free time and are able to move around freely – however, girls are sometimes paid for their labour. Children also mention that girls may be forced to drop out of school or marry, especially in rural areas.

Among children from minority groups within the EU, the experience of discrimination is consistently higher. **More than half of children with disabilities (physical, intellectual, sensory or autism) or migrants, asylum seekers, ethnic minorities or identifying as LGBTQ+ have experienced some form of differential treatment.**<sup>20</sup> For example:

- One in four children belonging to an ethnic minority has experienced being discriminated against because of race/ethnicity (24 per cent) or appearance (27 per cent).<sup>21</sup>
- LGBTQ+ children further report being discriminated against due to their sexual orientation (45 per cent), gender identity (37 per cent), mental health problems (23 per cent) or appearance (41 per cent).
- Children with disabilities have experienced differential treatment in particular because of appearance (31 per cent), their disability (21 per cent), mental health problems (21 per cent), gender (20 per cent) or school results (16 per cent).

<sup>19</sup> Some of these findings are also reflected in the European Fundamental Rights Agency's [recent large-scale survey with LGBTQ+ minorities](#), including children and young people.

<sup>20</sup> Only 53 per cent of ethnic minority group children, 43 per cent of children with disabilities and 27 per cent of LGBTQ+ children say that they are not treated differently from other children.

<sup>21</sup> Migrant children reported similar experiences of discrimination in a [UNICEF U-Report survey to young migrants in Europe in October 2018](#): 29 per cent did not feel accepted in their community, and 33 per cent reported being victims of discrimination, mostly due to skin colour or country of origin.

- Although children whose parents do not work did not stand out in overall experiences of discrimination, they are more likely to experience differential treatment because of family members not being able to cover their basic needs (9 per cent).

In European countries outside the EU, some children mention differential treatment within the family based on gender and age, where boys and older children are given more freedom and offered more opportunities than girls, as underlined by one focus group participant in the statement below.

**“I can say that I am treated differently, for example, it is a gender stereotype, only because I am a girl. Me and also other girls feel oppressed or different from boys, who are adored unconditionally.”**

(15-year-old girl, Albania)

Similarly to children in the EU, discrimination is often associated with what happens at school. Many focus group participants mention bullying in school because of looking different, ethnicity, income or coming from the countryside. As in EU countries, discrimination also happens between teachers and students, not just between children themselves.

In the focus group discussions, children were almost unanimous in reporting that not all children are treated equally. **Even if children have not experienced discrimination themselves, they identify and recognize discrimination in their own surroundings.**

Factors such as race or ethnicity, gender (identity), sexual orientation, disability, school grades (both good and bad), religion, language (or not speaking the local language) or place of residence (including living in care) are mentioned as reasons for differential treatment and bullying. A child living in care describes the unfairness of being ‘labelled’ as a problematic adolescent because of being placed in care:

**“The fact that we are in an institution says absolutely nothing about us, except that we have already experienced something in our lives.”**

(Child living in care, Slovenia)

Roma children especially highlight discrimination and prejudice. In Spain, for example, children report being divided into classes in school based on ethnicity, offered different lessons in school than other children (watching movies), being followed when they go shopping or being stopped by the police. They highlight that teachers and other professionals may also discriminate. For example, one child describes a teacher confessing to having been warned against the Roma, because they steal. Others share examples of discriminatory comments from teachers in front of their peers. They highlight that prejudice exists across all levels of society, even among friends:

**“I was with some friends, I told them that I was Roma, and they were shocked, they didn’t believe it, because they thought that Roma do nothing, and behave badly. And since I’m a good person, they didn’t think I was a Roma.”**

(Roma boy, 13, Spain)





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## Recommendations

The prevalence of discrimination and unequal treatment testified to by the children in this consultation is not new information and has been corroborated by many in-depth and large-scale research reports, for example by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. It is in line with previous child consultations<sup>22</sup> conducted by the participating organizations, which show that discrimination is a decisive factor impeding the realization of fundamental children's rights. The EU has a legal basis and mandate (e.g. EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, EU non-discrimination directives) to address inequalities based on the factors mentioned by the children. The existing legal gaps need to be closed urgently, and the child focus of existing mechanisms should be reviewed:

- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child should emphasize the need to enlarge the EU's policy and legal possibilities to address discrimination against children. The non-discrimination directives must be extended horizontally and be more child focused. Children reinforce the need to focus on equality and equity in EU action. Existing non-discrimination legislation should provide more child-specific mechanisms.
- The Child Guarantee should ensure that children from minorities, children in migration, children with disabilities, children growing up in poverty and children growing up in the alternative care system – who are, as the results of this study would suggest, often the ones most discriminated against – have access to the same quality and inclusive key service areas as their peers.
- Accordingly, the Child Guarantee should call on EU Member States to design a wide spectrum of programmes, from strengthening existing services to awareness-raising activities and education to breaking stereotypes and supporting parents in providing for their children, with the aim of supporting children in vulnerable situations to enjoy the same rights as all other children.

<sup>22</sup> World Vision (2017), [Will you hear us? It takes listening to children to end violence against them.](#)





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OPENING REMARKS

With Iratxe García Pérez, President of the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament and Laura (Ireland)



Iratxe  
García Pérez

Laura

Hawa

Maja



# Children engaging and being heard

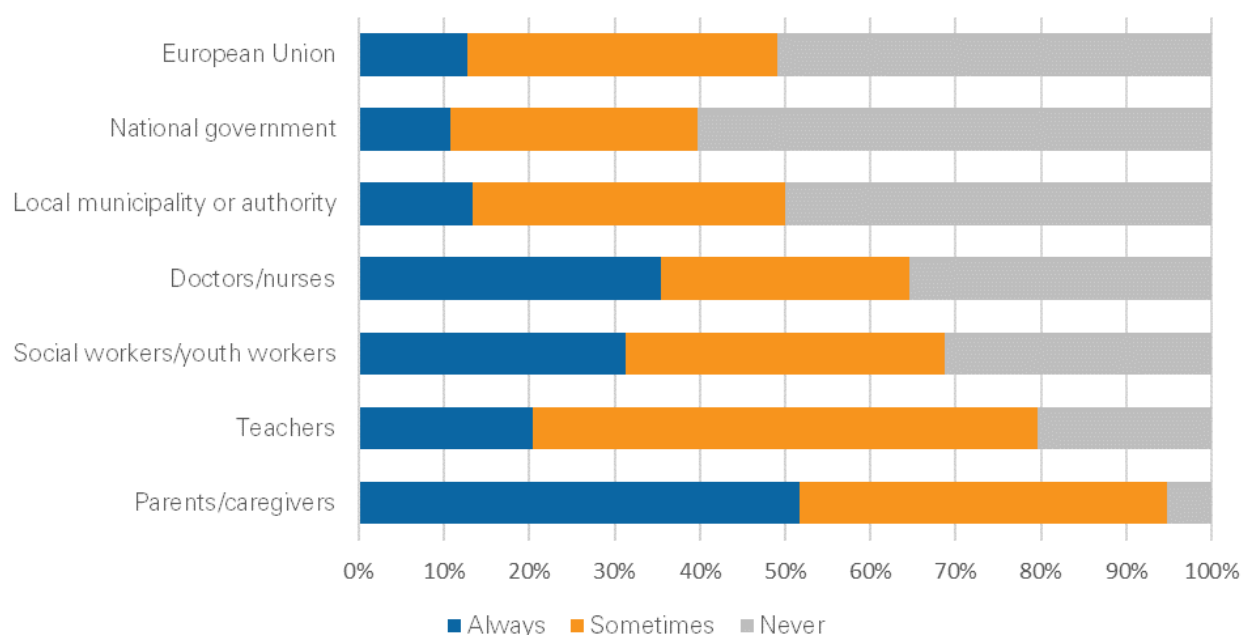
One of the most significant messages emerging from the consultations is that children from all regions want a greater say in the decisions affecting their lives. Regardless of background, **the vast majority of respondents (for example, 70 per cent in the EU) would like to participate more** if they were given the opportunity to, with girls slightly keener to be heard than boys (73 per cent versus 64 per cent), and older respondents keener than younger ones.

The extent to which this currently happens is both limited and variable. Children feel most heard by their parents, with 51.7 per cent stating that they always feel consulted and 43 per cent stating it happens sometimes. With professionals, the extent to which they are seen to consult children consistently differs, with teachers at 21 per cent, social workers 34 per cent and health professionals 47 per cent.

Discussions in focus groups confirm that, in general, children feel that their parents consult them on issues of importance to them and especially on smaller, personal decisions such as clothing. Regarding professionals, they highlight that professionals often prefer to talk to their parents rather than to them. Interestingly, children from European countries outside the EU view their engagement with professionals (such as doctors/nurses and social/youth workers) more positively.

Outside Europe, children report lower levels of being consulted. While parents are the most likely to be responsive to children's views, only 27 per cent of respondents think that their parents 'always' ask for their opinion. However, almost 40 per cent take the view that their opinion have made a difference when they have participated.

**Chart 2. EU countries:** When adults take decisions that affect you, do they ask for your opinion?





Participating organizations have conducted extensive previous consultations<sup>23</sup> with children that corroborate these results and emphasize the importance of meaningful child participation, listening to children's voices, and accountability in decision making.

**“The European Union can make policies to influence Ghana's government to empower children and ensure child participation in decision making at all levels and education of parents on the need for children to be active participants in decision making.”**

(Hawa, 15, Ghana)

A bleaker picture emerges regarding public bodies such as the local municipality or authority, the national government or the EU, with over half of respondents observing that they are never consulted. This finding is consistent across all groups within the EU and reflects evidence from previous consultations. In the Europe Kids Want survey<sup>24</sup> organized by Eurochild and UNICEF from July 2018 to June 2019, **two thirds of the children were unhappy with the way cities or towns engage with them, and almost half of the children felt they were never listened to by decision makers in their city/town.** Only 7 per cent felt they were always listened to. To this end, in 2019, the Bucharest Children's Declaration called on the EU to set up structural mechanisms to consult with children, including the most vulnerable.<sup>25</sup>

Children from the wider European region, however, paint a slightly more positive picture, with 40–45 per cent feeling that they are consulted. Between 20 to 30 per cent of children feel they are 'always' consulted by these entities, compared to 10 to 12 per cent of children living in the EU countries.

Even when children are consulted, relatively few feel that it makes a difference. Many respondents indicate that it depends on the topic. Almost 16 per cent of the respondents in the EU feel that their participation does not make any difference at all, with boys slightly more confident of their influence (20 per cent) than girls (13 per cent). Interestingly, younger children are also more likely to feel that their opinion make a difference. This figure rose to 24 per cent for European children outside the EU.

It should be noted that the European Commission has commissioned a study on child participation in EU political and democratic life, for which children in 10 EU Member States have been consulted in child focus groups. The results concur with the findings from these consultations. They are expected by the end of December 2020 and should be considered in the EU Strategy on Children's Rights. This study and other consultations with children on the impact of COVID-19<sup>26</sup> stress that many children don't think their government is listening to children when making decisions about COVID-19.

<sup>23</sup> World Vision (2016), Children and Young People's Participation: An Essential Approach for Ending Violence against Children. World Vision (2019) child-led research, From participating in research to leading it: Addressing inequalities in decision-making. World Vision (2020), Children's voices in the time of COVID-19, Continued child activism in the face of personal challenges.

<sup>24</sup> [Available online.](#)

<sup>25</sup> [Bucharest EU Children's Declaration.](#)

<sup>26</sup> Queens University Belfast and NGO partners: [#CovidUnder19 : Life Under Coronavirus – results of the survey.](#)



## Recommendations

The case for giving urgent attention to the concerns raised by children in this report are powerful. First, being heard and taken seriously is a fundamental right of every child. Second, the findings affirm those raised in many other consultations and constitute a growing and insistent demand from children. Third, strengthening awareness of and commitment to democratic institutions and processes through the experience of meaningful participation is an ever more pressing need in today's world. And finally, effective decision making in respect of laws, policies and services cannot be achieved without being directly informed by children themselves. The distress and suffering documented throughout this report is testimony to the failures in getting these things right for children. Accordingly, we would make the following recommendations:

- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee should each include a specific reference to the need, key methodologies and definition of meaningful, rights-based child participation, strongly encouraging more accountability to children and more consultation and participation in EU processes.<sup>27</sup>
- Both initiatives should call on the European Commission as well as EU Member States to develop structures that will support the meaningful participation of children in the most vulnerable situations in decision making. At least 20 per cent or a minimum percentage of vulnerable and marginalized children should be included in each EU child participation mechanism.
- Both initiatives should call on EU Member States and third countries to direct financial resources and ensure meaningful and child-rights-based participation in decision-making processes at local, national and EU levels.
- Both initiatives should call for strong and compulsory accountability and feedback mechanisms for children after they have participated in decision-making processes.
- EU Member States and third countries should invest in teacher training and in awareness raising activities about children's participation in decision making.
- On the Child Guarantee, EU Member States should
  - » Ensure that children – especially those in vulnerable situations – participate in the development as well as the monitoring and evaluation of the multiannual national strategies and the Child Guarantee Action Plans.<sup>28</sup>
- On the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, EU Member States should
  - » Ensure rights-based, meaningful and inclusive participation of children in decision-making processes that affect their lives at local, national and EU levels and in partner countries dedicated to the participation of vulnerable, marginalized and younger children.
  - » Ensure children from EU Member States and third countries are involved in discussions related to implementing the Strategy.

<sup>27</sup> See also the [Joint Position Paper on a Comprehensive EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#), July 2020.

<sup>28</sup> As proposed by the European Commission in its [road map proposal for the Child Guarantee](#).



# Quality services for all children

## Growing up healthy

### Information about health care

Overall, the findings indicate that **most children within the EU receive information about the different aspects of health and well-being listed in the questionnaire, with no significant differences among different groups of children.** In particular, children note that they receive significant levels of guidance from school and in other settings on hand washing and good hygiene in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Most children are also clearly provided with information about good, healthy nutrition. In general, children receive less information related to other areas of health and risk behaviour, including on the use of alcohol and tobacco, sexual health or mental health. However, information on these topics increases significantly with age, with, for example, 81 per cent of 17-year-olds in the EU receiving information about sexual health, compared to 35 per cent of 11-year-olds.

While children both in the wider European region and the wider world report receiving information about hygiene and nutrition at equal levels compared to children in the European Union, they report receiving information on other health-related topics such as tobacco, alcohol, sexual health and mental health much less frequently. Sexual health is an area where children report having much less knowledge, with only 32 per cent in non-EU countries in Europe indicating that they had received information about it. As a general pattern, and in all regions, it seems that children would benefit from further information and education about mental health and psychosocial well-being.<sup>29</sup>

Most of the information children receive is from parents and teachers – adults with whom children closely interact. However, teachers and parents as sources of information lose some of their importance with age, as friends and online sources play a greater role. For example, 82 per cent of 17-year-olds in the EU receive information about health online, compared to just 34 per cent of 11-year-olds. The increasing importance of online information invites further focus on ensuring that information about health available online is reliable, accessible and child friendly. By contrast with the EU, children from other European countries note that teachers play a more important role as sources of information than information available online. Far fewer children (19 per cent compared to 40 per cent in the EU) receive information from friends. Children from the wider world also report that information most often comes from parents and teachers, with online sources mentioned by almost one third of the respondents.

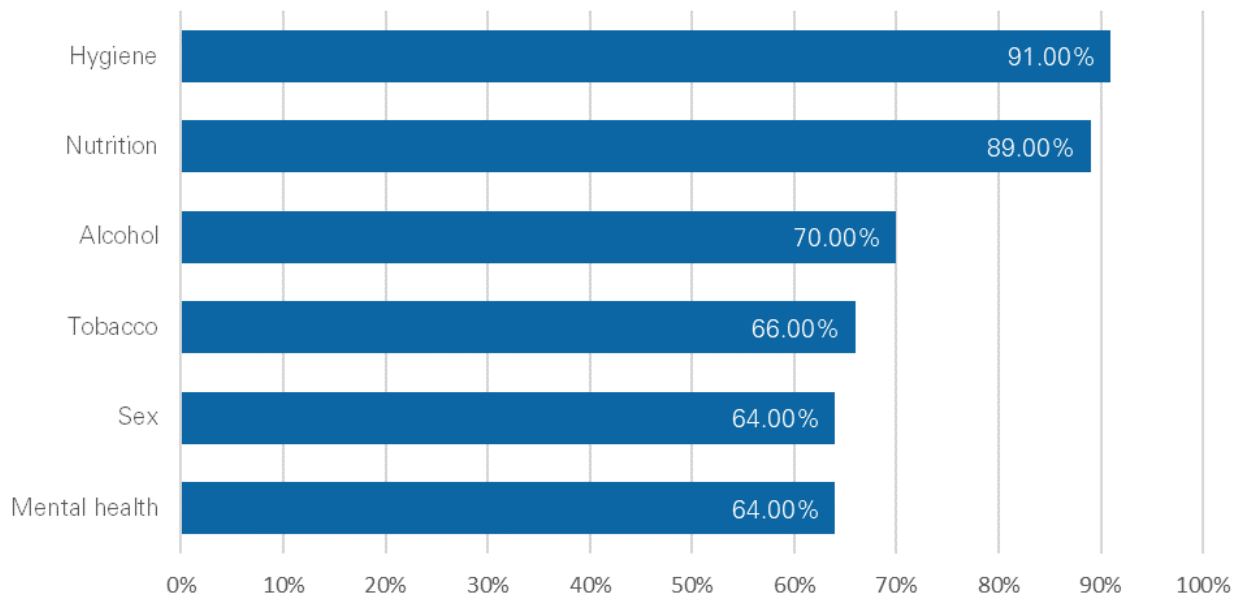
### Access to health-care services

Worryingly, **more than 30 per cent of respondents within the EU indicate that they do not have access to all the health services they need**, although the patterns of access vary widely between different groups of children. More than 10 per cent of respondents say that services are not available, and 5 per cent cannot afford them. In non-European countries, access to health care is even more limited, with over 40 per cent of respondents saying that they lack access to all services they need.

