

The European Society for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (ESCAP) welcomes the EU Commission working on issuing a recommendation on integrated child protection systems for the EU member states. We hereby submit our views on the topic and would of course be prepared to further contribute to the development of the recommendation.

Multiple disciplines and professions are involved in protecting children from violence and harm. An integrated child protection system needs to coordinate their efforts, understand if services actually reach out to those at risk and if these services achieve their intended goals. Yet, coordination and surveillance of service provision are not adequately addressed across Europe.

Prevention and early intervention are crucial and currently especially young children and their families at risk are hard to reach by institutional support systems. Furthermore, with children and adolescents growing up in an increasingly online environment, online child protection is another area that needs specific attention.

- **Improving administrative data on child maltreatment incidents.** The EU-funded COST Action “Multi-sectoral responses to child abuse and neglect in Europe: Incidence and trends” (CA19106) assembles more than 130 experts in 35 European countries to improve the collection of administrative data in different sectors as many countries lack knowledge on the number and types of child maltreatment incidents reported. We thus lack knowledge if certain groups of vulnerable children are underreported and underserved or if maltreated children in Europe have equal chances to be protected from harm across EU-countries and regionally within. To achieve these goals, the EU needs to set standards of uniformly collecting information on child maltreatment incidents in administrative data. This recommendation mirrors UNICEF’s effort to establish the International Classification of Violence Against Children (ICVAC).
- **Improving coordination across sectors and disciplines.** Child protection is inherently multi-disciplinary. Yet, education on child protection and discourses still too often happen in disciplinary silos. Consequently, basics like child maltreatment definitions largely vary. The EU should thus aim to support multi-disciplinary education in the field of child protection. For child protection practice, case management should be promoted to avoid uncoordinated and inefficient responses to maltreated children and their families.
- **Improving the evidence-base of interventions.** Too many interventions in the field of child protection are mainly based on good intentions but lack an evidence-base on their efficacy. The EU should favor services and intervention in child protection that are known to likely improve the children’s situation.
- **Funding research on childhood maltreatment.** Childhood maltreatment are risk factors for the later development of mental disorders such as substance misuse, depression or schizophrenia. A better understanding of the mechanisms that lead from childhood maltreatment and other childhood stressors such as peer bullying to mental disorders is essential for the development of early mechanism-based interventions.
- **Increasing the use of participatory approaches.** Many developments in child protection are initiated by experts from the field of professionals. The expert voice of survivors of child maltreatment is still rarely integrated in decisions to improve the situation of their unfortunate successors. In accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the EU should also strive to increase participation of children in decisions affecting their imminent health and wellbeing.

- **Improving prevention and early intervention structures.** With respect to preventive child protection it is crucial to reach out to young children and their families who are psychosocially stressed and at risk of child abuse and neglect at an early stage, namely when their mental health is not yet affected or when emerging developmental impairments are still discreet and inconspicuous. While Early Childhood Intervention models have been implemented in some countries they are not yet wide spread. What is needed are structures at the municipal level to enable a systematic collaboration and interdisciplinary service delivery in individual cases. However, there are desiderata: In particular, improved control and case management, the expansion of a broader repertoire of services, ranging from low-threshold, universal preventive services to higher-threshold, selective preventive services, as well as integrated planning procedures are recommended.
- **Funding research on early psychological interventions.** There is tremendous potential to buffer the detrimental effects of child abuse and neglect on psychopathology before the onset of psychiatric diagnosis. However, the evidence base for early psychological interventions is limited, contributing to delays in providing the right support to vulnerable young people. Research is, therefore, needed to address this urgent knowledge gaps.
- **Ensuring child protection online.** The goals of online child protection are to prevent (re-) victimization online (i.e., child exploitation online, online maltreatment and harassment/grooming, cyberbullying as well as exposure to sexual violence online) and to develop intervention strategies. Participation of young people and parents is needed. Dealing with technology assisted abuse creates changes that technology companies, computer scientists and child protection experts need to tackle together:
 - **Screening:** Machine learning and clinical expertise could be leveraged to develop screening algorithms and program classifiers that can identify and predict child abuse and exploitation online and deliver interventions in real-time. Universal internet safety prevention could be enhanced by equipping providers with the knowledge to recognize detectable trauma symptoms and to refer such children and adolescents to more intensive interventions
 - **Education:** Wide-reaching education about internet safety in schools needs to start at a young age, before children have unsupervised access to the internet. Outreach strategies for the most vulnerable adolescents are needed, e.g. children who experienced maltreatment have been shown to be more likely to be re-victimized online. There is a need to educate caregivers about how to best guide their children in navigating the online world. While caregivers can restrict time spent online and access to risky contents (e.g., via parental control software) what is even more important is to empower families, engage in dialogue and create a safe space for disclosure.
- **Including high risk children and adolescents as well as children and adolescents with specific needs into an integrated child protection system.** Accompanied and unaccompanied minors often experienced traumatization in their country of origin and during the flight. Due to institutional risks and victimization history of peers and parents, they are a high-risk population for further victimization. Institutional neglect and harmful conditions for these children are often not taken care of by the usual child protection system because these children are placed within a refugee care system. Child protection is an overall issue and therefore institutionalized children, for example children with handicaps and special needs, should be included in the child protection system in order to also reach the most vulnerable children.



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- **Sustainability goal 16.2 of the United Nations. End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children.** The UN recommended a monitoring by member states and defined indicators for different forms of abuse. A European strategy on integrated child protection systems should be able to contribute to a monitoring on a regular basis.
- **Protect children that have been abused or maltreated from secondary victimization.** Ensure that justice and social systems are child friendly and protective for children. Furthermore, these children need to be protected from harmful approaches from the media (e.g. disclosure of personal information).

**On behalf of the ESCAP Board, Jörg M. Fegert, President of ESCAP
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