

Children's rights in the EU

in the light of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

SUMMARY

Adopted in 1989, the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was the first international instrument to explicitly recognise children as human beings with innate rights. As of 2025, it has been ratified by 196 countries, including all EU Member States, and it has become the landmark treaty on children's rights, outlining universal standards for the care, treatment, survival, development, protection and participation of all children.

The promotion and protection of children's rights is one of the key objectives embedded in Article 3(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). Moreover, Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU recognises that children are entitled to 'protection and care as is necessary for their well-being'. The same article recognises that the child's best interests should be the primary consideration for public authorities and private institutions.

Over the years, the EU has moved from a sectoral approach towards a more coherent policy approach. Whereas initially, children's rights were developed in relation to specific areas – such as the free movement of persons – since 2000 the EU has taken a more coordinated line. The European Parliament has been especially vocal in advocating for children. This briefing offers an overview of the most relevant actions at European level to address and promote children's rights before looking at upcoming challenges.

This briefing is an update of a 2022 [briefing](#) written by Rosamund Shreeves.



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Background

In 1954, the UN [recommended](#) that all countries establish a national day to promote children's rights and welfare, and made 20 November Universal Children's Day. It was on this date, in 1959, that the UN General Assembly adopted the [Declaration of the Rights of the Child](#), and, in 1989, the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC) – the first international treaty to recognise children as human beings with innate rights. As a human being, a child is a rights-holder and not merely a beneficiary of protection. The CRC, which as of 2025 has been [ratified](#) by 196 countries including all EU Member States, requires governments to realise every child's rights to adequate living conditions, health and education, as well as their rights to a family life, to be protected from violence, not to be discriminated against, and to have their views heard. In 2000, two optional protocols were added to the CRC, on [the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict](#) (OPAC) and [the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography](#) (OPSC), followed in 2014 by a [third](#) (OP3) allowing children to bring complaints about violations of their rights directly to the [Committee on the Rights of the Child](#), the UN body charged with overseeing the implementation of the CRC and its optional protocols.

The CRC, with its three optional protocols, has become the cornerstone instrument at international level for promoting children's rights, laying down social, civil, economic, and political standards for their protection. It sets out a number of rules and principles to guide its signatories in developing comprehensive child-specific rights framework. Its four core principles are: non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, respect for the views of the child, and the right to life, survival and development. The EU is not a party to the CRC, as the CRC provides no [legal mechanism](#) for entities other than states to accede to it. However, the EU is guided by the principles and rights set out in the CRC, meaning that all its policies and actions affecting children must align with the best interests of the child.

EU legal and policy framework on children's rights

The EU has developed its own legal and policy framework on children's rights and child protection, which includes an overall multiannual [strategy](#) for work in this area.

Legal framework

EU law on children's rights consists of a complex system of primary and secondary EU law and existing [international legal frameworks](#), including UN and Council of Europe instruments. The complexity of the system is exemplified by the fact that currently there is no single, common definition of a 'child' in either the EU Treaties or in EU secondary law. Although the CRC, in its [Article 1](#), states that 'a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years', EU law may provide for different definitions or recognise different rights for children depending on their age. However, the fact that all Member States are currently parties to the CRC has helped to improve the coherence of policies developed to promote and protect children's rights. The EU and its Member States must ensure that their work on the new UN Sustainable Development Goals [aligns](#) with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, providing a further important incentive to implement children's rights in the EU's internal and [external](#) policies.

Although the [Treaty of Maastricht](#) introduced an obligation for the EU to respect fundamental rights in its policies and actions back in 1992, the EU's legal capacity to safeguard children's rights in particular was given a real boost by the [Treaty of Lisbon](#), which entered into force in 2009. The Treaty made respect for fundamental rights a core value of the EU ([Article 2 TEU](#)) and introduced an explicit objective to protect children's rights and promote them in EU internal and external policy ([Article 3 TEU](#)). It gave the [Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU](#), which also enshrines children's rights (notably in its [Article 24](#), directly inspired by CRC provisions), the same legal status as the

Treaties. This means that the EU institutions as well as Member States have an obligation to promote, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in all relevant EU policies and actions. Article 24 specifically recognises children's right to express their views freely and according to their age and maturity, their right for their best interests to be considered as a key element in all actions related to them, and their right to maintain regular relations and direct contacts with both parents.

The Charter also makes several references to children's rights, namely the right to receive free compulsory education; the prohibition of discrimination on grounds of age; and the prohibition of child labour, and young people's right to protection at work (Articles [14\(2\)](#), [21](#) and [32](#) respectively).

Neither the Lisbon Treaty nor the Charter give the EU a general [competence to legislate](#) on children's rights. Since children's rights cut across many different sectors, EU competence has to be determined on a case-by-case basis. For example, Articles [79](#) and [83](#) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) provide a specific legal basis for legislation combating trafficking in human beings and the sexual exploitation of children. Articles [81](#) and [82\(2\)](#) TFEU are a basis for adopting EU legislation to address the needs of children in areas such as child custody and victims' rights, where there is a cross-border dimension. Other areas relevant to children's rights where the EU has legislated include data and consumer protection and asylum and migration. Lastly, Article [216](#) TFEU enables the EU to conclude international conventions in relation to children's rights.