<sup>29</sup> For more in-depth and larger sample analysis on the prevalence of hygiene information, the impact of economic worry on children and the response on COVID-19 please see: World Vision (2020), [Children's voices in the time of COVID-19 Continued child activism in the face of personal challenges](#).



**Chart 3. EU countries:** Do you have access to information about health and well-being? (Tick all that apply)



**In the EU, all minorities indicate more frequently having limited access to health services.** Of LGBTQ+ children, 56 per cent say that they cannot access all the help they need, while 50 per cent of migrant children and 43 per cent of children belonging to ethnic minorities claim to not have access to all necessary services. Children with disabilities also face barriers, with only 47 per cent of them being able to access all the services they need. Older respondents also report having less access to services, with 61 per cent of 17-year-olds reporting having access to all necessary services, compared to 80 per cent of 11-year-olds. Finally, **children whose parents are not employed are also more likely to face barriers to accessing services**, with some claiming that services are not available (9 per cent) or that their parents cannot afford them (5 per cent).

Access to services can be determined not only by children's background, but also by multiple other factors. These might include the location of services that may be inaccessible or distant, the failure of some local schools to provide services, or the lack of access to the specialized care they need. Depending on the health system, even low costs can be a barrier for basic health care where children are living in poverty. Children in Croatia, for example, highlight a lack of

opportunities for children living in the poorer and more rural parts of the country. They also point to the fact that children from some parts of the country have access to free services such as speech therapists or specialized support for children with disabilities, whereas in other parts of the country those services are simply not available. Some children also note that the number of children living in poverty in their communities is increasing, creating another barrier to access. Similar concerns are raised by children in the wider European region. Although it is not possible to draw conclusions on the accessibility of health care globally based on this sample, respondents from the wider world do express having limited access to health care much more frequently than their European peers.

## Mental health

**Among all respondents within the EU, almost 1 in 10 identifies as suffering from mental health problems or symptoms such as depression or anxiety.** Girls report significantly higher levels of mental health problems than boys (11 per cent versus 3 per cent of overall respondents), and mental health problems seemed to significantly increase with age, with only 2 per cent of 11-year-olds reporting having a mental health problem, compared to 14 per cent among

17-year-olds.<sup>30</sup> Even more striking is that even though a third of children (36 per cent) report feeling sad or unhappy rarely or never, a fifth of respondents (20 per cent) are feeling sad most of the time – these rates are again significantly higher for girls than boys, with only 14 per cent of boys feeling sad ‘most of the time’ compared to 22 per cent of girls. This also seems to increase with age.

Some other groups of children report significantly higher instances of mental health problems and feelings of sadness, especially LGBTQ+ children, out of whom a staggering 47 per cent feel sad or unhappy ‘most of the time’.<sup>31</sup> Children with disabilities also report similarly high numbers, with 33 per cent of respondents saying that they feel sad or unhappy ‘most of the time’. Ethnic minorities and migrant children also report more frequent feelings of unhappiness (21 per cent of children belonging to ethnic minorities and 30 per cent of children identifying as migrants feel sad or unhappy ‘most of the time’).

Children cite multiple factors contributing to their experiences of sadness, depression and anxiety. **More than half of the respondents indicate being anxious about the future (53 per cent) as a source of unhappiness.**

More than a third (38 per cent) find school to be difficult. Social relations also play a big role in children’s mental health, with many children reporting loneliness and conflicts with family and friends. In open-ended responses and focus group discussions, children reflect, for example, on pressure and dissatisfaction related to looks or performance, overwhelming amounts of schoolwork, loss of close family members, and anxiety about the future. Stigma related to mental health seems to exacerbate some of the problems and may also prevent children from seeking help. For minorities, especially LGBTQ+ children and children with disabilities, bullying contributes to unhappiness (13 per cent of both LGBTQ+ children and those with disabilities). On the positive side, family is mentioned by many

**Chart 4. EU countries:** If you sometimes feel sad or unhappy, do you: (Tick all that apply)



<sup>30</sup> Similar results for declining positive affect was found when comparing 10- and 12-year-olds in the latest edition of the multi-country ‘Children’s Worlds’ survey; Rees, G., Savahl, S., Lee, B. J., & Casas, F. (eds.), (2020). Children’s views on their lives and well-being in 35 countries: A report on the Children’s Worlds project, 2016-19. Jerusalem, Israel: Children’s Worlds Project (ISCWeB). <<https://iscweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Childrens-Worlds-Comparative-Report2020.pdf>>.

<sup>31</sup> Some of these findings are also reflected in the European Fundamental Rights Agency’s [recent large-scale survey with LGBTQ+ minorities](#), including children and young people.

children as a source of happiness. Not seeing them is mentioned by children in care as a reason they feel unhappy.

Children employ a broad range of strategies to help them cope with emotional difficulties. More than half of the respondents have a friend to talk to (53 per cent), while a third say that they have a trusted adult from whom they can seek support (36 per cent). A quarter (27 per cent) do sports or exercise, with self-care in the form of exercise or meditation increasing with age. Children also talked about listening to music, sleeping or trying to keep themselves busy to overcome feelings of sadness. While girls report higher levels of psychological distress, they also report using all the positive coping strategies more frequently than boys – with sports being the only exception. LGBTQ+ children report living with mental health issues more often than others and sought support online more frequently than any other group (18 per cent), but only a quarter (24 per cent) say that they have a trusted adult to talk to.

The organizations involved in this consultation were not able to find up-to-date and comparable data on the prevalence of mental health problems or access to adequate services for children and young people living in the EU. The results on mental health in this survey would indicate that further investment

in understanding the issue and mapping potential gaps in services is needed.

Interestingly, **respondents from European countries outside the EU report feeling sad or unhappy less frequently than their peers in the EU**, with more than half (63 per cent) of respondents saying that they feel sad or unhappy ‘never’ or ‘rarely’.<sup>32</sup> However, reasons behind feelings of unhappiness or sadness are very similar, with anxiety about the future, finding school difficult, and worrying about parents or family mentioned by around a third of the participants. Children from these countries are more worried about their families than children in the EU countries. Strategies to cope with these feelings are similar: almost half of the respondents talk to a friend (48 per cent). However, talking to an adult is less common (27 per cent). Respondents from the wider world report feeling sad or unhappy slightly less frequently than children especially in the EU. Where they do experience problems, the main reasons are identified as worry about parents and family, the future and money. Loneliness and finding school difficult are also mentioned by a quarter of respondents. Almost half of the respondents have a friend or an adult to talk to about these feelings. One in four also reports doing sports or exercise.

## Recommendations

The levels of unhappiness highlighted in this consultation give cause for grave concern and prompt a range of questions that need to be addressed. For example, does the scale of mental health problems cited reflect a significant rise in the actual levels of unhappiness, or could it be explained by children now having a greater language through which to articulate their emotions, along with more acceptance and less stigma? Do changes in social attitudes and awareness provide any explanation for differences in different regions of the world? Are there wider social changes in children’s lives, for example, lengthier periods of economic dependency, greater disparities in wealth, more educational pressures, exposure to social media, a sense of vulnerability in the face of climate change, changes in family structures, or increased aspirations that affect well-being? Certainly, the scale of the problem implies a need for more than the improved provision of mental health services, important though that is. It demands a far deeper investigation into the underlying causes.

<sup>32</sup> As most respondents in the European region were from Albania, this is in line with [other comparative studies](#) where Albania ranks very high on children’s levels of happiness.



- The Child Guarantee should address access to free health care and community-based support services, including mental health provision, in particular for children in the most vulnerable situations and their families, and recognize the role of schools and social and community services in offering children the support they need. It should call on EU Member States to:
  - » Direct EU financial resources and national budgets to strengthen national health care, education and social care services and structures, ensuring that children in vulnerable situations have access to free health care and access to community-based mental health and psychosocial support.
  - » Provide financial support to low-income families, ensuring extra costs of health-care provision and medication are covered.
  - » Support low-income families in accessing extra health support, such as children's access to specialized support (e.g. speech therapists). Often these services are facilitated through schools and social services.
  - » Design and deliver health-care services within school settings for all children (annual health screenings as well as in-house mental-health support).
  - » Ensure that children in rural areas have access to the health care they need. Ensure frequent doctors' visits in these areas and facilitate children's access to urban areas to seek specialized support when needed.
  - » Address the significant barriers of discriminated groups with higher risks of mental health needs and less support resources (for example, children with disabilities, children in migration suffering from severe distress, children exposed to violence, and LGBTQ+).
  - » Direct financial resources to awareness-raising activities to tackle stigma around mental health problems. Children should be informed of services and resources should be directed to ensure that children in need have access to free-of-charge mental health and psychosocial services.
  - » Direct efforts to understanding the underlying causes of children's mental health problems to design effective strategies to combat them.
- Access to health services free of discrimination and financial barriers should be addressed in the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. The Strategy should call on:
  - » Partner countries to invest EU financial resources (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), The Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)) and national budgets in children's access to affordable, accessible and gender-sensitive health care and mental-health support.
  - » Partner countries to invest in awareness-raising activities about children's access to health care and mental-health support.
  - » The European Commission to ensure that at least 20 per cent of all EU official development assistance is spent on human development, including access to health care and nutrition, with a focus on reaching children so they can survive, thrive and develop their potential.



## Healthy food for a healthy body

### Food at school

Within the EU, most children receive lunch at school (62 per cent). However, when asked about the quality of the food on offer, many children indicate that they bring their own food (41 per cent), probably partly because they think the school quality is bad (20 per cent) or the food is too expensive (18 per cent). At the other end of the spectrum, around a third of respondents (32 per cent) like the taste of the school food and 23 per cent think the quality is good. Even though the findings indicate no significant differences between children according to parents' employment and potential exposure to poverty, research and evidence has shown that children in the EU face challenges in covering the costs of school meals and that the COVID-19 crisis has caused significant challenges for children and their families.<sup>33</sup>

Children from a focus group discussion of children living in poverty in Portugal state

that they often feel excluded because they cannot join their peers in buying snacks from a nearby bar and must bring their own.

Respondents from the wider European region benefit from a school lunch much less often than children in the EU, with only 17 per cent of respondents indicating that lunch is served at their school. However, when assessing the food's quality, children answer very similarly to their peers in the EU countries. It appears that most respondents from outside Europe do have lunch at school, although the sample is too disparate to build an accurate picture, and around half of them are positive about the food.

### Food at home

Most EU respondents (80 per cent) report always having enough to eat at home. However, this implies that **20 per cent of children do not always have enough to eat**, with comparable figures from the wider

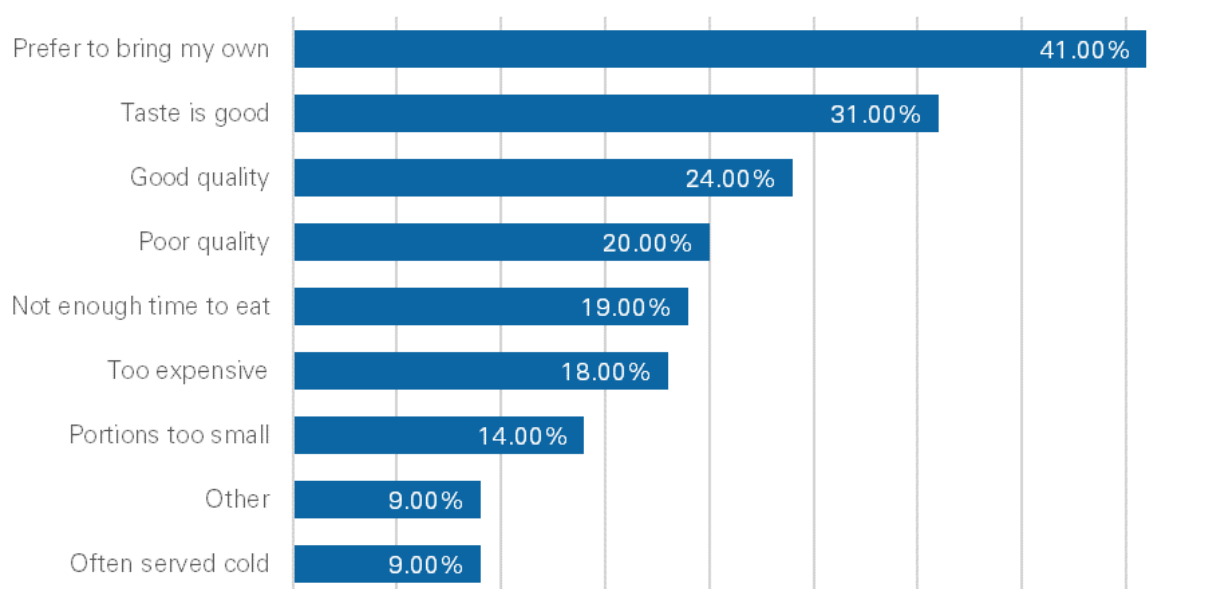
<sup>33</sup> Eurochild (2020): [Growing up in lockdown: Europe's children in the age of COVID-19 – 2020 Eurochild report](#). Save the Children (2020): [The impact of COVID-19 on children in Europe](#).

European region. Asylum seekers and children whose parents do not work report higher rates of food insecurity.

Respondents globally, however, report facing food insecurity at home much more frequently than their European peers, with almost one in four (24 per cent) saying that they only have enough to eat at home

‘sometimes’. Half of the respondents say that they always have enough to eat, but more than 20 per cent of the respondents say that the food they generally eat at home is not healthy. Even before COVID-19, almost a quarter of all children under 5 years of age globally were stunted – rates that are likely to be exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis.

**Chart 5. EU countries:** If you get school meals, what do you think about them? (Tick as many boxes as you like)



## Recommendations

- The Child Guarantee should call on EU Member States to:
  - » Provide universal, free healthy school meals and/or free fruit and vegetables in early childhood education and care and in primary and secondary education. In the case that the provision of the meals cannot be universal, make sure that the meals provided to children in need are given in a non-stigmatizing way.
  - » Support parents in need through non-stigmatizing financial benefits or through in-kind support to provide nutritious meals to their children. Support should also be accompanied by information about healthy eating habits and healthy ways of cooking.
  - » Design and deliver public awareness-raising campaigns about the benefits of healthy eating.
  - » Restrict the sale and marketing of unhealthy food products in and around schools.
  - » Promote a healthy eating culture inside school and include educational activities on healthy food in school curricula.
- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child should call for EU external relations to place more emphasis on concrete action plans for nutrition and not reduce investment.



# Learning and developing skills for the future

## Attending preschool

Most children responding from EU countries had enrolled in education before the compulsory age, with the most common age of preschool or kindergarten enrolment being 3 years old (40 per cent). More than 70 per cent of the respondents started preschool or kindergarten between the ages of 2 and 4. Less than 2 per cent of the respondents say that they did not participate in any preschool education. However, some children report starting preschool at the age of 7 or older, which might mean that they confuse the question to mean starting compulsory education. No significant differences emerged between the different groups of children. Most children in the wider European region have also participated in some form of preschool education, with 3 years being the most common age of enrolment. However, the average age tends to be slightly older than in the EU countries, with 17 per cent saying that they started preschool at the age of 5.

## Being at school

For most children, school is a positive experience. However, **while most EU respondents feel positive about school (72 per cent), this is not the case for almost half of LGBTQ+ children (47 per cent) and children with disabilities (almost 40 per cent)**. Younger children aged 11 and 12 also feel more positive about school than older respondents.

Children cite a wide range of factors leading to dissatisfaction with school. More than a third of the respondents from the EU are unable to pinpoint specific reasons (36 per cent). Some cited finding lessons hard (35.4 per cent), fights between students (16 per cent), loneliness (16 per cent), prejudice from teachers (15 per cent) or bullying (11 per cent). Other factors raised include stress, long hours, teaching methods focusing on memorization and lack of adaptation to the needs of individual students.

