

ESCAP's Positions – European Parliament Elections 2024

The European Society for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (ESCAP) is a not-for-profit association with 36 member societies across the European region, including also non-EU states. It is ESCAP's purpose to promote the mental health and wellbeing of children, adolescents and their families, to improve the quality of their lives, to ensure children's right for support to healthy mental development and for appropriate preventive and therapeutic mental health services and interventions. ESCAP promotes public awareness and public advocacy related to the mental health of children and adolescents.

Mental health crisis in Europe hits children, adolescents and young adults

The COVID-19 pandemics and the multiplying crises [1-3] have left and continue to leave deep scars on the development of a large proportion of European and global youth (and young adults in the transition phase), which are reflected in increased levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, suicidal tendencies, eating disorders, educational gaps, reduced physical fitness, difficulties in transition phases and entry into working life [4-11]. The results of the June 2023 Eurobarometer survey showed that 62% of EU citizens believe that global events at the time of the survey (the COVID-19 pandemic, Russian aggression against Ukraine, the climate crisis, unemployment and food and energy costs) have affected their mental health "somewhat" or "a lot". In 2021-22, 46% of respondents had an emotional or psychosocial problem, such as depression or anxiety, and 54% of young respondents with a mental health problem reported that they had not received help from a professional [12]. Data from the 2022 McKinsey Health Institute Survey [13] supported by ESCAP experts for European countries also showed an increase in stigma and self-stigmatisation of young persons of the Generation Z with mental health problems [5]. Two Europe wide reviews of prospective datasets on mental health showed a correlation of the increase of depression and anxiety symptomatology with the rigidity of Corona measures like school closures. Children's participation was generally not organized or respected by policy makers during the acute crisis, therefore one of the consequences has to be to strengthen a children's rights position to be pre-

pared for rapid reactions in further crisis [6, 14]. WHO refers to some children and adolescents with mental illness in Europe as »left behind« by the crisis [15]. In addition, the maximum capacities of all systems have been unveiled in times of exceptional needs. After the demands on mental health systems greatly exceeded their capacity, with almost half of young people reporting that their mental health needs were not being met, policy makers finally became aware of the needs of the young European population [12, 16, 17-19]. In 2022, the German Ethics Council called it an ethical obligation to give back to the younger generation in the sense of intergenerational justice [20].

Due to the acute situation and the fact that the needs of children and young people and their rights have hardly been considered in this crisis, ESCAP is calling for the **establishment of a European Parliament Commissioner for Children's Rights, Protection and Mental Well-Being**. We suggest that structures are created, similar to those in Germany with the Independent Commissioner Child Sexual Abuse, which are primarily concerned with child protection, safeguarding and the care and participation of mentally stressed children and young people, who often also have experience of trauma. In view of the current special situation, we urgently need a mandated voice in parliament, strongly committed to this issue who repeatedly reminds the public and parliamentarians of these tasks.

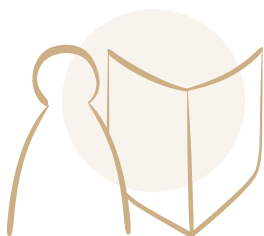
ESCAP welcomes the comprehensive approach to mental health which was introduced by the EU Commission in June 2023 [17] as well as the EU Council Conclusions on mental health [21, 22] from November 2023. The resolution on mental health adopted by the European Parliament in December 2023 [19] includes several key issues specifically relevant to the mental health of children and adolescents that ESCAP strongly supports:

- › Recognize negative influences of adverse childhood experiences on onset of mental health conditions
- › Tackle stigma and discrimination and raise awareness
- › Significance of early detection and intervention, as well accessibility and affordability of children' and young people's mental health services
- › Strengthening child protection services and early prevention
- › Urgent need for scientific research on safe use of digital technology by children and adolescents
- › Include mental health in school education
- › Provide training for educators as well as psychoeducation for families and youth workers
- › Realize principles of equitable, affordable and readily accessible care
- › Recognize potential effect of digital mental health services in increasing accessibility for youth
- › Offer continuity of care in transition from child and adolescent mental health services to adult services
- › Offer integrated and multi-sectoral mental health services
- › Address mental health workforce shortages
- › Involve people with lived experience – including parents and adolescents themselves

Urgent actions are needed now

While we welcome all participatory initiatives, this must not become an exercise of window dressing. During the next legislature period, we expect the new EU Parliament to expand and implement the important fundamental resolution from 2023. The announcement of the recent substantial budget cuts of programmes that support health priorities and research including the Horizon Europe and EU4Health programmes as part of the midterm revision of the multiannual financial framework for 2021-2027 [23] are worrying and indeed contradict the prioritization announced last year. Addressing the Mental Health crisis is a continuous task that needs to be taken seriously and must not be dropped in the light of other developments.

