

# 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

## Summary



## Background

The European Union (EU) is committed to promoting and protecting the rights of children. It is undertaking two major pieces of work to contribute to making this commitment a reality:

- A Strategy on the Rights of the Child, 2021-2024
- A Child Guarantee to ensure every child in Europe at risk of poverty has access to essential services

To find out what children are experiencing and what they say needs to change, the EU approached five child rights organizations – Child Fund Alliance, Eurochild, Save the Children, UNICEF and World Vision – to consult with children on their lives, aspirations and concerns for the future. This report is a summary of the findings of that consultation with over 10,000 children aged 11–17 across Europe and beyond. For a copy of the full report, [see here](#).

**'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".'**

(Extract from the Child Advisory Board's foreword to the report)

While each child's life is unique and children's situations differ significantly, this report provides a coherent and insistent set of messages that speak to being a child in the 2020s. Many common themes emerge – discrimination and exclusion; lack of access to vital services; failures in the education system; high levels of violence; and continued failure to listen to, respect and consider children's views – with the most marginalized children facing the gravest challenges. Perhaps of greatest concern is that a fifth of children in the EU are growing up unhappy and anxious for the future. The findings highlight powerfully that we are failing to create environments for optimum childhoods for far too many children.

Significantly, the consultations took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had an unprecedented impact on children. It also limited the opportunity to contact many vulnerable children. Although some children highlight unexpected benefits of more family time and creative opportunities, the more dominant themes are those of greater anxiety, mental stress, loneliness, fear of falling behind and money problems. The longer the pandemic continues, the more significant these concerns will become. All recommendations proposed in this report need to consider the implications of this context.

Overall, the findings testify to the significant insights that children can bring to the table and affirm the imperative for ensuring that children's perspectives inform the economic, social, legal and policy frameworks and priorities of the EU. It is a clarion call for action.

**“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)

## Listen to us

A plea emerges from all children, regardless of circumstances, that they want to participate in decision-making processes about things that concern them. However, it is apparent that this happens far too rarely. The case for giving urgent attention to the concerns raised by children in this report is powerful. The distress and suffering documented throughout this report is testimony to the failures in getting these things right if adults with power and influence in their lives are not listening.

**Change needed at a minimum:** Child participation must be at the heart of the Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee. The EU and its Member States as well as third countries must invest in creating the necessary culture and structures, backed by financial resources, to ensure meaningful and child-rights-based participation in all decision-making processes at local, national and EU levels, including through awareness raising and training to build capacity and commitment.

**‘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.’**

(Extract from the Foreword to the report from the Child Advisory Board)

## Respect our rights

Encouragingly, almost all the children had heard about their rights. The problem arises in the extent to which they 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, the police or legal professionals, with only one in four children feeling that their rights are taken seriously in these contexts.

**“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)

**Change needed at a minimum:** The Strategy on the Rights of the Child should call on EU Member States and third countries to provide child rights education in schools and preschool, while all professionals working with children inside and outside school settings should receive training and be fully aware of children’s rights and ways of promoting them. The European Commission should invest more in its communication tools to reach children and inform them about how the EU protects and promotes children’s rights.

## Include us all equally

Discrimination seriously impedes the realization of children’s rights. A third of children have experienced some form of differential treatment, with far more girls being treated unequally. Over half of children with disabilities or children who are migrants, asylum seekers, from ethnic minorities or identify as LGBTQ+ have experienced differential treatment, with school emerging as the most challenging environment. This scale of discrimination and inequality has been corroborated by many other large-scale research reports.