Some of the frustrations related to school are summarized by an open-ended answer by a young person in Romania:

**“School does not teach you basic things you have to do every day. You have too much to learn and write so you don’t have time for yourself and to discover what you are passionate about and what you want to do in life.”**

(Focus group participant, Romania)

Focus group discussion participants in Portugal also reflect on some other commonly mentioned frustrations about not being heard by adults in school:

**“The adults at school don’t really want to hear us, they just want us to be far away.”**

(Focus group participant, Portugal)

Discrimination and differential treatment contribute to children’s feelings about school in the EU. For example, girls differ from boys in citing the difficulty of studies (38 versus 30 per cent) and loneliness (17 versus 12 per cent). For LGBTQ+ children, additional negative experiences at school arise in respect of differential treatment because of sex, gender identity or sexuality (28 per cent) or prejudice from teachers (19 per cent). They also experience bullying (20 per cent) more frequently than others. Migrant children, asylum-seeking children and children belonging to ethnic minorities experience more differential treatment based on ethnicity and religion than other groups.



Children whose parents do not work also report higher levels of bullying and differential treatment because of their economic background. It is important to note, however, that the samples involved are too small to make in-depth conclusions about their specific experience at school. Half of the children with disabilities respond that finding schoolwork difficult is a source of difficulty for them, a significantly higher figure than for other children, with fights between students (24 per cent) and loneliness (23 per cent) also raised by them. In open-ended responses, children mention the lack of attention to their needs for support.

Strikingly, 92 per cent of respondents from the wider European region express positive views about school. The reasons for not enjoying school include finding lessons hard (18 per cent). Outside Europe, around 80 per cent of children feel positive about being at school, with reasons cited very similar to those within Europe. Likewise, the reasons for disliking school mirror those in Europe with finding lessons hard, bullying, differential treatment and fights and conflicts between students being cited.

## Costs and accessibility

Although most of the respondents from the EU do not face costs in school that their parents could not afford, **almost a third of students indicate that they face some cost-related barriers to education.** The most common barriers are school trips (13 per cent), books (7 per cent) and school meals (7 per cent). In addition, some children have difficulties with transport and after-school activities. It is to be noted, however, that 13 per cent of respondents answer that they do not know. Younger children especially may not have information about the financial constraints that their family faces.

The groups most likely to experience these barriers within the EU are children from ethnic minorities, migrants, asylum seekers and children of parents who are out of work. For example, half of children from ethnic minorities and migrant children indicate cost-related barriers, while of children whose parents do not work, 31 per cent have difficulties with funding school trips, 17 per cent with books, 13 per cent with afterschool activities and 12 per cent with



transport. Children describe that some of them receive a scholarship or other support to cover school-related costs, but especially **trips and supplementary materials are sometimes still too expensive for their families**. Challenges in accessing education due to multiple factors, especially online, are demonstrated by the following statement by a Roma girl living in Spain:

**“I didn’t have a computer, the internet didn’t reach my village, and I didn’t have any data. I lost my uncle. (...) I didn’t have the strength to connect to the classes. The teachers knew this, but they suspended me because I couldn’t connect for the last three months, and I had to repeat.”**

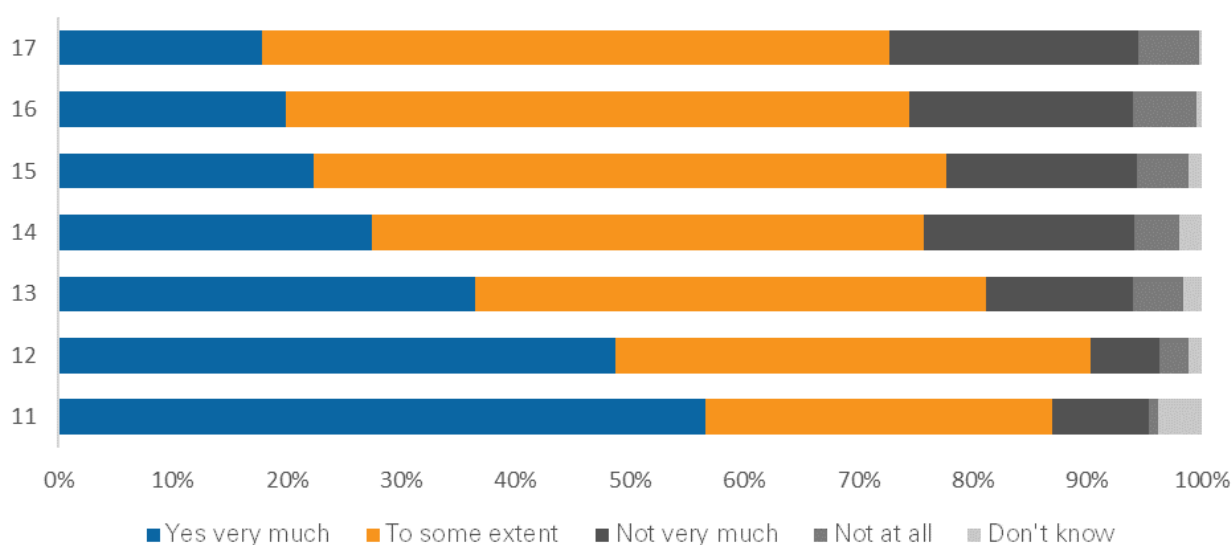
(Roma girl, 15, Spain)

Although the consultation did not address the availability of education overall, other studies and surveys have shown that some minority groups may face barriers to accessing education or may have lower enrolment rates for early childhood and secondary education.

In contrast to countries in the EU, children from the European region overall face financial barriers to their education more frequently, with only 51 per cent of the respondents stating that they do not face any barriers. Twenty per cent of the respondents mention problems affording school trips, 18 per cent books, 13 per cent masks and 12 per cent afterschool activities. Other costs cited include having to pay a yearly voluntary fee to cover costs such as the school guard, cleaning or even heating or furniture for the class. Others point to needing to walk long distances to school because public transport is too expensive. Children with disabilities also raise the problem of families having to cover the costs of assistive technologies and accessible transportation to school.

Financial barriers are even more common for children outside of Europe, with only 23 per cent of respondents saying that they do not encounter any difficulties in covering school-related costs. Books, school meals, school uniforms and school trips are all mentioned by more than one in four respondents, and school and exam fees are also highlighted.

**Chart 6. EU countries:** Do you think that what you learn in school is useful for your future?





## Relevance and value of education

Broadly similar aspirations and expectations from school can be seen across the consultations from all countries. Most EU children feel that the education they receive is at least somewhat relevant for their future – 28 per cent agree that their education is very useful, and 50 per cent somewhat useful. However, it is a matter of some concern that confidence in their education diminishes with age and that **less than 20 per cent of 17-year-olds feel that their education provides them with useful tools for their future.**

A more positive experience is evident from children in the wider European region where children generally feel positive about school, with 65 per cent of respondents saying that their education is ‘very useful’ for their future. The figure from respondents outside Europe viewing their education as useful is 56 per cent.

However, when children are asked about things that they like or do not like about school, a more nuanced picture arises. The vast majority of EU respondents appreciate the school’s social aspect, with 84 per cent highlighting being with their friends as a positive about school. Yet, less than half of students like their teachers (46 per cent) or

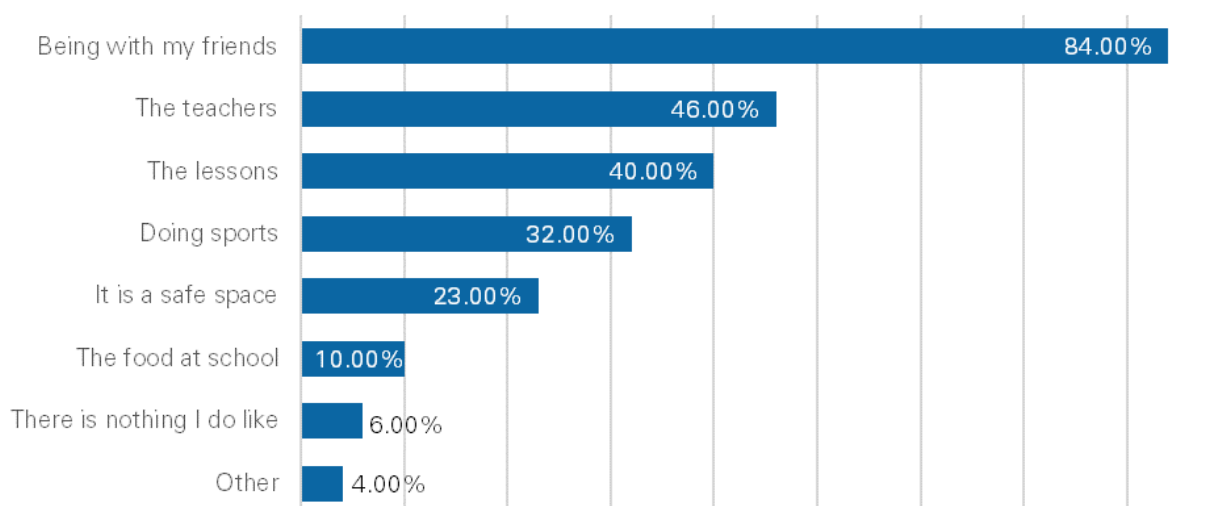
**“A child that doesn’t go to school won’t be able to do much with his life; if you don’t go to school, you can’t do anything. School lets you open up to the world and talk to people. School is life.”**

(Young asylum seeker, France)

lessons (40 per cent). Sports are particularly important for boys, out of whom 46 per cent like sports activities (compared to 26 per cent of girls). Children from other European countries express broadly similar views on what they value in school.

Within the EU, the findings also reveal that **children would like to see very significant changes in every aspect of their school lives. Of the respondents, 62 per cent would like to have less homework, and 57 per cent would like to have more interesting lessons.** Almost a third of respondents would like to influence the content of school curricula, with more sports activities (33 per cent), learning about child rights (31 per cent) and more arts subjects (31 per cent). More time for play and sports activities are particularly

**Chart 7. EU countries:** What do you like about your school? (Tick all that apply)

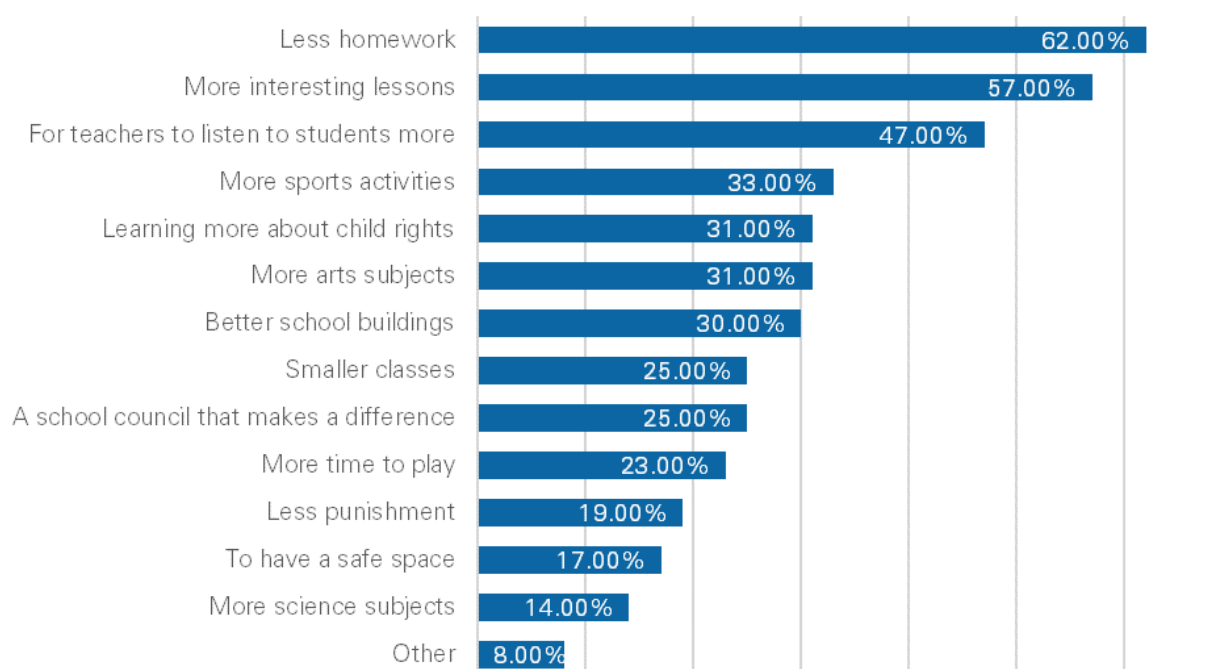


important for younger respondents, whereas older respondents are keener to learn more about their rights. Children also want more focus on life skills education, as well as learning and understanding differences and tackling stereotypes. A quarter of students wish to see improvements in the learning environment (school buildings and class size), or the participation of students. The importance of participation and the learning environment increases with age. For example, 57 per cent of 17-year-olds wish for their teachers to listen to them more, compared to 27 per cent of 11-year-olds.

**Children from minorities (migrant, asylum-seekers, ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ children) are more likely to highlight the importance of having a safe space.** Children with disabilities emphasize the importance of the opportunity to participate in integrated classes with children without disabilities but underline the necessity for teachers to understand and adapt to their needs.

Similar aspirations are expressed by children outside the EU. Notably, however, for the children in the wider region of Europe, although many of the same issues are highlighted, the emphases are different. Having more sports activities comes up as the highest priority (49 per cent), followed by less homework (36 per cent), better school buildings (36 per cent) and more interesting lessons (30 per cent). And while the children acknowledge the importance of education and appreciate the ability to go to school and learn, many raise concerns over the material conditions of the school with old, poorly maintained buildings, lacking proper facilities, water and electricity. Additional concerns are raised over poor hygiene, lack of specialized facilities including laboratories, and the large size of classes. Some children observe that teachers are not ‘keeping up with the times’ or in tune with children’s needs, nor open to their suggestions, and sometimes discriminate between students based on family connections, ethnicity, income or school results. At the same time, some participants express a lot of appreciation for teachers and the support they offer.

**Chart 8. EU countries:** What would you like to change about your school, for example? (Tick all that apply)



## Recommendations

- The Child Guarantee should call on EU Member States to:
  - » Direct EU financial resources and national budgets to strengthen education systems and ensure that early childhood education and care and education are free and accessible to all, especially to children with disabilities, children growing up in poverty, children growing up in segregated environments (e.g. Roma children, children growing up in institutional care settings) and children in rural areas.
  - » Invest in infrastructure, staff recruitment, budgetary formulae and teacher training to support the access of children with disabilities in mainstream education – from early childhood education and care to secondary and vocational education.
  - » Ensure that families – especially those in vulnerable situations – are not burdened with extra or hidden costs (e.g. school trips, books, meals). When this is not possible, low-income families must be financially supported in a non-stigmatizing way to pay for any additional costs (for example, school trips, supplementary meals) that they cannot afford.
  - » Address the issue of quality education, not only access to it. Education settings must provide children with education material that is relevant to their needs. Children should be supported in sharing their views regarding the school curricula and their views should be considered.
  - » Address the issue of equity and school safety for girls and boys. All children, no matter their gender, sexual orientation or background, should participate equally in education. Education settings must be inclusive, and children must feel safe in their schools. Schools should adopt anti-bullying strategies and teachers and other professionals working in education settings must be trained in creating an inclusive environment for all children and supporting children in vulnerable situations.
  - » Support children in accessing free extra-curricular activities within the school setting, such as free educational support. This can be especially helpful for children that do not have the resources to receive private tutoring after school.
  - » Support children in accessing good quality distance learning. As seen from the results of the study, especially for children in vulnerable situations, distance learning education is often impossible. Member States must support low-income families in purchasing IT equipment or support them by covering costs for an internet connection. Distance learning must be inclusive and adapted to the needs of children with disabilities. They must be supported in accessing distance learning as they have been particularly affected by the closure of schools.
  - » Adapt early childhood education and care and education to help parents maintain their work or find employment.



- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child should call on:
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to address the relevance of education and the large number of children who find that school curricula do not correspond to what they need for life.
  - » EU Member States to prioritize the quality of teaching and learning over study hours. Recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies<sup>36</sup> have demonstrated that long study hours do not correlate with good learning outcomes. Children should be empowered to share their views on the school curriculum.
  - » EU Member States, partner countries and the European Commission services to direct EU financial resources and national budgets to strengthen education systems, ensuring that all children, especially those at risk of dropping out, equally participate in formal education. Financial resources should also be directed to strengthening children's access to online education.
  - » European Commission and partner countries to commit to prioritizing, expanding and continually support education in emergencies.

## Children's living environments

### The home

The home and family constitute the centre of most children's lives. Most of the respondents to the online questionnaire do have both a home and parents or caregivers to take care of them: 98 per cent of the respondents from EU countries live at home, and 96 per cent of them live with their parents or caregivers.

The vast majority of children within the EU report having enough space for their homework (80 per cent) and having their own room (72 per cent). However, **children from minority groups report higher levels of noise, lack of space, cold conditions in the winter, and lack of access to a Wi-Fi connection.** These problems could be linked to the slightly higher rates of living away from home, living in families of more than four children, and having lower rates of parental employment among minority groups, especially ethnic minorities, migrant children and asylum-seeking children.

