

SLIDE 1

Thank you for inviting me to this important online conference on the Mental Health Impact of COVID 19 on children.

Eurochild, as the largest network of children's rights organisations in Europe, with almost 200 organisations and individuals in membership from across 35 European countries, we are very aware of the mental health challenges that children have been experiencing due to the COVID 19 pandemic.

This pandemic has had a devastating impact on children's mental health.

Very few people have been immune to the worry and pressure that has come from this pandemic and also due to living in 'lockdown'. Children in particular have missed the most over the past year.

Many children could not meet their friends, hug their grandparents, lost dear family members, could not access online classes, missed out on eating a healthy meal each day, or feeling safe while at school.

Many children were frightened and still are.

Today I would like to present the Key Mental Health Challenges faced by children due to COVID-19.

Some of the challenges I present here are what children themselves have told us.

There is a whole range of research that identifies the devastating impact of the pandemic on children's mental health.

This includes The OECD report - Combatting COVID-19's Effect on Children, which states that Children living in poverty are likely to suffer more from mental health issues during the pandemic.

This report also highlights that exposure to poverty, social exclusion, and high levels of anxiety in early life, can significantly affect mental well-being for years and even for decades later.

This report also states that the restrictions introduced due to the pandemic pose particular difficulties for children in alternative care, and many develop clinical- level mental health difficulties

According to UNICEF, children thrive when they feel safe and protected.

This includes supportive parenting, a secure home life and a positive learning environment in school.

These are key factors in building and protecting mental well-being in childhood.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted many of these foundations.

Childhood is a critical stage of life for mental health and well-being, and the stress, fear and uncertainty associated with the COVID-19 outbreak, has had significant negative effects on children's mental health.

Children are feeling: sad, scared, isolated, anxious, angry and uncertain of the future.

In my own country Malta, during a consultation with children, children mentioned the effects of COVID-19 such as the lack of interaction, isolation and new pressures and realities as factors that are determining their level of life satisfaction.

(Report from the consultation with children regarding Children, Obesity and Life Satisfaction- April 2021)

The Children sustained that since this pandemic started, they are spending more hours online whether following lessons, studying and/or playing.

They also mentioned other effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their families and their economic situation due to loss of jobs and loss of incomes.

A child mentioned COVID in relation to the added stress, pressures and isolation, which might lead a person to resort to comfort eating. This is worrying for my country when obesity in children was already extremely high pre-pandemic.

(Report from the consultation with children regarding Children, Obesity and Life Satisfaction- April 2021)

Mental health is a widespread and significant concern for children themselves.

In the second part of 2020, the European Commission called on Eurochild and four other child rights organisations to facilitate consultations with children across Europe and beyond.

As a result, the views of more than 10,000 children were collected.

The findings are collated in the Our Europe; Our Rights; Our Future report.

Findings such as:

- **Almost 1 in 10 children from EU countries 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.**
- **1 in 5 children said they feel 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.

From a DG Just Report in 2020, some children felt that they were not protected during the pandemic. They claimed that and I quote: 'Adults just assumed all children are safe at home. While I was doing online learning, I could hear the parents of my friend fighting in the background... no one was checking if children were OK or not, if they are living in a safe environment'.

(DG Just Report 2020)

The causes presented for these alarming rates of mental health problems are complex, but include, anxiety about the future, fear for the health of family members, bullying and challenges in coping with school.

Our members at Eurochild, have reported how the pandemic has had far-reaching effects on children's well-being.

Our Growing Up in Lockdown Report published in November 2020, and based on assessments provided by 42 Eurochild members in 25 countries, identified that the pandemic has exacerbated existing problems of social inequality, with job losses pushing many families further into poverty and school closures creating a wider educational divide, impacting children's life chances, and their physical and mental health.

The Report describes how children with no history of behavioural problems, are having trouble sleeping and some are becoming increasingly aggressive.

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis was felt just as severely, if not more so, by children in out-of-home care.

The children strongly missed outside contact during lockdown, notably access to school, sports and other outside facilities, and worse still - contact with their own families.

Being confined to their residential setting created strains for both children and staff, with disputes breaking out and their mental health suffering.

Again, children living in out-of-home-care in my own country Malta narrated their experience throughout the first part of the pandemic in which they were not allowed to leave the residential home for four months.

On a positive note, the children said that this time served to break off the daily alienated routine, and as an opportunity for the children within the home to get to know each other better, to be together, talk and share their stories.

(DG Just Report 2020)

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in certain forms of violence, such as increased domestic violence and online abuse. And as we know, exposure to any form of violence severely affects a child's physical, psychological and emotional development. It can lead to serious and long-lasting mental health issues, chronic diseases, self-harm tendencies, even suicide.