With view to the 2024 elections for the European Parliament, the ESCAP Board have agreed the following recommendations and demands with regard to ensuring that the mental health of children and young people are being treated as a priority throughout the next legislative period 2024-2029.



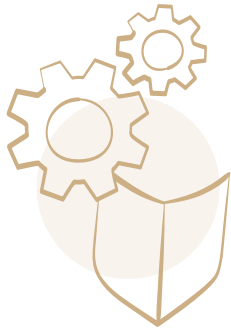
European Parliament Commissioner for Children's Rights, protection and Mental Well-Being to be instated and corresponding commissioners in the individual states.

- › During the pandemic it has become clear that policy decisions in many countries around the world did not adequately consider the impact of these measures on the development of children and adolescents. [6, 24]



Mental Health in all policies approach

- › Public policies across all sectors should promote mental health and wellbeing by initiating and facilitating action within different non-health public policy areas.
- › Coordination across sectors and disciplines needs to be improved



Development and strengthening of integrated child protection systems

- › Also see the [response ESCAP submitted](#) to the consultation of the EU Commission in October 2023.
- › Child protection is inherently multi-disciplinary. 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.
- › Increase the use of participatory approaches. The expert voice of those who had to endure maltreatment as children needs to routinely be integrated in decisions to improve the situation of those who are unfortunately suffering now and will suffer in the future. 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.
- › Ensure adequate care for children in institutions



Ensure timely, appropriate and affordable access to mental health support.

- › Make low-threshold offers widely available and integrate them into a stepped care approach.
- › Reduce inequalities in access to mental health care and mental health treatments
- › Significantly reduce the current waiting times. Delayed access to treatment can have considerable negative impact
- › Ensure access to evidence-based therapeutic approaches



Address shortage of mental health professionals

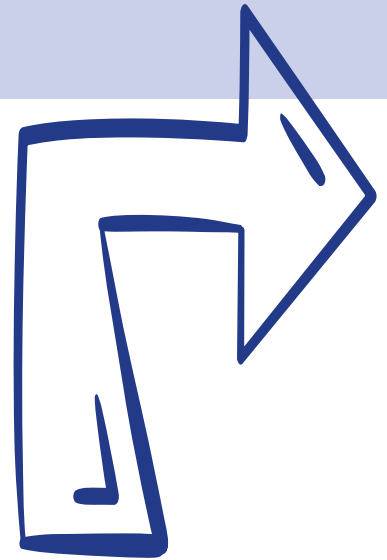
- › Shortage of specialists in child and adolescent psychiatric care is a problem in all EU countries. Specific efforts are therefore needed to achieve a uniform, basic level of further training for child and adolescent psychiatrists, but also for child and adolescent psychotherapists. Basic standards need to be set through exemplary measures such as an online curriculum in all official EU languages.
- › Such a curriculum would be also helpful for EU candidate countries as well as Ukraine in the current situation.
- › Ensure continuous professional development for child and adolescent psychiatrists.
- › Ensure that the countries are following professional standards as accepted by local professional organizations with regards to working conditions, staffing and education of professionals working with children and adolescents.
- › Ensure similar conditions and education requirements for other professionals working in child and adolescent mental health, nurses, social workers, occupational therapists, teachers and other professionals.



Ensuring quality scientific research in child and adolescent psychiatry

Promoting scientific careers for doctors, psychologists and allied professions
Fund and support research projects to improve diagnostic and treatment for youth mental disorders

The 21st International ESCAP Congress will take place from 29 June to 1 July 2025 in Strasbourg. In addition to the latest research, clinical practice, mental health policy will play a crucial role in the programme. Not least as the seat of the EU Parliament, we look forward to a lively exchange with parliamentarians during the congress. We are planning specific events with the European Parliament which will be finalised after the elections. We will be happy to offer parliamentarians and their staff uncomplicated access to the congress.