**“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)

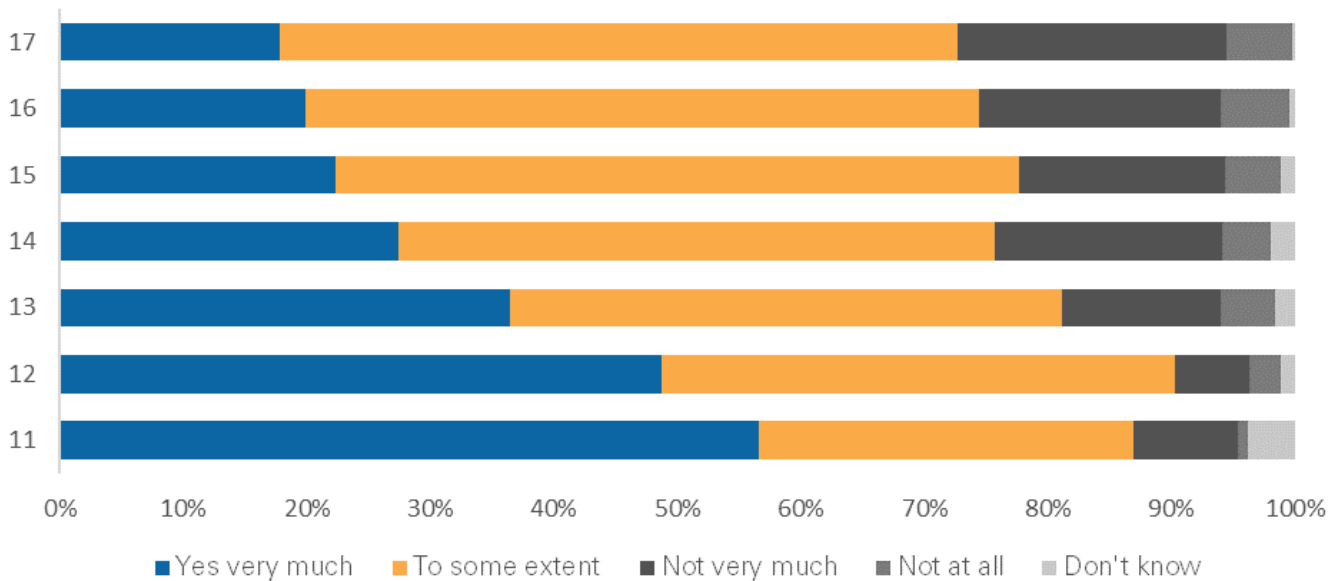
**Change needed at a minimum:** Addressing discrimination and ensuring equity and equality should be considered as cornerstones of the Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee. The EU’s discrimination directives must be made horizontal and more child focused, with existing non-discrimination legislation providing more child-specific mechanisms backed by programmes to support inclusion and equity.

# Make education relevant

Although many children are positive about school, far too many feel it is not designed to meet their needs, and their ideas for change are unheeded. Older children, particularly, highlight its failure to provide them with the tools and skills they need for the future, wanting more emphasis on life skills, art subjects, sports and children’s rights, and respect for their perspectives and views. Poverty is a huge barrier, with almost a third of children unable to pay for, for example, school trips and books, leading to social exclusion and reduced life chances. Overall, the findings strongly suggest that school systems do not sufficiently meet the needs of children in the 21st century.

**Change needed at a minimum:** The Child Guarantee Council Recommendation should urge EU Member States to guarantee free access to high quality, inclusive and safe education, including early childhood education and care for every child, and for those in need in particular. Education should be designed to meet present and future needs, and take full account of children’s views on curricula, teaching methods and school environments. The Strategy on the Rights of the Child should prioritize children’s right to education and should urge third countries to invest more in children’s affordable and quality education.

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



**“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.”**

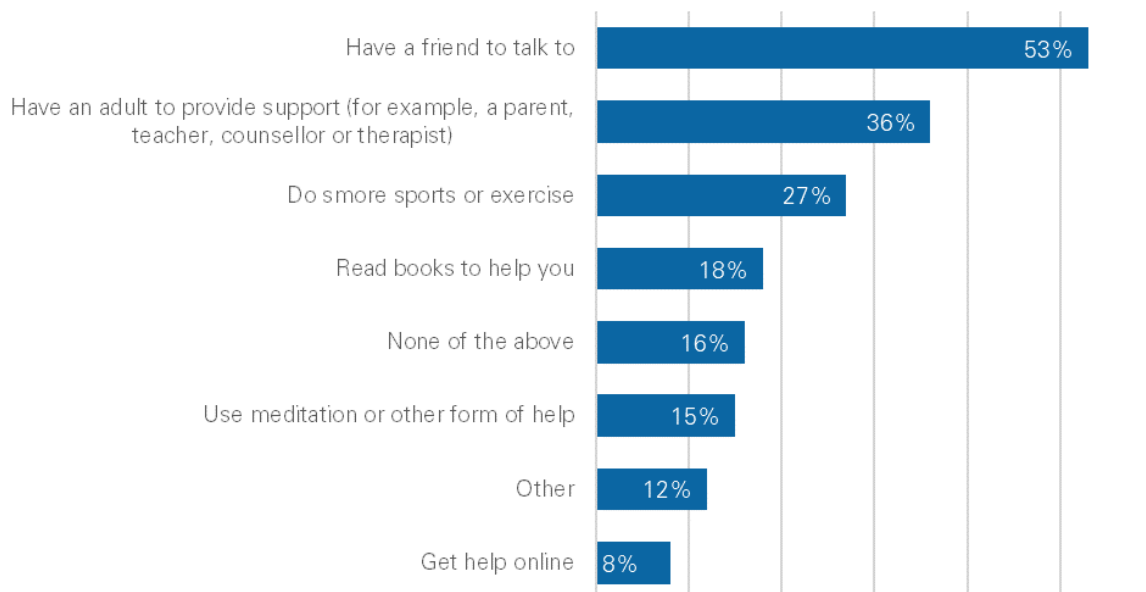
(Young asylum seeker, France)