**The impact of poverty is also reflected in the responses of children whose parents are not employed,** who report more frequently not having access to digital equipment (13 per cent), having fewer games

and activities (39 per cent compared to 58 per cent of children whose parents are employed) or having to share a room (25 per cent). Children living in poverty in Portugal, for example, express frustration over not having access to the internet during COVID-19 as access to other activities is limited: "It gets more boring at the weekend because we have nowhere to go."

Having a room of one's own is also important for children. This is illustrated in focus group discussions with children living in care or seeking asylum, where participants refer to their wish to have their own space, as they often must share a room with other young people.

Children from the wider European region reported more difficulties with their home environment. Only 41 per cent of respondents report having their own room, and around 60 per cent having enough space to do their homework and access to a fast Wi-Fi connection. Children are highly sensitive to the disparities across different groups of children. In Albania, for example, children from rural areas mention insufficient heating and hot water during winter; some even have broken windows or live in housing

<sup>36</sup> OECD (2018), [PISA 2018. Insights and interpretations](#).



damaged by natural disasters, while others have their own room and a garden to play in. Some children report lacking internet access and devices at home and having to borrow their parents' phones or the neighbour's internet access for online learning during the lockdown, while others have their own smartphones and a reliable internet connection. However, beyond Europe, the findings are even more negative, with only a third of respondents saying they have space to do their homework or access to games and activities in the home, and only a quarter have access to fast Wi-Fi or their own room.

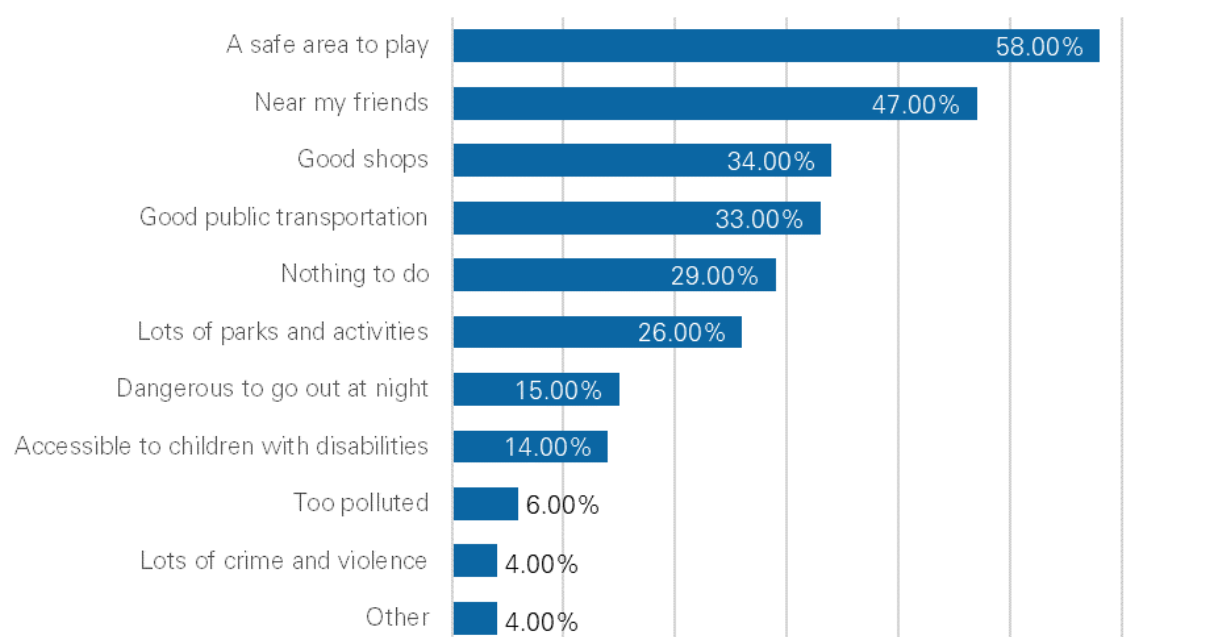
## The neighbourhood

The findings offer a far from positive view of children's experience of their wider living environments. In the EU, overall, 58 per cent of respondents indicate that their neighbourhood is safe to play in, with close to half of the children saying that they live close to their friends. However, this means that a very significant number of children do feel isolated and vulnerable within their

communities. In addition, **only a third of the respondents report that their neighbourhood provides good public transportation and almost a third of the children feel that their neighbourhood offers nothing to do**, with girls experiencing it more frequently than boys. The concern about lack of activities also increased with age, with 37 per cent of responding 17-year-olds reporting that their neighbourhood does not offer anything to do, compared to 15 per cent of 11-year-olds. Children with disabilities often face barriers in accessibility. Only 19 per cent of children with disabilities think that their neighbourhood is accessible for them.

Degrees of vulnerability and feeling unsafe vary significantly across different groups of children. **Girls and young people who do not identify as girls or boys report more frequently that their neighbourhood is dangerous to go out in at night** (17 per cent and 26 per cent respectively, compared to 11 per cent of boys). All minorities report more frequently that their neighbourhood is dangerous at night – for example, 27 per cent

**Chart 9. EU countries:** What do you think about the neighborhood where you live? (Tick all that apply)



of LGBTQ+ children, 18 per cent of children from ethnic minorities and 21 per cent of children with disabilities. Parents' employment does not seem to have a significant effect on how children perceive their neighbourhoods. In focus group discussions, some groups of children talked about abuse of alcohol and drugs, or the behaviours of adults that make them feel unsafe.

**Children from the wider European region are more critical towards their living environments than those in the EU**, with 15 per cent experiencing them as too polluted and 43 per cent saying there is nothing to do. Fewer children feel that they have good public transportation, or good shops, friends or parks and activities nearby. Children from rural areas in Albania and Kosovo, for example, mention the lack of playgrounds and street

lightning, unpaved streets, stray dogs, lack of rubbish bins in the streets and lack of leisure opportunities for children. They also miss not having access to leisure facilities for sports or culture, or parks for playing, and comment that lack of economic means often serves as a barrier to enjoying their communities. Outside Europe, the findings are even more negative, with only half of the respondents seeing their neighbourhood as a safe area to play, and only 41 per cent saying they lived close to friends. One focus group in Ghana mentioned open defecation as a health issue in their community. On the other hand, the fact that only 20 per cent think that there is nothing to do points to a slightly more positive picture than in Europe overall.



## Recommendations

It was difficult to reach children in most vulnerable situations due to COVID-19 and time restrictions as well as a lack of IT equipment or internet connectivity that children growing up in poverty or social exclusion face. In the results of the consultation, 96 per cent of children interviewed in the EU live with their parents and 89 per cent live at home. However, this sample does not represent children in certain vulnerable situations across the EU. Many children inside and outside the EU grow up homeless, on the streets, in institutional care settings or in inadequate housing conditions, and children with disabilities live in places that are not always accessible. Therefore, to ensure that the recommendations in this study also cover children in need, we have included recommendations that correspond to the needs of children in most vulnerable situations that do not live in adequate housing together with their parents.

- The Child Guarantee must call on EU Member States to:
  - » Support low-income families and minority groups financially and with in-kind support to maintain their house or to advance their living conditions.
  - » Financially support families with children with disabilities to adjust their living space so it is fully accessible.
  - » Invest in social housing. Parents with children must be prioritized in accessing social housing. Social housing should not be constructed in segregated areas.
  - » Make sure that parents with children at risk of eviction or already homeless are not placed in homeless shelters but in temporary accommodation that resembles a family environment, until a permanent solution is found.
  - » Support children in accessing housing while they transition from the alternative care system to independent living. Provide children with financial benefits and/or free-of-charge housing along with counselling/guidance services.
  - » Support the transition from institutional to family- and community-based care. Make sure that children are placed in quality family-based care (e.g. foster care) or when this is in their best interest, in family-like care (e.g. small group homes). Small group homes must resemble a family environment and children should have their own room.
- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child must call on EU Member States and partner countries to:
  - » Develop policies and run services that will ensure that all children, no matter their background, have access to decent housing. Child victims of violence, children in institutional and alternative care as well as children in conflict with the law should be further supported through targeted measures, ensuring that they have decent living conditions and are not placed in segregated or stigmatizing settings.
  - » Recognize the vulnerability of girls in the public sphere and develop policies to respond to their feeling of safety.



# Play, leisure and culture

Access to meaningful and fulfilling leisure activities is central to children's physical, cognitive, social and emotional development. Encouragingly, most respondents indicate that they have available free time and activities that they are invested in. Ballgames (such as football, basketball and handball) and other sports (biking, running, tennis, riding), and arts (drawing, theatre) are all frequently mentioned.

However, not all children have equal access to these opportunities. **More than 20 per cent of the respondents both in the EU and the wider European region report that sometimes they cannot participate in activities because their parents cannot afford them.** This figure is higher for all minorities, with almost 50 per cent of

migrant children, 34 per cent of children with disabilities and 51 per cent of children with unemployed parents in the EU facing these barriers.<sup>37</sup> Children from vulnerable backgrounds describe their reliance on inexpensive and free-of-charge activities for their leisure time, many of which are provided by the school, although not available in all areas. Some also participate in unstructured or self-driven activities, such as drawing or biking with friends. However, they are effectively denied access to any activities that involve cost, thus differentiating them from others. The problem is significantly greater for children outside Europe, of whom well over 40 per cent report being unable to access activities because of financial constraints.

## Recommendations

- The Child Guarantee should call on EU Member States to:
  - » Address accessibility of leisure and cultural activities for children from low-income families and children in migration/belonging to ethnic minority groups, both as rights in and of themselves and as a means to strengthen children's mental health and overall well-being.
  - » Direct EU financial resources and national budgets to design and provide leisure activities free of charge for all children at the local level and especially in municipalities with low-income families.
  - » Develop free-of-charge extra-curricular activities in education settings, allowing all children to participate in them.
  - » Provide parents non-stigmatizing extra financial support to give children access to extra-curricular activities.
  - » Set proper benchmarks and standards, emphasizing the public health impact of safety and access to appropriate sport and leisure.
- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child should acknowledge the importance of children's access to play and leisure activities as a key element of children's overall well-being and based on Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and should call on EU Member States and partner countries to invest more in safe environments and leisure access.

<sup>37</sup> Similar findings have been found in a UNICEF [U-Report survey to young migrants](#) in Europe in December 2017, where only 47 per cent of respondents said they were involved in recreational activities where they live.





# Risks and opportunities of the digital age

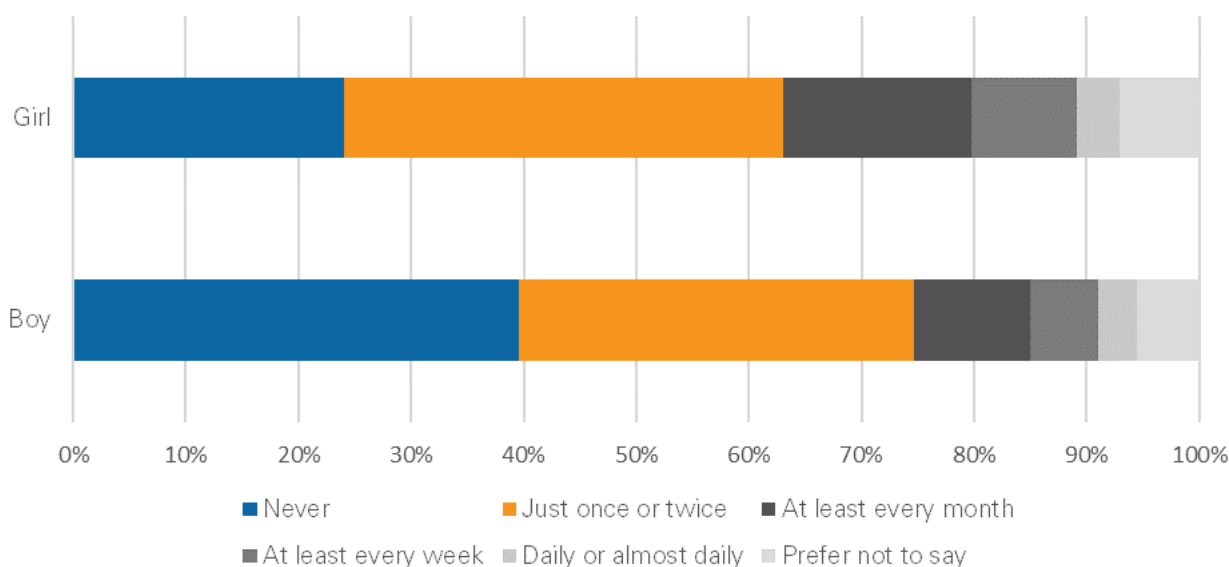
Problems in relation to accessing the internet are highlighted by 43 per cent of respondents in the EU, including worries about privacy (18 per cent), the internet being too time consuming (15 per cent) or a poor signal (9 per cent). **Children whose parents do not work are more likely to face barriers, including price of devices** (18 per cent) and poor signal (21 per cent). It is also to be noted that children who face multiple barriers to online access are also probably less likely to respond to the survey, and hence the responses are likely to be skewed towards those who have no connection difficulties.

Children in the neighbouring countries face many more barriers in accessing digital devices and connectivity, with over 60 per cent citing problems. The price of access to devices is mentioned by 21 per cent of respondents and the price of access to data by 13 per cent. However, they cite comparable concerns over the internet being too time consuming (18 per cent) and over privacy (16 per cent).

Unsurprisingly, children from other parts of the world are far more likely to face problems with the price of devices and data. More than a quarter of the respondents also lack a good signal where they live and do not have access to the internet at school. In 2017, UNICEF estimated that about 364 million young people between the ages of 15 and 24 across the globe do not have any access to the internet at school.<sup>38</sup> Some of the children participating in focus group discussions reported using the connection at their friends' homes to go online. The problem is illustrated by an example from Burkina Faso, where children participating in this consultation had to go to the local office of the supporting organization to fill in the online questionnaire due to a lack of access at home.

Children do not report experiencing upsetting or problematic events online very frequently, but girls feel more exposed to such content than boys, and exposure increases with age. In the EU findings, **almost one in three girls (30 per cent) experienced disturbing**

**Chart 10. EU countries:** In the past year, how often has something happened online or on your phone that has upset or bothered you?



<sup>38</sup> UNICEF (2017), [State of the World's Children 2017](#).





**content at least once a month in the past year, compared to 20 per cent of boys.<sup>39</sup> Children in the wider European region appear to be far less exposed to problematic content, with almost half of the respondents reporting having never come across such content or events in the past year, compared to 29 per cent of children in the EU. There is, however, a difference between boys and girls, with girls being slightly more exposed to such content.** Lack of access and exposure to online content probably explains why figures from children outside Europe of experiencing upsetting content or events are significantly lower than those from within Europe. In the EU, **children from minorities encounter upsetting events online more frequently,**

with almost half of LGBTQ+ children (48 per cent) experiencing upsetting things happening to them online at least every month. Migrant children and ethnic minorities are also more exposed to upsetting content, albeit the sample of these groups was very small.

Most children from the EU report having received information about accessing and using the internet safely: 64 per cent have received such information and found it useful, 16.8 per cent feel that they do not need such information, while 7 per cent would like to learn more. Although gender differences are not significant, boys report receiving information more frequently than girls, and access to information also appears to decrease with age.

<sup>39</sup> For more research on this topic, please see Smahel, D., Machackova, H., Mascheroni, G., Dedkova, L., Staksrud, E., Ólafsson, K., Livingstone, S., and Hasebrink, U. (2020), [EU Kids Online 2020: Survey results from 19 countries. EU Kids Online](#).



## Recommendations

- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child must address the issue of children's safety in the online world. It should call on the:
  - » European Commission, EU Member States and partner countries to take all measures necessary to ensure that children's rights are protected online.
  - » European Commission, EU Member States and partner countries to advance their legislation and policies to safeguard and promote children's rights in the online world. EU regulations and national legislation concerning children must be reviewed, considering children's rights and their protection in the digital world.
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to safeguard children's data and use them in a transparent way in full respect of the best interests of the child. Tech companies must be monitored regularly and should be held accountable for how they collect and process children's data.
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to empower and enable tech companies to contribute to protecting children from online sexual abuse while respecting children's rights.
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to promote children's education in media literacy, in accessing the digital world, in recognizing online threats, inappropriate behaviours and disinformation, and in protecting themselves. Teachers as well as parents should be informed and trained in empowering children in recognizing their digital rights and protecting themselves in the digital environment.
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to emphasize the protection of children belonging to minority groups. Girls should be further protected.
  - » European Commission to place stronger emphasis on urging online platforms, games and apps to address children's rights, including privacy and safety by design.
  - » The European Commission to put children's participation and empowerment at the heart of EU policies (e.g. Updated Skills Agenda for Europe) and initiatives (Safer Internet Days and the Safer Internet Forum) and ensure that children in vulnerable situations also have their voices heard.
- The Child Guarantee should call on:
  - » EU Member States to support children in accessing the digital world. Children in vulnerable situations should be provided with free IT equipment and families should be supported with lower charges for internet provision.