References

1. Anagnostopoulos D, Fegert JM, the ESCAP board and ESCAP policy division (2022) War hits children first. Positional statement from the ESCAP board. European Society for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry <https://www.escap.eu/division/policy-division/war-hits-children-first> Accessed 20 January 2024
2. Fegert JM, the ESCAP board and ESCAP policy division (2022) Trauma and recovery in youth after natural disasters. European Society for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry <https://www.escap.eu/resources/trauma-and-recovery-after-natural-disasters> Accessed 20 January 2024
3. Fegert JM, the ESCAP board and ESCAP policy division (2023) Stop the humanitarian crisis in Gaza – Ensuring the basic needs of children. European Society for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry <https://www.escap.eu/division/policy-division/humanitarian-crisis> Accessed 20 January 2024
4. Bersia M, Koumantakis E, Berchiolla P, Charrier L, Ricotti A, Grimaldi P et al (2022) Suicide spectrum among young people during the COVID-19 pandemic: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *eClinicalMedicine* 54. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eclinm.2022.101705>
5. Fegert JM, Deetjen U (2023) Die schwierige Situation junger Menschen nach der Pandemie - eine Herausforderung für die Kinder- und Jugendpsychiatrie/-psychotherapie. *Z Kinder Jug-Psych* 51(2):89-91. doi: 10.1024/1422-4917/a000925
6. Fegert JM, Ludwig-Walz H, Witt A, Bujard M (2023) Children's rights and restrictive measures during the COVID-19 pandemic: implications for politicians, mental health experts and society. *Child Adolesc Psychiatry Ment Health* 17(1):75. doi: 10.1186/s13034-023-00617-8.
7. Kauhanen L, Wan Mohd Yunus WMA, Lempinen L, Peltonen K, Gyllenberg D, Mishina K et al (2023) A systematic review of the mental health changes of children and young people before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 32(6):995-1013. doi: 10.1007/s00787-022-02060-0
8. Ludwig-Walz H, Dannheim I, Pfadenhauer LM, Fegert JM, Bujard M (2022) Increase of depression among children and adolescents after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Child Adolesc Psychiatry Ment Health* 16(1):109. doi: 10.1186/s13034-022-00546-y
9. Ludwig-Walz H, Dannheim I, Pfadenhauer LM, Fegert JM, Bujard M (2023) Anxiety increased among children and adolescents during pandemic-related school closures in Europe: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Child Adolesc Psychiatry Ment Health* 17(1):74. doi: 10.1186/s13034-023-00612-z
10. Ludwig-Walz H, Siemens W, Heinisch S, Dannheim I, Loss J, Bujard M (2023) How the COVID-19 pandemic and related school closures reduce physical activity among children and adolescents in the WHO European Region: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act* 20(1):149. doi: 10.1186/s12966-023-01542-x
11. Schlissel AC, Richmond TK, Eliasziw M, Leonberg K, Skeer MR (2023) Anorexia nervosa and the COVID-19 pandemic among young people: a scoping review. *J Eat Disord* 11(1):122. doi: 10.1186/s40337-023-00843-7
12. Eurobarometer Mental Health 2023 <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3032> Accessed 20 January 2024
13. Arora L, Coe E, Dewhurst M, Enomoto K (2022) Heat waves, the war in Ukraine, and stigma: Gen Z's perspectives on mental health. McKinsey and Company <https://www.mckinsey.com/mhi/our-insights/heat-waves-the-war-in-ukraine-and-stigma-gen-zs-perspectives-on-mental-health> Accessed 20 January 2024
14. Lange S, Altrock CM, Gossmann E, Fegert JM, Jud A (2022) COVID-19-What Price Do Children Pay? An Analysis of

- Economic and Social Policy Factors. *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 19(13). doi: 10.3390/ijerph19137604
15. Ng K, Moreno-Maldonado C, Stavrou M, Lenzi M (2023) Left behind: inequalities in the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic among adolescents in the WHO European Region. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people's health and well-being from the findings of the HBSC survey round 2021/2022. WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen.
 16. Revet A, Hebebrand J, Anagnostopoulos D, Kehoe LA, Gradl-Dietsch G et al (2021) Perceived impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child and adolescent psychiatric services after 1 year (February/March 2021): ESCAP CovCAP survey. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 32(2):249-256. doi: 10.1007/s00787-021-01851-1
 17. European Commission (2023) COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS on a comprehensive approach to mental health. European Commission, Brussels. https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-06/com_2023_298_1_act_en.pdf Accessed 20 January 2024
 18. Melchior M (2023) The long shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and adolescents' mental health. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 32(12):2385-2386.
 19. Parliament (2023) European Parliament resolution of 12 December 2023 on mental health (2023/2074(INI)). European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0457_EN.pdf Accessed 20 January 2024
 20. Ad Hoc Recommendation by the German Ethics Council: Pandemic and Mental Health: Attention, Assistance and Support for Children, Adolescents and Young Adults in and after Societal Crises, November 2022. <https://www.ethikrat.org/fileadmin/Publikationen/Ad-hoc-Empfehlungen/englisch/recommendation-pandemic-and-mental-health.pdf> Accessed 30 January 2024
 21. Council of the European Union (2023) Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States on a comprehensive approach to the mental health of young people in the European Union. Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council, Brussels. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15322-2023-INIT/en/pdf> Accessed 20 January 2024
 22. Council of the European Union (2023) Council conclusions on mental health. Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council, Brussels. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15971-2023-INIT/en/pdf> Accessed 20 January 2024
 23. CO EUR 2 CONCL 1 Special meeting of the European Council (1 February 2024) – Conclusions. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/69874/20240201-special-euco-conclusions-en.pdf> Accessed 12 February 2024
 24. Lange S, Altrock CM, Gossmann E, Fegert JM, Jud A. (2022) COVID-19—What Price Do Children Pay? An Analysis of Economic and Social Policy Factors. *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 19:7604. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19137604>