# Support our physical and mental health

Nearly a third of children within the EU indicate a lack of access to necessary health services, with children from minority groups facing the greatest difficulties. Significant numbers of children highlight mental health problems or symptoms such as depression or anxiety, with even higher numbers expressing feelings of sadness or unhappiness, with girls, older children and those from minority groups disproportionately affected. Children describe these alarming rates of mental ill-health as caused by anxiety about the future, bullying, challenges in coping with school and loneliness, much of it compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, although there may be more deep-seated structural roots.

**Change needed at a minimum:** The EU, through the Child Guarantee Council Recommendation, should urge EU Member States to direct EU financial resources and national budgets to strengthen free and accessible national health and social care services and structures for every child, and especially for those in need. States should promote awareness-raising activities to tackle stigma around mental health problems, backed by investment in research to understand the underlying causes of children's mental health problems in order to design effective strategies to combat them.

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



# Help us eat a healthy diet

Twenty per cent of children do not always have enough to eat, with children of asylum seekers and those with parents not working reporting even higher rates.

**Change needed at a minimum:** EU Member States should ensure that every child has access to healthy, affordable food in early years care and school, with provision on non-stigmatizing financial support to families where necessary to enable them to provide children with nutritious meals.

# Make our housing and local communities safe

Many children from minority groups face significant problems with housing – overcrowding, noise, cold and lack of Wi-Fi access. Although most of the children indicate that their neighbourhood is largely safe for play, children who grow up homeless, on the streets, in institutional care or in inadequate housing conditions, as well as children with disabilities, face more problems. Many children highlight difficulties such as a lack of good public transport, and, for girls in particular, a lack 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.

**Change needed at a minimum:** Under the scope of the Child Guarantee, EU Member States should promote policies to ensure accessible and affordable housing for children in need, including through investment in social housing designed to integrate communities. Recognition must be afforded to the vulnerability of girls in the public sphere and policies developed to ensure they can feel safe in their communities.

## Let us play

Play is often seen by adults as ‘deficit time’, unproductive and of minimal importance. However, it is an essential dimension of childhood, and vital for all aspects of children’s development. Yet, over a quarter of the children report that sometimes they cannot participate in play, sports, cultural activities or arts because they are unaffordable, rising to half of children from many marginalized groups, with profound implications for their well-being and social opportunities.

**Change needed at a minimum:** The EU, as part of the Child Guarantee Council Recommendation, should call on EU Member States to invest more in safe environments and leisure access for all children, including the most marginalized, and direct EU financial resources and national budgets to design and provide leisure activities free of charge for all children at the local level, especially in municipalities with low-income families.