More recently, in our Eurochild's members survey, some of our members stated that children's mental health has now become their main priority. One member reported that since the start of the pandemic their national helpline for children had received a rapid increase in the number of calls from children about suicide and problems connected to their mental health and family violence.

The stakes could not be higher.

We must adequately and appropriately address the key mental health challenges faced by children due to this pandemic.

Children thrive when they are safe and protected, when family and community connections are stable and nurturing, when they are not frightened and when their basic needs are met.

There are things we can do, to reduce the mental health challenges faced by children.

We must implement the proposal for a Child Guarantee. This ambitious proposal can become a key instrument in not only lifting children out of poverty, but also promoting children's well-being and mental health.

We must provide adequate support services that meet the needs of children and families now and in the future.

The impact of the pandemic on children will be with us for many years to come. That's why we welcome the proposal for a Child Guarantee which seeks to ensure effective and free access to quality healthcare, including mental health care, for children.

However, these support services must also include quality physical and mental healthcare in pregnancy, childbirth and post-natal care, as the mental health of the mother is also of utmost importance.

We must listen to children and include them in any discussion or implementation of activities, such as further lockdowns or plans to shape programmes and services around their needs.

The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child includes a thematic area on child participation.

We need to make sure that the actions and recommendations in this Strategy are implemented.

We must ensure to support children and help them to understand the pandemic, to make them feel safer and explain how they can protect themselves.

One good example of this is the storybook for children named, 'My Hero is You' which was developed for and by children themselves from around the world.

The impact on mental health is one of the greatest social issues emerging from the pandemic.

Children have felt the greatest impact over the last year and will continue experiencing this in the future.

We cannot wait to see what happens and hope for the best.

Children are asking 'Can we believe in you?'

This is Eurochild's recent campaign which is capturing the challenges, concerns, and fears that children have told us about, and what they have experienced during this pandemic.

We have heard their voices and we cannot ignore them.

We cannot be complacent!

We must ensure that they are participating in decisions that will have an impact upon them.

We have to invest in children, in their education, in their health, in their wellbeing and in their social welfare, to address poverty, social exclusion, inequalities that they and their families are experiencing.

I assure you that Eurochild is committed to supporting our members to turn the recent EU commitments into actions and to demonstrate that children can believe in us.

I hope you will all join us in this journey, that is so crucial for the wellbeing of all of our children, living in Europe.



Eurochild

Putting children at
the heart of Europe

Key Mental Health Challenges faced by Children due to COVID-19

H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca
Eurochild President

Children's Mental Health – What the Research states.....

- Childhood is a critical stage of life for mental health and well-being
- Negative experiences –have a damaging effect on the development of cognitive and emotional skills
- Exposure to poverty, social exclusion, and high levels of anxiety in early life can significantly affect mental well-being years and even decades later
- In the WHO European Region, suicide is the leading cause of death among 10–19-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries of the Region, and the second-leading cause in high-income countries.
- Supportive parenting, a secure home life and a positive learning environment in school are the key factors in building and protecting mental well-being in childhood.



Children's Mental Health – What Children said....

- Almost 1 in 10 children from the EU identifies as living with mental health problems or symptoms such as depression or anxiety
- 1 in 5 children said they feel sad or unhappy most of the time
- Nearly half of LGBTQ+ children and a third of children with disabilities say they feel sad or unhappy most of the time
- IMAGE OF REPORT TO BE ADDED



Children's Mental Health – What Our Members said....

From our Growing Up In Lockdown Report

- The pandemic has exacerbated existing problems of social inequality, with job losses pushing many families further into poverty and school closures creating a wider educational divide
- Financial stress, uncertainty over the future, and families being confined to the home during the lockdown led inevitably to increased anxiety and mental health problems
- children with no history of behavioural problems, are having trouble sleeping and are becoming increasingly aggressive
- The impact of the COVID-19 crisis was felt just as keenly, if not more so, by children in out-of-home care
- Increase in increase in certain forms of violence, such as increased domestic violence and online abuse



Supporting Children's Mental Health

- Children thrive when they are safe and protected, when family and community connections are stable and nurturing, when they are not frightened and when their basic needs are met.
- To help children reduce their fear of the pandemic - My Hero is You
- Provide support services that meet the needs of children and families now and in the future.
- Listen to children and include them in any discussion or implementation of activities, such as further lockdowns or plans to shape programmes and services around their needs

The stakes could not be higher. If not adequately or appropriately addressed, the mental health consequences for a generation of children and young people could far surpass the immediate health and economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving long-term social and economic consequences in its wake.

We call on governments, businesses, donors, and leaders to urgently help us by lending their resources, creativity, innovation and commitment to supporting this effort, as we build back better, shape a healthier and safer world for every child and young person, and support their mental health and wellbeing every step of the way.





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**Thank you and final
thoughts
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