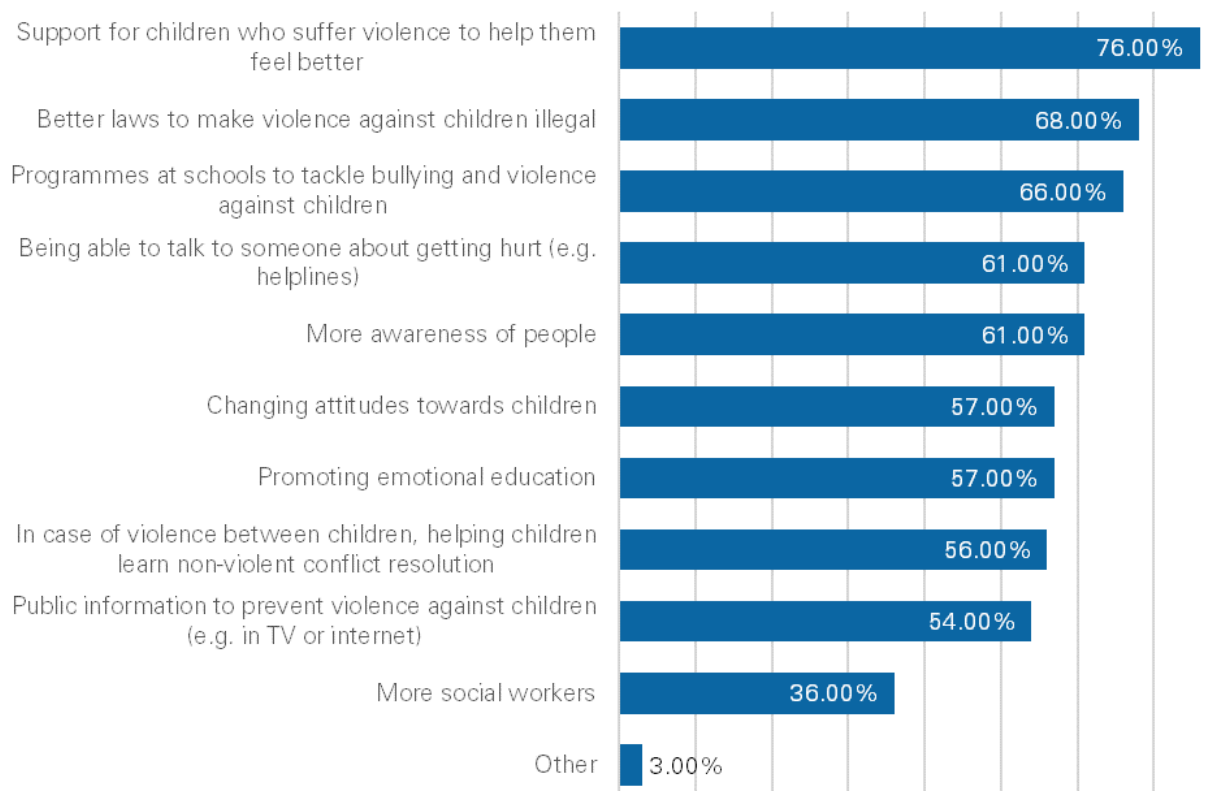


# A childhood free of violence

The consultation process deliberately did not address children's experiences of violence, as responses were anonymous and the organizations leading the consultations would not be able to address any concerns raised. The focus in the survey was, therefore, not on prevalence, experience or impact of violence, but, rather, what strategies children think are needed to tackle violence against children. It is worth noting that ending all forms of violence against children is one of the key priorities for children responding to these consultations.

There is wide support from respondents from the EU to all of the strategies included in the questionnaire, with better support to victims of violence being the most supported option: **more than half of respondents think that all of the strategies proposed in the questionnaire would protect children from being hurt, with the exception of having more social workers.** Both girls and boys are supportive of all interventions, with girls more frequently mentioning emotional education (61 versus 46 per cent), being able to talk to someone about being hurt (67 versus 47 per cent) and school-based programmes (68 versus 63 per cent).

**Chart 11. EU countries:** What do you think would help stop children getting hurt (e.g. hitting, bullying, physical or sexual violence)? (Tick all that apply)







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Interestingly, these responses are in marked contrast to the findings from children from the wider European region, which indicate support for only three of the approaches: support to victims (63 per cent), school-based programmes (62 per cent) and better legislation to make violence illegal (57 per cent). School-based programmes also gain wide support (73 per cent) from children responding globally. They also place a higher priority on public information campaigns (61 per cent) over support to victims (54 per cent), awareness raising (49 per cent) or legislation (39 per cent).

**Many children express their frustration over lack of action on preventing bullying in school.** They observe that while teachers might know that bullying is happening, there is limited action on it. In addition, they **highlight the need to better understand the underlying causes of bullying, to educate children and adults about minorities and the importance of social inclusion, to listen to children more intently when they talk about their experiences, and to have trusted adults in the school that children can talk to and seek support from.** Children report that the lack of action sends a discouraging message that the perpetrator of the violence will 'get away' with an insincere apology, and the bullying will continue as before.

## Recommendations

Globally, violence against children is prevalent – in the home, at and on the way to school and in the neighbourhood, as well as through violent conflicts. According to long-term studies, World Vision estimates that more than 1 billion children around the world experience violence every year. UNICEF has estimated that 300 million children experience violent discipline from their caregivers regularly.<sup>40</sup> Extensive child consultations, including research led by children across Europe and globally, reiterate that ending violence against them in the home, at school and in the neighbourhood, including cyber bullying, is identified by children as a key priority.<sup>41</sup>

Research also shows that COVID-19 measures may have exposed up to 85 million more girls and boys worldwide to physical, sexual and/or emotional violence in the first three months of the lockdown. World Vision predicts that many of the 13 million extra child marriages alerted to UNFPA will occur in the time immediately following the crisis, with at least 4 million more girls married in the next two years and many never returning to school.<sup>42</sup>

Ending violence against children is one of the key concerns raised by the children consulted. The European Commission must make the eradication of all forms of violence against children a cornerstone of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and should call on:

- EU Member States and partner countries to take all appropriate measures to ban all forms of corporal punishment against children, and to explicitly condemn and commit to ending harmful practices, including child labour, child trafficking, gender-based violence, female genital mutilation, and early and forced child marriage.
- EU Member States and partner countries to promote anti-bullying strategies. Teachers and professionals working at schools should be educated in a zero-tolerance approach towards school bullying and in ways of preventing it.
- EU Member States and partner countries to invest in a child protection system-strengthening approach, including prevention and early intervention to tackle all forms of violence against children.
- EU Member States and partner countries to develop and implement programmes that will better support child victims of violence, in line with the EU's Victims' Rights Directive
- The European Commission to adopt or strengthen the implementation of policy frameworks that will contribute to preventing violence against children or supporting child victims of violence. For example, the new strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse and the New EU Strategy towards the Eradication of Trafficking in Human Beings can play a significant role in addressing violence against children.
- EU Member States and third countries to develop or strengthen national legislation on preventing violence against children and fully implement the above-mentioned EU policies.

<sup>40</sup> UNICEF (2017), [A Familiar Face: Violence in the lives of children and adolescents](#).

<sup>41</sup> See for example World Vision (2020), [Our Research, Our Rights, Ending violence against children through the lens of child researchers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Indonesia, Nicaragua, Romania and Sierra Leone](#).

<sup>42</sup> World Vision (2020), [A perfect storm: Millions more children at risk of violence under lockdown and into the 'new normal'](#). Recently, more connections have also been made on the [devastating links between increased violence against children and climate change](#).







# A climate for future generations

The consultations with children for this report did not include specific questions regarding climate change, but when prioritizing areas where the EU should act, **28 per cent of respondents from the EU think that the EU should prioritize climate action to protect child rights.** Recent polls run by UNICEF<sup>43</sup> have also indicated that children are concerned about climate change and wish to take part in the green transition.

Over the summer of 2020, World Vision conducted a global child consultation on climate change with children from vulnerable groups outside the EU and included a question on the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child in this specific context.<sup>44</sup>

When children and young people are asked whether they are aware of climate change and how it may have an impact on their community, 88 per cent of the respondents are aware, 8 per cent somehow aware and 4 per cent unaware. The results compared to equivalent adult surveys suggest that children and young people are likely more conscious of climate change, and this awareness is repeatedly turned into concerns about the future of the planet.

Most child respondents self-report a high level of acceptance of scientific facts and ways of thinking that climate is warming across the planet, which is a human-driven phenomenon. Only a few children suggest that climate change is produced by natural processes. They report a high level of concern about climate change and a wish to find strategies to contribute to reducing the negative impact on the environment. This study explored

feelings and perceptions of fact from children and young people, which are represented in a range of emotions, including feeling worried, angry, helpless, hopeful and motivated to change. The study found that children and young people understand climate change clearly and make connections to personal and societal responsibilities. They consider that climate change is happening now in their own communities and not in remote areas, and it not only directly affects distant people from other countries. Furthermore, many children report an increased level of uncertainty about their future due to the environment's damage.

Concerning perceptions of risk, the answers vary from country to country and from urban to rural, ranging from highlighting connections to increased child marriage and a gender impact of climate change, greater vulnerability to disasters generating traumatic effects such as separation from parents, no access to schools and social protection mechanisms, or major negative impact on livelihoods.<sup>45</sup>

**"I am concerned about its impact [climate change]. This directly affects families with greater poverty conditions, natural disasters associated with climate change cause many material, economic and human losses."**

(Jeremy, 16, Nicaragua)

<sup>43</sup> See UNICEF [U-Report poll on climate change](#), July 2020, and [U-Report poll ahead of the COP25 meeting](#), November 2018.

<sup>44</sup> World Vision (2020), ['Talk less and act more, the world needs help': Children front and centre of climate action](#).

<sup>45</sup> Recently, more connections have also been made on the [devastating links between increased violence against children and climate change](#).

Forty-four per cent of children and young people are aware of the EU and central actions to support children's rights; 56 per cent of respondents are unaware of the EU or confused the EU with an NGO.

However, when asked how the European Union helps to address those challenges to children's rights, most respondents mention child protection, child participation and welfare programmes, which gives an indication of what they experience the EU to stand for.

## Recommendations

- Children's voices on climate change in this consultation are quite limited in number and cannot be representative. Yet, both in the EU and globally, we see an unprecedented amount of child activism on climate change concerns. There is no doubt that a significant number of children want to be active and want to be heard on the future of the planet, which is their future. On the other hand, global climate change discussions and policies rarely include a focus on the indirect impacts of climate change on children's lives and their rights, or make child activism heard. The EU, given its new priorities on the European Green Deal internally and in external action, could set a signal on creating a stronger child focus in its climate change approaches and initiatives.
- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child should call on:
  - » The European Commission to mainstream children's rights in all EU policies relevant to fighting climate change and protecting the environment.
  - » The European Commission to develop formal mechanisms to support children's and young people's rights-based participation in discussions and decision making on climate change.
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to advance their efforts to protect the environment and tackle climate change and mainstream children's rights in upcoming or existing relevant legislation and policies.
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to develop or strengthen awareness-raising activities related to climate change and environmental protection. Countries should examine the possibility of adding education material to school curricula related to environmental protection, climate change and its impact on children and future generations, and ways to act.
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to mainstream children's participation in decision-making procedures. Children should be empowered to meaningfully participate in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of relevant climate and environmental policies.
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to direct EU financial resources and national budgets to communities affected by climate change so they can adapt their living conditions.

# Children's lives now and in the future

## The present

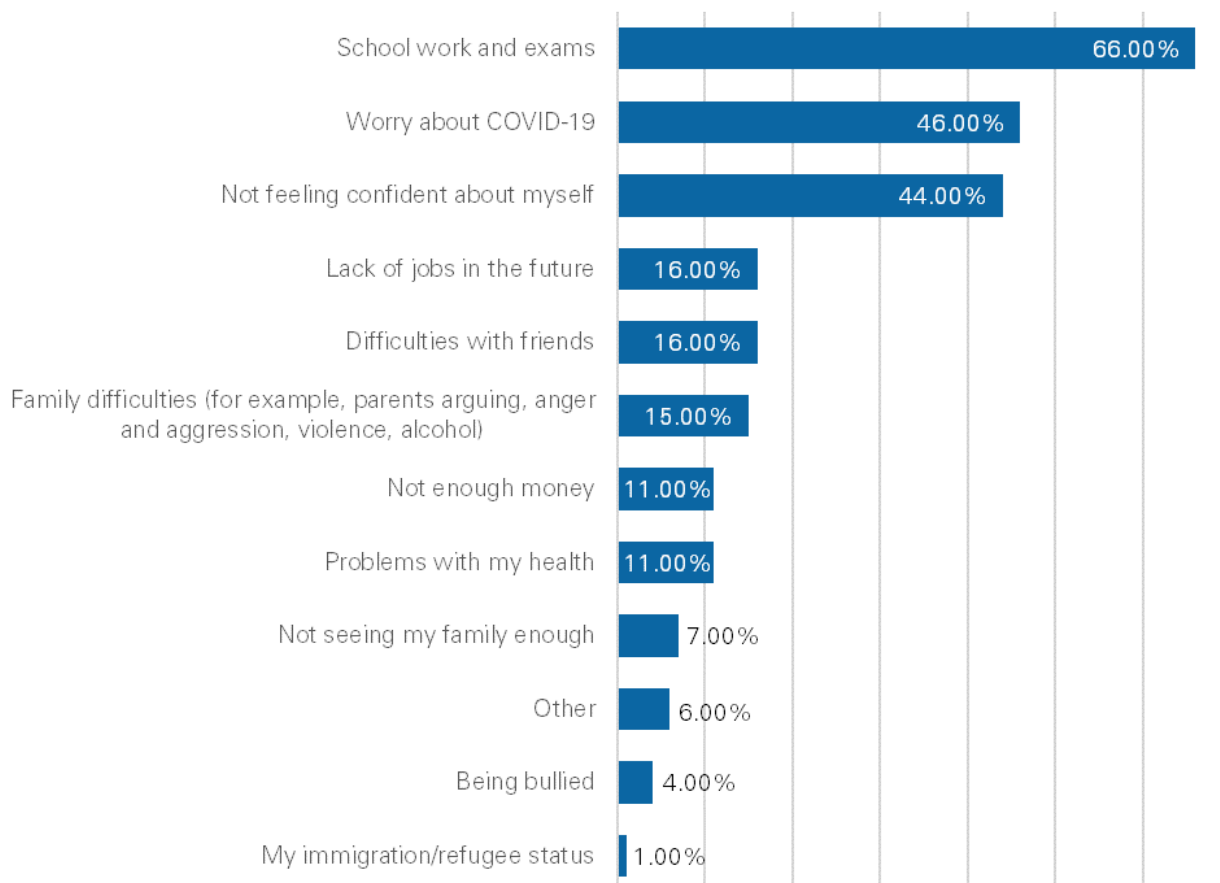
### What is difficult in children's lives today?

In 2020, children living in the European Union are clearly living with high levels of anxiety and stress. They are mainly **concerned about their schoolwork, self-confidence, being accepted by others, lack of jobs in the future and, not surprisingly, the impact of COVID-19**, with levels of stress increasing with age. Older children also cite family difficulties more frequently (20 per cent of 17-year-olds compared to 6 per cent

of 11-year-olds). Girls report all difficulties more frequently than boys, with lack of self-confidence being a clear outlier where boys and girls have a very different experience (29 per cent of boys compared to 51 per cent of girls). Girls also report higher levels of school pressure and conflict with family members and friends.

Among minorities, LGBTQ+ children are more likely to be worried about the lack of self-confidence (71 per cent), bullying (9 per cent), family difficulties (34 per cent), lack of jobs in the future (27 per cent) and health problems

**Chart 12. EU countries:** What is difficult in your life right now? At home, school, etc. (Tick all that apply)







(26 per cent). Migrant children and children from ethnic minorities are more worried about financial concerns (35 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively); 18 per cent of migrant children state that their migrant or refugee status was one of the most difficult things in their life at the moment. Children with disabilities are more concerned than other groups about their health, with 29 per cent of respondents indicating health as a difficulty in their lives. Of children whose parents are not employed, 32 per cent report that not having enough money is the most difficult thing in their life right now, which is significantly higher compared to children whose parents are employed (8 per cent).