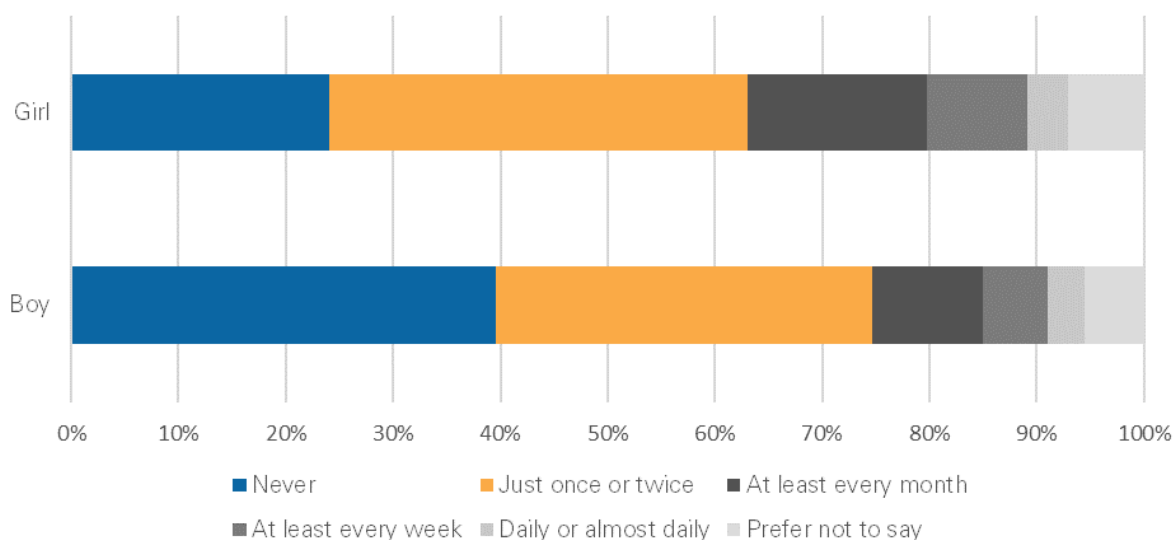


## Guarantee a safe and accessible digital world

Children view access to the internet as a necessity, vital for education, entertainment, information and contact with family and friends. They need the opportunities it affords without exposure to harm or exploitation. However, nearly half the children report problems with connectivity, access to devices or availability of data, with the poorest inevitably the most disadvantaged. Contrary to popular opinion, however, 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.

**Change needed at a minimum:** The Strategy on the Rights of the Child should call on the EU, its Member States and third countries to review and strengthen their legislation and policies to safeguard and promote children's rights in the online world and place stronger emphasis on urging online platforms, games and apps to address children's rights, including privacy and safety by design.

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





# End violence against children

Ending violence is one of the key concerns raised by the children. The violence they experience is widespread – in the home, at and on the way to school and in the neighbourhood. They press for better support to victims of violence, stronger legislation, school programmes on tackling violence, and changes in attitudes towards children with a greater willingness by adults to listen to them. They also highlight a continued lack of action on preventing bullying in school. The COVID-19 crisis has made action on violence against children even more pressing, with emerging research indicating the impact of the pandemic on exposure to physical, sexual, and/or emotional violence.

**Change needed at a minimum:** The European Commission must make the eradication of all forms of violence against children a cornerstone commitment of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and invest more resources in addressing it. EU Member States and third countries must take all appropriate measures to ban all forms of corporal punishment against children, explicitly condemn harmful practices and commit to ending them, train all teachers in a zero-tolerance approach towards school bullying and how to prevent it, and strengthen child protection systems.

# Protect the climate for our futures

An unprecedented number of children are concerned about climate change and are engaged in campaigning to combat it. They want to be active and involved in the future of the planet. The climate emergency is urgent and has unprecedented implications for children's lives. However, global climate change debates rarely include a focus on the impacts of climate change on children's lives and their rights, or make child activism heard.

**Change needed at a minimum:** The Strategy on the Rights of the Child should send a signal by creating a stronger child focus in the EU's climate change approaches and initiatives, and mainstream children's rights in all EU policies relevant to fighting climate change and protecting the environment, including through formal mechanisms to support children's participation in discussions and decision making on climate change. EU Member States should ensure that school curricula address environmental protection, climate change and its impact on children and future generations, and the concrete measures people can adopt to mitigate the challenge.

**"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)

## ...and to conclude...

The overarching messages from the children are to take their rights seriously and ensure that the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee commit to focusing on concrete and effective measures to ensure:

- Equal treatment for all children, with particular attention to children in vulnerable situations
- Equal access to quality and affordable education for all children, from early childhood education and care to secondary education
- Measures to stop violence against children
- Children's participation in decision making
- Children's access to mental health support