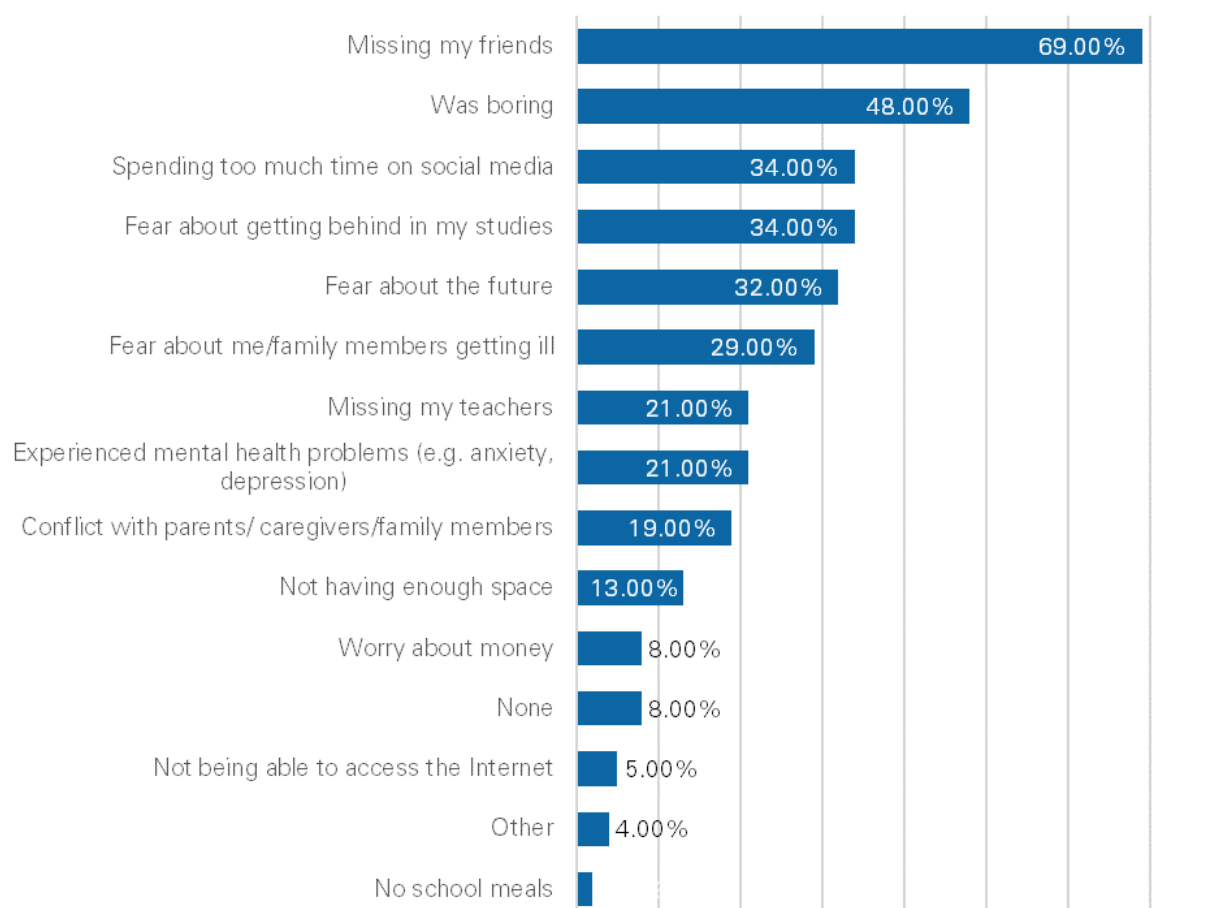
School work and exams (42 per cent) and lack of jobs in the future (24 per cent) are pressing concerns for respondents from the wider European region as well. Children from the wider European region are more concerned about lack of money (17 per cent)

compared with to their peers in the EU. Lack of self-confidence, which is the second biggest worry for children in the EU countries, does not resonate among children in the wider European region, with only 13 per cent indicating it to be a major challenge.

## The impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly had a huge impact on the lives of children, especially the most vulnerable. However, children from all parts of Europe also identify some positive aspects in relation to the pandemic. When asked about the positive aspects of staying at home and not going to school due to COVID-19-related restrictions, more than half of the EU respondents indicate that they liked being with their family more – overall, the presence of the family is mentioned as a factor that contributes to children's happiness.

**Chart 13. EU countries:** During the Coronavirus pandemic, what were the biggest problems that you faced when staying at home and not going to school? (Tick all that apply)





**Almost half of the respondents from the EU also appreciate that distance learning helped them work at their own speed (50 per cent), they enjoyed having time to do more creative things (46 per cent), and they discovered more about how to learn online (44 per cent). Having more time with the family (64 per cent<sup>46</sup>) and to play (40 per cent<sup>47</sup>) and finding new ways to communicate with friends (40 per cent<sup>48</sup>) were more important to younger respondents.** Boys and girls also

prioritize some aspects differently. Girls especially appreciate the opportunity to be creative, whereas boys mention time to play as an important positive aspect much more frequently, a factor that may be a consequence of the younger range of respondents who identified as boys. Very similar figures are found from children in the wider European region.

Despite the positives, however, the pandemic has undoubtedly also affected children's lives negatively, especially in terms of their ability to connect with each other. Within the EU, although many children enjoyed finding new ways to communicate, the social impacts of the pandemic were the biggest problem mentioned by children, with 69 per cent of the children missing their friends during the lockdowns – girls especially, since 73 per cent of them report having missing their friends, compared to 62 per cent of boys.

Almost half (48 per cent) of respondents report having been bored. Spending too much time on social media, fear of falling behind with their studies, fear about the future and fear of family members of the respondents themselves falling ill with COVID-19 are mentioned by around a third of respondents from the EU – all of them far more frequently reported by girls than boys. Age affected how children experienced the pandemic. Younger children were more likely to miss their teachers (39 per cent of 11-year-olds compared to 18 per cent of 17-year-olds), whereas older respondents report having had higher levels of stress related to money, conflict with parents and family members, mental health issues, fear about falling behind

with their studies and fear about the future. The uncertainty of the future is much more concrete for older adolescents approaching the end of their studies, who are having to make choices about their future during a pandemic. Older respondents also report spending too much time on social media and lacking space, even though they are less likely to have siblings living with them in the same household.

Again, children from the wider European region report very similar experiences. They highlight the stress of isolation, anxiety related to fear of falling ill and the difficulty of online learning as a negative impact. Adjusting to online learning has required significant efforts from many. However, some differences are highlighted by children from the wider European region. They report significantly higher levels of concern about COVID-19: 65 per cent of the respondents indicate that worry about COVID-19 was the most difficult thing in their lives at the moment. In a focus group discussion with Roma children in Albania, for example, children reflected on how the financial stress on their parents caused by the pandemic has made them unhappy. One child explained:

**“The parents frequently said to us that we did not have enough money because they could not sell at the market.”**

(Focus group participant, Albania)

The pandemic has hit the most vulnerable children the hardest. **Among minorities within the EU, LGBTQ+ children report significantly higher rates of experiencing mental health problems (53 per cent) than other groups of children.** Increasing worry about money and not having enough space can also be detected among all minorities. Children whose parents do not work report worry related to money more frequently than those whose parents are employed (13 per cent compared to 7 per cent).

<sup>46</sup> Of 11-year-olds.

<sup>47</sup> Of 11-year-olds.

<sup>48</sup> Of 11-year-olds.





Children from other parts of the world share some of the same worries with respondents from Europe: COVID-19 and schoolwork and exams worry many. Most respondents miss their friends and almost half of them say that they are bored. Fear about getting behind in studies, missing teachers and fear about the future are also mentioned by around a third of the respondents. What is striking is the higher levels of children mentioning family difficulties (19 per cent) and worry about money (35 per cent), which reflects the levels of child poverty in some respondents' countries.<sup>49</sup>

The impact of COVID-19 in increasing child poverty has been devastating. UNICEF and Save the Children estimate that 150 million additional children will fall into poverty because of the economic impact of COVID-19.<sup>50</sup> Some of the impacts of the lockdown are echoed by children from a focus group in Ghana, where some children mention school drop-out, child marriage and the impact of lockdowns on their parents' income.

In addition, World Vision's child consultations on COVID-19<sup>51</sup>, for example, corroborate these smaller-scale findings, showing that children express clear understanding of the importance of complying with the lockdown measures but articulate a great sense of social justice, a desire to continue serving others, and finding ways to use their voices to support the vulnerable and marginalized. Even though all the young respondents in this study thought of themselves as living in poverty, they are aware that there are other people in their communities who are even more disadvantaged than them and pointed out the effects of the measures on inclusion. They insist on the need for children to play a pivotal role in using their social networks for awareness raising and protection or sharing technology access.

<sup>49</sup> Queens University Belfast and NGO partners (2020): [#CovidUnder19 : Life Under Coronavirus – results of the survey](#) (including Eurochild, World Vision, Save the Children and Child Fund Alliance).

<sup>50</sup> Save the Children and UNICEF (2020), [Impact of COVID-19 on multidimensional child poverty](#).

<sup>51</sup> World Vision (2020), [Children's voices in the time of COVID-19: Continued child activism in the face of personal challenges](#).

## Recommendations

- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee should call on:
  - » The European Commission, EU Member States and partner countries to focus on any public health crisis response and its effects on children. Children often bear the brunt of the negative, indirect impact of COVID-19 measures that exasperate inequalities, increase violence, threaten livelihoods and have taken millions of children out of school, of which many, particularly girls, will never return. The European Commission, EU Member States and partner countries should analyse the effects of planned COVID (or other health) measures on children from the beginning and design measures to ameliorate the negative impact on children.
  - » EU Member States and partner countries to adopt measures to mitigate experiences of increasing poverty and inequality caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. EU Member States and partner countries should take measures to ensure that online education is accessible to all, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. National authorities should also ensure that children continue to receive the support that they used to receive when schools were open. For example, some children have gone hungry as a result of school closures. Finally, families across the world must be supported as they have already experienced increased levels of poverty due to the economic crisis caused by COVID-19.
- The Child Guarantee should call on:
  - » The European Commission and EU Member States to take an integrated approach to tackling child poverty and support children growing up in poverty to access quality and affordable services, and support parents' access to resources in line with the 2013 Investing in Children Recommendation. As indicated from the results of this study, children in migration, children from ethnic minorities and children whose parents are not working are particularly worried about their family's finances, which do not allow them to have opportunities equal to their peers'. Therefore, the European Commission should consider the strong links between parents' unemployment and access to services in its Child Guarantee proposal.
  - » European Commission and EU Member States to create synergies between the Child Guarantee and the Youth Guarantee. Many children participating in this survey are worried about jobs in the future.<sup>52</sup> Linking the Child and the Youth Guarantee could be useful to further identify and reach young people in need of support and to improve the transition from education to work.

<sup>52</sup> Children shared the same concern in the [Europe Kids Want survey](#).



## The Future

**Equality, education and violence are the biggest priorities for children.** Across all groups in all regions, children's most pressing priority is the focus on equity and equality: all children being treated in the same way, regardless of their background, is the most important priority for 72 per cent of the respondents from the EU. Fighting violence against children (63 per cent), ensuring access to education for all (58 per cent) and ensuring that children can grow up in their family or by someone who takes care of them in a loving environment (56 per cent) are also issues of critical concern to more than half of the respondents from EU countries.

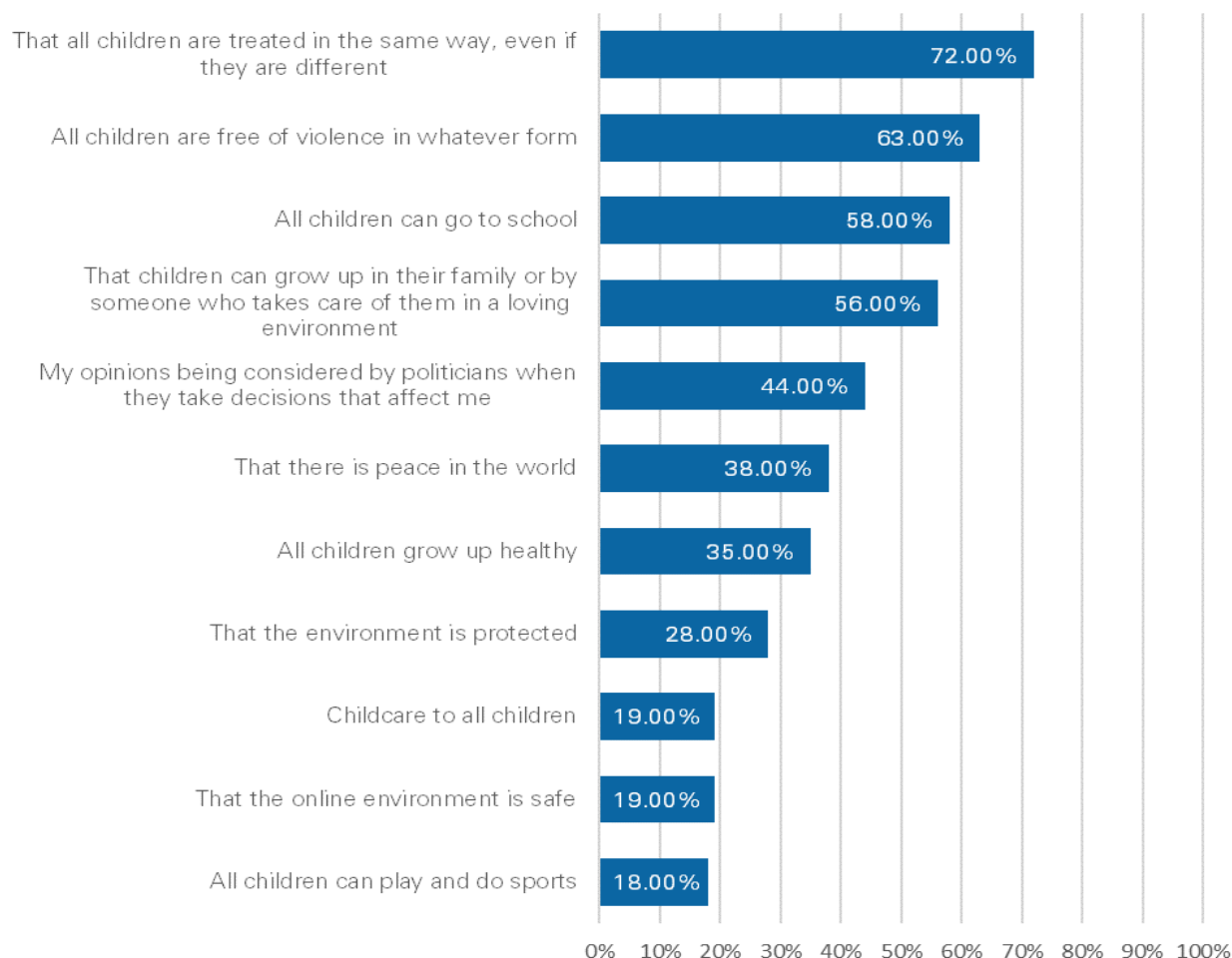
There are some gender differences in how children responded. Equity and equality, education and fighting violence against children are especially important for girls, whereas boys value health, safe online environments and sports. There are no significant differences between minority groups, but equity is particularly important

to LGBTQ+ children (87 per cent). One area where differences emerge is that children from the wider European region give significantly less weight to environmental protection compared to peers in the EU, where more than one in four children indicate it as a priority.

Children do, however, express strong support for seeing EU action across other areas as well, including participation in decision making (44 per cent), peace (38 per cent), health (35 per cent) and environmental protection (28 per cent). The importance of participation in decision making increases with age, whereas younger respondents put more emphasis on play and sports. Although children whose parents are not employed rate the options quite similarly, they clearly place more emphasis on providing childcare to all children (31 per cent, compared to 18 per cent of children whose both parents are employed).



**Chart 14. EU countries:** What do you think the EU should make a priority for children? (Choose five things that are most important to you.)



In addition to the priorities included in the questionnaire, some children draw attention to other issues. Unaccompanied minors interviewed in France, for example, are critical of the EU's handling of the migration crisis

and wish for more focus from the EU on resolving the problems that children face from the countries they are from, as demonstrated in the statement below:

**“All the responsibilities are based on the European Union. If we leave everything to come here, it’s because there’s a reason. Instead of fighting against immigration, they should fight against the war, against what forces people to flee.”**

(Unaccompanied minor from Western Africa, France)

## Recommendations

Equity and equality, education and protection from violence, as well as child protection and child participation, should be the cornerstones of focus for the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee. They should include clear mechanisms and targets on how the two will substantially address legal, policy and spending gaps in these areas, both internally and externally.

Hence, we are calling the European Commission to promote children's rights in the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee and ensure that the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee prioritize:

**Equal treatment for all children with particular attention to children in vulnerable situations.** According to children's feedback from EU Member States and third countries, it is clear that both the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee should focus on promoting children's rights and ensuring that children grow up in inclusive societies. According to the results from this study, it seems that children with disabilities, LGBTQ+ children, children in migration, children belonging to ethnic minorities and children growing up in low-income families are the ones most often discriminated against. Both frameworks should pay attention to these groups of children. They should prioritize closing the EU legal non-discrimination gap and urge EU Member States and partner countries to prioritize the rights of the most vulnerable children in national policy and legislation, ensuring that all children enjoy treatment equal to how their peers are treated. In particular, the Child Guarantee should urge EU Member States to take all appropriate measures to secure these children's equal access to free health care, decent housing, adequate nutrition, free education, free early childhood education and care, and leisure activities. Finally, and as an outcome from the results of this study, children without parental care should be particularly supported. The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee should call on EU Member States and partner countries to take all appropriate measures to strengthen families and prevent children's admission to the child protection system, unless this is in the best interest of the child. Once in the care system, children should be placed in quality family-based or family-like environments in which they receive individualized care.

**Equal access to quality education for all children from early childhood education and care until secondary education.** Education should be free for all children and, whenever needed, children should be supported to participate equally in the educational procedure. Education should also be of good quality. Children should be consulted on the lessons provided in schools and their views should shape the education curriculum. School settings should also provide children with a safe environment to learn and should promote an inclusive culture. Schools should adopt a zero-tolerance approach towards bullying. Teachers, as well as other professionals, should be trained to protect children in the school environment. Children with disabilities as well as children in migration should be supported in following mainstream education.

**Measures to stop violence against children.** Protecting children from all forms of violence should be considered a cornerstone of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child should call on the European Commission and EU Member States, as well as partner countries, to ban all forms of violence against children and prioritize combatting violence against children in EU and national legislation and policies. EU Member States and partner countries should design and implement programmes aimed at preventing violence against children or in supporting children to recognize and report incidents of violence. Child protection systems must be strengthened to provide individualized support to child victims of violence.

**Children's participation in decision making.** Child participation must be embedded in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee. Both frameworks should call on EU Member States and partner countries to develop structures that will allow children's meaningful participation in decision-making procedures. The European Commission should also develop relevant mechanisms that will allow children in the most vulnerable situations to participate in decision-making procedures.

**Children's access to mental-health support.** Almost 1 in 10 respondents to this survey report living with mental health problems such as depression or anxiety, and a fifth of respondents indicate that they feel sad most of the time. Children have reported that they feel this way due to stress to perform well at school, stress over their future, and difficult relationships with family and friends, often due to discrimination. The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee should urge EU Member States and partner countries to address the significant barriers faced by discriminated groups with higher risks of mental health needs and to direct financial resources towards strengthening mental health services and ensuring that they are free, accessible and of good quality. EU Member States and partner countries should also invest in preventive measures, such as supporting children's access to sports and leisure activities, and in education systems that are inclusive and promote acceptance. Finally, both frameworks should call on EU Member States and partner countries to design and deliver awareness-raising activities to tackle stigma around mental health problems.



# Resources and references

- [Joint Position paper on a Comprehensive EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#)
- The EU Alliance for Investing in Children: [Contribution to the EC public consultation on the Child Guarantee](#)
- The EU Alliance for Investing in Children: [Joint statement on protecting children and their families during and after the COVID-19 crisis](#)
- The EU Alliance for Investing in Children: [Proposal for a Council Recommendation on the Child Guarantee](#)
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# Appendices

## I. Methodology

### Online questionnaire

The consultations were conducted in two streams: 1) an online questionnaire with 51 questions, mostly multiple choice and translated by local partners into 20 languages; and 2) focus group discussions, both face to face and online. While the translations were most often reviewed by several people to ensure they were as close to the original English questionnaire as possible, some nuances might have been lost in translation.

The questionnaire (available in Annex II) was developed by a group of child rights experts based on a template provided by the European Commission. The questionnaire was reviewed by a group of more than 20 children and young people, who responded to a test questionnaire and provided comments and feedback on the length, themes, formulation of the questions and child-friendliness. The questionnaire also went through an ethical review by three independent experts to ensure it was safe and respected the respondents' privacy and the confidentiality of the information they provided. For reasons related to informed consent to participate in data collection and research, the online questionnaire targeted children aged 11 to 17. The responses, therefore, do not necessarily reflect the reality of younger children.

The questionnaire was disseminated online, notably on social media, by the organizations coordinating the consultations as well as by their local offices and partner organizations. A detailed account of all the organizations involved can be found in the Acknowledgements section. The questionnaire was also promoted by the European Commission and during the European Forum on Child Rights. Given that the questionnaire was disseminated online, it is likely that it excludes children who do not have access to the internet nor are interacting with any of the organizations involved in these consultations.

### Participation by region

The vast majority of the responses to the survey, over 8,000, came from member countries of the European Union, notably from Lithuania (1,771), Romania (1,454), Denmark (960), Ireland (902), Germany (771), Poland (632), Spain (278), Hungary (186), Italy (185), Portugal (165), France (153), Finland (141) and Slovenia (128).

The second largest group of respondents were children from non-EU countries in the European region (almost 1,500). More than two thirds of these responses were from Albania (1,096 respondents), with multiple respondents also from Iceland (205 respondents), Kosovo (96 respondents), Switzerland (25), the United Kingdom (17) and Serbia (15). Due to the strong representation from some countries and less from others, the responses here should be considered indicative and not representative of the entire wider European region.

The online survey was available to collect responses from all countries in the world – 274 children from other parts of the world responded, notably from Mexico (43), the United States (27), India (26), Uganda (24), Afghanistan (21), Burkina Faso (20) and Paraguay (13). However, given the small sample size and the variety of socio-economic contexts in which the responding children



live – ranging from some of the richest to some of the poorest countries in the world – these results are not representative of the multiple realities and experiences of children globally. These children are a heterogeneous group, with children living in care, with disabilities or living in refugee camps. They do, however, provide a glimpse of what children outside of Europe think of the role of the EU in protecting children's rights and what they hope the EU will act on.

Due to the smaller size of minority groups represented among respondents from the countries outside the EU, we were not able to do a similar level of disaggregation of data from the online discussions with enough confidence in the results to be included in the report. Nevertheless, several focus group discussions with vulnerable groups were organized in some of these countries to illustrate the experiences of minorities especially in the wider European region.

## **Inclusion of vulnerable groups in the online questionnaire from the European Union countries**

Given the smaller number of minorities represented from countries outside the European Union, the data were only disaggregated by minority groups in the analysis for the European Union countries. Therefore, information regarding the participation of vulnerable groups is only included here for the countries of the European Union.

### **Children with disabilities**

Out of all children who indicated having a disability or long-term health condition, 4.8 per cent (117) of the respondents from EU countries indicated that they have a physical disability, 4.2 per cent (102) an intellectual disability, 7.4 per cent (178) a sensory disability, 2.9 per cent autism (71), 6.5 per cent (156) a specific learning difficulty (e.g. dyslexia), 28.0 per cent (676) a mental health problem, and 18.9 per cent (457) another long-term illness or other medical condition. Younger respondents were much more unsure whether they had a disability or other long-term health condition – 54.4 per cent (68) of 11-year-olds, compared to 32.2 per cent (185) of 17-year-olds in the EU countries.

### **Minority groups**

Out of the 7,669 respondents who answered the question related to background, 6.8 per cent (524) of the respondents from EU countries identified themselves as belonging to an ethnic minority, 0.6 per cent (46) as asylum seekers, 1.6 per cent (524) as migrants and 12.8 per cent (982) as LGBTQ+. Other young people did not identify belonging to any of the groups above, did not wish to indicate it or answered 'other', with many children claiming identities such as 'vegetarian', 'footballer' or belonging to a religious or political group.

### **Parental employment**

Most children from EU countries live in households where both parents work (76.3 per cent; 6,146); 13.6 per cent (1,097) live in a household where only the father works, and 6.1 per cent (491) in a household where only the mother works. Four per cent (322) live in households where neither parent works. As the questionnaire did not include information regarding family income, parental non-employment has been used as a proxy measure for child poverty. It is interesting to note that children with physical, intellectual or sensory disabilities or autism were more likely to live in families where only one parent worked (usually the father). This could be related to mothers staying home to support their children.

## Analysis of the data

The data for these consultations were collected through [SurveyMonkey](#). Simple cross tabulations were done to detect whether different groups had responded differently to the questions. The differences between these groups were assessed for statistical significance using a [test provided by SurveyMonkey](#) with a confidence level of 95 per cent, and was only included if the difference was statistically significant. No further statistical analysis has been done on the results, but further analysis could uncover some of the relationships between different overlapping deprivations that some groups of children face.

## Focus group discussions

Focus group discussions were organized in 10 countries in Europe and one country outside the region, Ghana. These groups targeted multiple different vulnerable groups, such as children with disabilities, Roma and other ethnic minority children, migrant and asylum-seeking children, children in care and children living in poverty. Most of the participating children were between the ages of 9 and 17. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, reaching younger children proved to be a challenge, and should be kept in mind when analysing the results of these consultations.

Below is a breakdown of participation and target groups by country:

Country	Number of discussions	Number of children	Target group
Albania	21	239	Children living in poverty, Roma children, ethnic minorities, returnees from EU countries, asylum seeking children, children with disabilities
Bulgaria	1	N/A	Roma children
Croatia	7	64	N/A
Cyprus	2	18	Single parent children, migrant children, children with dual nationality
France	5	27	Migrant children, asylum seeking children
Ghana	1	20	N/A
Kosovo	3	29	Ethnic minorities, children with disabilities
Portugal	8	56	Children living in poverty, children in care, Roma children
Slovenia	3	13	Children in care, LGBTQ+ children, UNICEF Junior Ambassadors
Spain	4	21	Children with disabilities, Roma children
Ukraine	1	12	Children living in care
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>499</b>	

All focus group discussions were guided by a questionnaire template that followed a format similar to the online questionnaire (full questionnaire for focus group discussions can be found in Annex III). A package with information about facilitation, safeguarding and data processing was developed for the coordinators and facilitators to ensure that the focus group discussions were conducted safely and with the consent of the participating children and their parents or caregivers.

Some of the discussions were organized face to face, while others had to be conducted online due to COVID-19-related restrictions. In many countries, however, initial plans regarding focus group discussions were not realized because of the barriers posed by the pandemic. Despite these limitations, focus group discussions were conducted in a variety of countries and with many vulnerable groups, and provide important insights that elaborate the findings of the online questionnaire.

## **Information from other consultations**

In addition to covering the consultations run for the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee, this report reflects some of the findings of a consultation conducted by World Vision in mid-2020 to explore the views of children living in deprived contexts and their experiences related to climate change. The consultation included questions on the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. The consultation sought to also capture children's ideas on how to engage in initiatives to support advocacy messages on climate action and environmental sustainability, as well as the intersection between climate change and children's rights. The research sample in this study is a purposeful sample and included 121 children and young people (74 girls and 47 boys) between the ages of 10 and 17 from 12 countries (Albania, Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Chile, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Mongolia, Nicaragua, Romania, and Sierra Leone). Selection criteria considered gender, age, ability, religion, geographic region, context (i.e. fragile context representation), location (i.e. rural versus urban), and ethnicity to ensure diverse perspectives. The results relevant to the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child are included in the section on the environment. The project used online one-to-one interviews and focus groups discussions on social media platforms.

Whenever relevant, this report also integrates findings from research and mostly other consultations with children conducted by the organizations involved to validate some of the findings and fill in gaps where these consultations were not able to provide information.



## II. Online questionnaire

### What is the consultation for?

The European Union (EU) wants your help!

The EU is a group of countries in Europe that work together on various issues such as the rights of its citizens. Its government is the European Commission.

The European Commission is preparing two major pieces of work for children:

1. A Strategy on how the EU and countries in the EU best can protect child rights. Children have many rights, which are all described in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Strategy will try to help ensure that they are all met for all children. It will be published at the beginning of 2021.
2. A Child Guarantee initiative which will work to make sure that every child in the EU has access to all the services they need so that they have an equal chance to develop themselves and reach their full potential.

And they are asking for your input to this work.

### Why is your opinion important?

The Commission wants to find out from children and young people what are their experiences and whether their rights are being met. We would like to hear directly from you, as “children are experts on children” with the most direct experience of own lives. You can help the EU to better understand the challenges you face and help us prioritize and suggest solutions.

### How will you be consulted?

This survey has been written to get your input. Five international organisations have been helping the European Commission to prepare it. These organisations are UNICEF, Save the Children, EuroChild, World Vision and Child Fund Alliance and we hope to reach out to children all over Europe to complete it. You do not have to live in an EU country to complete it. We expect that the questions will take between 20-30 minutes at most to complete. We have been helped by an advisory group of children and young people to make sure the questions are ‘child-friendly’ and make sense for you. All of your inputs will be compiled in a report, which will inform the development of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee.

The survey answers are completely confidential. Your answers will be anonymous, and you will not be asked for your name.

Taking part in this survey is completely voluntary. If you decide to take part, please click ‘Yes’ and next below and that will take you to the survey questions. If you do not want to take part, you can just leave the survey by clicking the X at the top of the screen. If you agree and then change your mind you can stop taking part by clicking out of the survey. You can skip any question you do not want to answer by scrolling down to the next question or clicking the NEXT button at the bottom of each page.

If at any point during the survey you want to talk to someone about your thoughts, feelings or problems, follow this link to find a child helpline in your country: <https://www.childhelplineinternational.org/child-helplines/child-helpline-network/>

The reports as well as the final Strategy and Guarantee will be made publicly available and be shared with all children that have been involved in the process.

Once they are adopted, we will give you feedback on how your opinions have informed the Strategy on the rights of the child. Stay tuned.

We want this EU strategy on the rights of the child to be for and with children.

Thank you! We are extremely grateful for your participation!

Do you agree to take part in the survey?

- Yes

Is anybody helping you (the child) with this survey?

- Yes
- No

Are you under 15 years old?

- Yes
- No

If yes, you will need to ask permission from your parent or caregiver to participate in this survey. You will now be taken to a page that will give your parents some information about the survey and your participation. You should consult them before responding.

### **Parental Consent: Consultations with children on the European Union Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee**

The European Commission is preparing two major pieces of work for children:

A Strategy on how the EU and countries in the EU best can protect child rights. The Strategy will try to help ensure that they are all met for all children. It will be published at the beginning of 2021.

A Child Guarantee initiative which will work to make sure that every child in the EU has access to all the services they need so that they have an equal chance to develop themselves and reach their full potential.

To support these projects, UNICEF, Eurochild, Save the Children, World Vision and Child Fund are launching this online survey to collect children's opinions and information about their overall well-being. The results of these consultations will be published as a report that will be submitted to the European Commission.

The data collected is anonymous and the child's identity will not be disclosed at any point. The resulting data will only be accessed by staff and associates of these organizations who are working on this project and the resulting report. Participation in the survey is completely voluntary, and children may at any point choose not to participate.

To protect the confidential nature of all research, participating children should fill in the survey in privacy.

If you have any questions related to this research, do not hesitate to contact the project managers:

Louise Thivant, [lthivant@unicef.org](mailto:lthivant@unicef.org)

Mieke Schuurman, [mieke.schuurman@eurochild.org](mailto:mieke.schuurman@eurochild.org)

Do you agree to your child or the child in your care to participate in this research?

- Yes
- No

### The first set of questions are about you

1. Which one of the following describes you best?

- Boy
- Girl
- Neither
- I don't want to say

2. What age are you?

- 11
- 12
- 13
- 14
- 15
- 16
- 17

3. What country do you live in?

4. Where do you live?

- I live at home
- I live in a children's residential home
- I live in a detention centre
- I live in a camp for refugees or migrants
- I live in a centre for homeless people
- I live somewhere else (Please tell us where you live)

5. Who do you live with?

- I live with my parent(s)/caregivers
- I live with other relatives (e.g. grandparent(s), aunt, uncle)
- I live with a foster family
- I live with someone else (Please tell us who this is)

6. Do you live with other children (that means anyone under the age of 18 years)?

- I don't have any brothers or sisters
- I have brother/sister(s), but they don't live with me
- 1 brother or sister
- 2 brothers or sisters



- 3 brothers or sisters
- 4 or more
- I live with other children that are not my siblings

**7.** Do you have a long-term disability, illness or medical condition?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

**8.** If yes, what disability/medical condition do you have? (Please tick all that apply)

- Physical disability (e.g. walking or getting around)
- Intellectual disability (e.g. finding it hard to understand things or remember things)
- Sensory disability (e.g. hearing, seeing or both)
- Autism
- Communication (e.g. talking to others, stammering)
- Specific learning difficulty (e.g. dyslexia)
- Mental health condition (e.g. anxiety or depression)
- Other long-term condition (e.g. asthma, diabetes, chronic fatigue)
- I'm not sure

**9.** Which of the following groups/communities, if any, do you feel you belong to? (Please tick all that apply)

- Minority ethnic community
- Asylum seekers
- Migrant community
- LGBTQ+ community
- None of these
- I don't want to say
- Other

**10.** Do your parents/caregivers work?

- Yes, both parents/caregivers work
- Only my mother works
- Only my father works
- None of them works

**Now we want to find out whether you have heard about children's rights and the EU**

**11.** Have you heard about the rights of the child (e.g. go to school, not be hurt, be listened to, go to a doctor)?

- Yes
- No

**12.** If yes, where have you learned about the rights of the child? (Tick all that apply.)

- School
- Family
- Friends
- Professional (e.g. youth worker, doctor, lawyer)
- Online
- Book
- Organization working for children
- Other

**13.** In your personal life, which of the following adults respect that, as a child, you have rights? (Tick all that apply)

- Your parents, family and carers
- Your teachers
- Doctors and nurses
- Social workers
- Legal professionals (judges, lawyers)
- Police
- Authorities working in migration
- Media
- Youth workers
- The whole society
- None of them

**14.** Do you know what the European Union's (EU) is?

- Yes
- No

**15.** What would be the best way for you to receive information on what the EU is and its work to improve the lives of children? (Tick all that apply)

- Internet
- Television
- School material
- Written text (e.g. leaflet)
- Other

**The next few questions are about whether you get the services you need**

**16.** Have you been treated differently for any of the following reasons? (Tick all that apply)

- were born in a different country from where you now live
- belong to a different race or ethnicity
- are girl / boy / have another gender
- like people of your/ their same sex
- am questioning my gender
- have a disability
- have mental health problems
- live in in care (you don't live with your family)
- your family can't cover your basic needs
- had worse school results
- have special needs in education
- because of the way I look
- any other reason?
- I am not treated differently or worse than other children

**17.** At what age did you first go to pre-school/kindergarten/crèche?

**18.** Do you feel positive about being at school?

- Yes
- No

**19.** If no, what are the reasons? (tick all that apply)

- I am treated differently because of my economic background
- I am treated differently because of my religion
- I am treated differently because of my race/ethnicity/color
- I am treated differently because of my disability
- I am treated differently because of my sex/gender/sexuality
- I am treated differently because my parents are the same sex
- I am bullied
- The teachers are prejudiced against me
- I find the lessons hard
- There are often fights and conflict between students
- I don't have friends/am lonely
- I don't know why
- Other

If you wish to discuss any of these issues with an adult, a link will be provided at the end of this questionnaire where you can find your local child helpline.

**20.** What do you like about your school? (Tick all that apply)



- The teachers
- The lessons
- Being with my friends
- It is a safe space
- Doing sports
- The food at school
- There is nothing I do like
- Other

**21.** What would you like to change about school, for example? (Tick all that apply)

- More time to play
- More sports activities
- More arts subjects
- More science subjects
- For teachers to listen to students more
- A school council that made a difference
- Smaller classes
- To have a safe space
- More interesting lessons
- Less homework
- Less punishment
- Better school buildings
- Learning more about child rights
- Other

**22.** Are there things you have to pay for at school that you/your parents/carers cannot afford? (Tick all that apply)

- School meals
- Books
- Transport
- School trips
- Sports activities
- School uniform
- Afterschool activities (e.g. music, dance, foreign language clubs)
- Masks
- None
- I don't know
- Other

**23.** During the Coronavirus pandemic, what were the good things about staying at home and not going to school? (Tick all that apply)

- Enjoyed being with my family more
- Found new ways to communicate with friends
- Discovered more about how to learn online
- Helped me work at my own speed
- Enjoyed having more time to play
- Opportunity to do more creative things
- None
- Other

**24.** During the Coronavirus pandemic, what were the biggest problems that you faced when staying at home and not going to school? (Tick all that apply)

- Was boring
- Worry about money
- Conflict with parents/ caregivers/family members
- Missing my friends
- Missing my teachers
- Fear about the future
- Experienced mental health problems (e.g. anxiety, depression)
- No school meals
- Fear about getting behind in my studies
- Not being able to access the Internet
- Spending too much time on social media
- Fear about me/family members getting ill
- Not having enough space
- None
- Other

**25.** Do you think that what you learn at school is useful for your future?

- Yes very much
- To some extent
- Not very much
- Not at all
- Don't know

**We also want to find out about food and nutrition**

**26.** Is food served at your school at lunch time?

- Yes

- No lunch is served
- No lunch is served because our school finishes before lunch
- No lunch is served because we can go home for lunch

**27.** If you get school meals, what do you think about them? (Tick as many boxes as you want)

- Taste is good
- Good quality
- Poor quality
- Portions too small
- Often served cold
- Not enough time to eat
- Too expensive
- Prefer to bring my own
- Other

**28.** Do you always have enough to eat at home?

- Yes
- Mostly
- Sometimes
- No

**29.** Do you generally eat healthy food at home?

- Yes
- No

**The next few questions are about health care**

**30.** Do you have access to information about health and well-being? (Tick all that apply)

- Nutrition
- Hygiene
- Sex
- Tobacco
- Alcohol
- Mental health
- Other

**31.** If yes, is it from: (Tick all that apply)

- Parents/ caregivers
- Teachers
- Friends



- Online/ Social Media
- Health professionals (such as doctors, nurses, psychologists)
- Youth workers
- Other

**32.** Do you have access to the health services (including mental health services) you need?

- Yes I can access all the help I need
- I can access most of the help I need
- I only have limited access
- No services are available
- Parents /caregivers cannot afford the services I need

**33.** Do you ever feel sad or unhappy?

- Never
- Rarely
- About once a month
- About once a week
- Most of the time

**34.** If you do feel sad or unhappy, is it because you are: (Tick all that apply)

- Lonely
- Anxious about the future
- Worried about money
- Worried about your parents/family
- Arguing with your parents/brothers or sisters
- Arguing with friends
- Finding school difficult
- Being bullied/ cyberbullied
- Other

**35.** If you sometimes feel sad or unhappy, do you: (Tick all that apply)

- Get help online
- Have a friend to talk to
- Have an adult to provide support (for example, a parent, teacher, counsellor or therapist)
- Read books to help you
- Do more sports or exercise
- Use meditation or other form of help
- None of the above
- Other

### The next questions are about where you live

**36.** What do you think about the neighbourhood where you live? (Tick all that apply)

- A safe area to play
- Lots of parks and activities
- Good shops
- Near my friends
- Dangerous to go out at night
- Nothing to do
- Too polluted
- Lots of crime and violence
- Good public transportation
- Accessible to children with disabilities
- Other

**37.** What do you like/not like about your own home (or the place where you live)? (Tick all that apply)

- There is fast wifi
- I have no access to wifi/digital equipment
- I have space to do my homework
- I have games and activities
- There is a garden to play in
- There is not enough space
- It is too cold in the winter
- There is no hot water
- It is very noisy
- I have my own room
- I have to share a room
- Other

### And now a couple of questions about your activities and participation

**38.** What are the sports, hobbies, cultural and other fun activities that you do in your free time? List up to three activities.

**39.** Are you ever unable to take part in activities because you cannot afford them?

- Yes

	Never	Sometimes	Always
Parents/caregivers			
Teachers			
Social/youth workers			
Doctors/nurses			
Local municipality or authority			
National government			
European Union			

- No

**40.** What is difficult for you in your life now? At home, school, etc. (Tick all that apply)

- Not enough money
- Worry about COVID-19
- School work and exams
- Lack of jobs in the future
- Family difficulties (for example, parents arguing, anger and aggression, violence, alcohol)
- Difficulties with friends
- Being bullied
- Not feeling confident about myself
- My immigration/refugee status
- Not seeing my family enough
- Problems with my health
- Other

**41.** When adults take decisions that affect you, do they ask for your opinion?

**42.** If you have shared your opinion in the past, do you think it made a difference?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes
- It depends on the topic
- I don't know

**43.** If you have replied no to the previous question, would you like to have your opinion listened to more?



- Yes
- No
- I don't know

#### Next are a couple of questions on keeping children safe

**44.** What do you think would help to stop children getting hurt (e.g. hitting, bullying, physical or sexual violence)? (Tick all that apply)

- Programmes at schools to tackle bullying and violence against children
- Public information to prevent violence against children (e.g. in TV or internet)
- Support for children who suffer violence to help them feel better
- More social workers
- Better laws to make violence against children illegal
- Being able to talk to someone about getting hurt (e.g. helplines)
- Changing attitudes towards children
- Promoting emotional education
- In case of violence between children, helping children learn non-violent conflict resolution
- More awareness of people
- Other

**45.** Do you experience any of the following difficulties in accessing the Internet?

- My parents don't allow me to use the internet
- My teachers don't allow me to use the internet
- Getting access to devices (mobile phone, computer, tablet) is too expensive
- There is no signal or poor signal where I live
- Paying for internet/data is too expensive
- The internet doesn't provide what I want or need
- The internet is too difficult to use
- I don't have enough time to go online
- The internet is too time consuming
- I am worried about my privacy
- The internet is not for people of my age
- The internet is not for people like me
- None of these

**46.** In the past year, how often has something happened online or on your phone that has upset or bothered you?

- Never
- Just once or twice
- At least every month

- At least every week
- Daily or almost daily
- Prefer not to say

**47.** Have you received enough information to access and use the Internet safely?

- Yes, and it was useful
- No, I did not receive it, but I do not need it
- No, I did not receive it but would like more information
- I am not sure.

### **And finally, on the top priorities for the EU**

**48.** What do you think the EU should make a priority for children? (Choose five things that are the most important to you)

- My opinions being considered by politicians when they take decisions that affect me
- That all children are treated in the same way, even if they are different (regardless of, for example, gender, sexual orientation, disability, the country they come from, their ethnicity or their religion, parents are poor etc.)
- That children can grow up in their family or by someone who takes care of them in a loving environment
- That the online environment is safe
- All children are free of violence in whatever form
- All children grow up healthy
- All children can go to school
- All children can play and do sports
- That the environment is protected
- That there is peace in the world
- Childcare to all children
- Other

### **Thank you so much for taking part!**

If you want to talk to someone about your thoughts, feelings or problems, follow this link to find a child helpline in your country: <https://www.childhelplineinternational.org/child-helplines/child-helpline-network/>

# III. Focus group questionnaire

## Note to the facilitators:

This questionnaire should be used in conjunction with the Guide for Facilitators and Coordinators. It is anticipated that the FGD will take about 60-90 minutes. You can choose to leave out any questions that you feel might be difficult or not relevant for the participants, or if you consider the questionnaire too long.

Please provide a brief overview of the participants in the group to accompany your report on the FGD discussions:

- Ages
- Country
- Specific relevant characteristics (e.g. children with disabilities, in institutions, refugees and asylum seekers etc.)

With all the questions, allow the participants to start the discussion first and only use the prompts if you feel they do not understand the question or need some help to open up or broaden the discussion. You can also use the prompts as follow up questions and to help reach out to any member of the group that has not contributed. They should not be used to limit, or close down the scope of the children's ideas, thoughts or experiences.

## General questions: First we want to find out whether the children have heard about children's rights and the EU

1. Have you heard about the rights of the child (e.g. go to school, not be hurt, be listened to, go to a doctor ...)?

(Prompt to find out where they learned about children's rights and what they know)

2. Do you think adults respect children's rights?

(Possible suggestions about the types of adults in their lives e.g. parents, family and carers, teachers, doctors, nurses or social workers, judges, lawyers and police, youth workers, the media, people working in migration. Ask for illustrative examples of how their rights have or have not been respected)

3. Are you familiar with the European Union's (EU) work to promote and protect the rights of the child?

(Ask for examples of what they know)

4. Do you think you are treated differently from other children? Can you describe why you think that is?

(If necessary, you can provide some prompts e.g. being born in a different country from where you now live, different race or ethnicity, gender or sexuality, disability, poverty)

## Now we will move on to looking at education

5. How do you feel about school?

(Explore whether they feel positively or negatively about school, the reasons why and what they would like to see change. Where necessary possible prompts include e.g. background, religion, race or ethnicity, disability, gender or sexuality, bullying, struggling with schoolwork, fights and conflict between students. Also explore both what they like about school and things they would



like to change e.g. more playtime, more sports, arts, or science, teachers to listen more, a good school council, smaller classes, a safe space to go, more interesting lessons, less homework or less punishments)

**6.** Are there things you have to pay for at school and you/your parents cannot afford them?

(Possible prompts e.g. school meals, books, transport, school trips, school uniform. If possible, explore how they feel about this)

**7.** This year, following the Coronavirus pandemic, what were the good and the difficult things about staying at home and not going to school?

(Positive prompts e.g. being with my family more, new ways to communicate with friends, discovered more about how to learn online, helped me work at my own speed, enjoyed having more time to play, opportunity to do more creative things) Prompts on the challenges might include being boring, worry about money, conflict with parents, missing my friends, fear about the future, fear about falling behind, not being able to access the internet, fear about getting ill, worry about family members getting ill, feeling anxious and stressed)

**8.** Is food served at your school at lunch time?

(If they get school meals, explore what they think about them e.g. enjoyable, varied diet, good quality, poor quality, portions too small, often served cold, not enough time to eat, too expensive, cannot afford them, prefer to bring my own)

### **The next few questions are about health care**

**9.** Do you have access to information and health (including mental health) services you need in order to keep healthy?

(Possible prompts include nutrition, hygiene, [sex], tobacco, alcohol, mental health, etc. Also explore where they get information from, and any problems in accessing services)

**10.** Would you say you are generally happy with your life?

(Explore some of the reasons why or why not. Possible prompts around not being happy might include e.g. not enough money, worry about COVID-19, schoolwork and exams, lack of jobs in the future, family difficulties (for example, parents arguing, anger and aggression, violence, alcohol), being bullied, not feeling confident about myself, not seeing my family enough)

### **The next questions are about where you live**

**11.** What do you think about the neighbourhood where you live?

(Possible prompts e.g. safe area to play, lots of parks and activities, good shops, near my friends, dangerous to go out at night, nothing to do, too full of traffic, lots of crime and violence)

**12.** What do you like/not like about your own home/the place where you live in?

(Possible prompts e.g. my own room, sharing a room, fast Wi-Fi/no access to Wi-Fi/digital equipment, space to do homework, games and activities, garden to play in, not enough space, too cold in the winter, no hot water, noisy)

### **And now a couple of questions about your activities and being listened to**

**13.** What are the sports, hobbies, cultural and other fun activities that you do in your free time?

(Prompt to explore whether they are ever unable to take part in activities because they cannot

afford them, or what other barriers might prevent them taking part in them, such as physical barriers, poor transport, parental attitudes)

**14.** When adults take decisions that affect you, do they ask for your opinion?

(Encourage the participants to reflect on different adults in their lives and how much they listen, whether they felt it made a difference and if they would like to be listened to more)

**Next are a couple of questions on keeping children safe**

**15.** What would help to stop children getting hurt (e.g. hitting, bullying, physical or sexual violence)?

(Possible prompts e.g. programmes at schools to tackle bullying and violence against children, public information to prevent violence against children (e.g. in TV or internet), support for children who suffer violence to help them feel better, more social workers, better laws to make violence against children illegal, being able to talk to someone about getting hurt (e.g. helplines) , changing attitudes towards children, promoting emotional education, helping children learn non-violent conflict resolution)

**16.** Do you have difficulties accessing the internet? If so, what are the difficulties?

(Encourage them to describe where they get information and what more they would like)

And finally, on the top priorities for the EU

**17.** What do you think the EU should make a priority for children?

(Provide each participant with a printed list of the options and ask them to mark the five things that are the most important to them. Collect the lists afterwards for analysis)

- My opinions being considered by politicians when they take decisions that affect me
- That all children are treated in the same way, even if they are different (regardless of, for example, gender, disability, the country they come from, their ethnicity or their religion, parents are poor etc.)
- That children can grow up in their family or by someone who takes care of them in a loving environment
- That the online environment is safe
- That all children are free of violence in whatever form
- That all children grow up healthy (both physically and mentally)
- That all children can go to school
- That all children can play and do sports
- That the environment is protected
- That there is peace in the world
- Other

## IV. List of respondents per country

- Lithuania: 1,771
- Romania: 1,454
- Albania: 1,096
- Denmark: 960
- Ireland: 902
- Germany: 771
- Poland: 632
- Spain: 278
- Iceland: 205
- Hungary: 186
- Italy: 185
- Portugal: 165
- France: 153
- Finland: 141
- Slovenia: 128
- Greece: 103
- Kosovo: 96
- Croatia: 78
- Netherlands: 60
- Austria: 58
- Belgium: 53
- Mexico: 43
- Bulgaria: 42
- USA: 27
- Cyprus: 26
- India: 26
- Switzerland: 25
- Uganda: 24
- Afghanistan: 21
- Burkina Faso: 20
- Sweden: 17
- UK: 17
- Serbia: 15
- Paraguay: 13
- Andorra: 7
- Czech Rep: 7
- Angola: 6
- Bangladesh: 6
- Chile: 5
- Latvia: 5
- Malta: 5
- Antigua & Barbuda: 4
- Argentina: 4
- Moldova: 4
- Algeria: 3
- Armenia: 3
- Barbados: 3
- DR Congo: 3
- Ghana: 3
- Madagascar: 3
- Norway: 3
- Australia: 2
- Belize: 2
- Benin: 2
- Bolivia: 2
- Brazil: 2
- Colombia: 2
- Cuba: 2
- El Salvador: 2
- Georgia: 2
- Israel: 2
- Nepal: 2
- Peru: 2
- Slovakia: 2
- State of Palestine: 2
- Turkey: 2
- Azerbaijan 1
- Bahamas 1
- Bahrain 1
- Belarus 1
- Bhutan 1
- Bosnia and Herzegovina 1
- Cameroon 1
- China 1
- Cote d'Ivoire 1
- Djibouti 1
- Eritrea 1
- Estonia 1
- Guatemala 1
- Guyana 1
- Holy See 1
- Iran 1
- Iraq 1
- Japan 1
- Jordan 1
- Kazakhstan 1
- Kyrgyzstan
- Liberia 1
- Luxembourg 1
- Malaysia 1
- Maldives 1
- Marshall Islands 1
- Mauritius 1
- Mongolia 1
- Montenegro 1
- Namibia 1
- Nigeria 1
- Oman 1
- Qatar 1
- Russia 1
- Saint Lucia 1
- St. Vincent & Grenadines 1
- Syria 1
- Thailand 1
- Tunisia 1
- United Arab Emirates 1
- Venezuela 1
- Zambia 1







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