The role of the Council of Europe

The case law of the Court of Justice of the EU and that of the [European Court of Human Rights](#), and the decisions of the Council of Europe's European Committee of [Social Rights](#), have also served to uphold the rights of the child. In 2022, to clarify and provide further insight into the legal framework covering children's rights, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights ([FRA](#)) further updated a [handbook](#) developed in cooperation with the Council of Europe and the European Court of Human Rights. This handbook covers issues such as equality, personal identity, family life, alternative care and adoption, migration and asylum, child protection against violence and exploitation, and children's rights within criminal justice and alternative proceedings.

In February 2022, the Council of Europe adopted a [strategy for the rights of the child](#) (2022–2027). It is the fourth in a series of [strategies](#) aimed at fostering the rights of children across Europe, in the framework of the '[Building a Europe for and with Children](#)' programme, which has been in place since 2006.

Policy framework

EU policy documents and other non-binding EU measures also play a significant role in defining the overall framework for action. Over the years, the EU has moved from a sectoral approach towards a more coherent policy line. Whereas initially, children's rights were developed in relation to specific policy areas, such as the free movement of persons, since 2000 the EU has been coordinating its action, on the basis of three building blocks: the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the EU Treaties and overarching Commission communications, specifically the 2006 communication, [Towards an EU strategy on the rights of the child](#), the 2011 [EU agenda for the rights of the child](#) and the 2021 [EU strategy on the rights of the child](#).

The 2011 EU agenda for the rights of the child marked an important step forward towards mainstreaming children's rights in all EU policy spheres. The current EU strategy on the rights of the child builds on this earlier work. Developed with input from stakeholders, [including children](#), the strategy sets priorities for EU action in six areas: 1) [participation in political and democratic life](#), 2) [socio-economic inclusion, health and education](#), 3) [combating violence against children and ensuring child protection](#), 4) [child-friendly justice](#), 5) [children's safety in a digital and information society](#) and 6) [supporting, protecting and empowering children globally](#).¹ The strategy takes account of the specific needs of certain groups of children, including those in situations of multiple vulnerabilities and facing intersecting forms of discrimination. It also aims to strengthen the

mainstreaming of children's rights across all relevant EU policies, legislation and funding programmes.

Building on earlier action to tackle child poverty and social exclusion by [investing in children](#), the launch of the strategy was accompanied by a proposal for a [European child guarantee](#). This initiative, [adopted](#) by the Commission and the Council in June 2021, is intended to ensure that children in need across the EU have access to a set of key services, such as early childhood education and care, education, healthcare, nutrition, housing, and cultural and leisure activities.

EU institutional architecture for children's rights

In her 2024 [political guidelines](#), the re-elected President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, identified children's wellbeing as a particular area of concern, specifically emphasising the need to continue efforts to tackle child poverty. She has also highlighted the importance of safeguarding the mental health of children and young people, particularly in the online environment.

The protection of children's rights appears to be a key focus across various Commissioners' portfolios. The primary responsibility for children's social and economic rights lies with Executive Vice-President for Social Rights and Skills, Quality Jobs and Preparedness Roxana Mînzatu. She has been tasked with implementing the EU child guarantee and overseeing the allocation of EU social funding. Additionally, education policy is also within her scope, with a particular focus on the European Education Area, the action plan on basic skills, and the stem (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education strategic plan. Mînzatu collaborates closely with the Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport, Glenn Micallef, who is responsible for implementing the EU strategy on the rights of the child. Their work also includes supporting the mental health of children and young people.

Commissioner Micallef also leads the work on developing an action plan against cyberbullying under the supervision of Executive Vice-President for Tech Sovereignty, Security and Democracy Henna Virkkunen. They also collaborate with Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare Olivér Várhelyi, who is leading an EU-wide inquiry into the broader impacts of social media on people's mental health, particularly among young people. Magnus Brunner, Commissioner for Internal Affairs and Migration, is spearheading efforts to protect children from sexual abuse. As Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jozef Síkela advocates for children's rights and wellbeing, as well as for the empowerment of women and girls outside the EU. Meanwhile, Commissioner for Equality, Preparedness and Crisis Management Hadja Lahbib is responsible for safeguarding the rights and safety of children within the EU. Finally, the Commissioners have also been tasked with organising the first [Youth Policy Dialogues](#) to provide young people with a platform to make their voices heard.

In 2007, the Commission appointed a [coordinator](#) for the rights of the child to coordinate the work of its various departments in this area. The Commission can also draw on the [Expert Group](#) on the Rights of the Child and on the EU Network for Children's Rights, launched by Vice-President Šuica in March 2022. The network aims to strengthen dialogue and mutual learning between the EU and the Member States on children's rights, and to support the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the EU strategy on the rights of the child.

In the European Parliament, the Committees on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs ([LIBE](#)) and on Legal Affairs ([JURI](#)) both have a strong interest in children's rights, while the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality ([FEMM](#)) also addresses the rights of girls and children in general. Parliament too has a [Coordinator on Children's Rights](#), a role that has expanded since it was first created in 1987. The Coordinator, currently Vice-President [Ewa Kopacz](#), plays an important role both in resolving cross-border family disputes² and promoting children's rights more broadly. Working with Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), the Coordinator ensures that the institution's work upholds and advances children's rights. Additionally, Parliament has a cross-party

[Child Rights Intergroup](#), which advocates for children's rights, ensures that the best interests of the child are taken into account in EU actions, and collaborates with child-focused organisations to keep children's rights high on the EU agenda.

The Council's current [18-month programme](#) (1 January 2025 – 30 June 2026) drawn up by the Polish, Danish and Cypriot Presidencies, commits to enhancing dialogue with civil society and citizens – especially young people. It aims to promote equal opportunities and social inclusion for all, as well as to protect minors from harmful content online.

Implementation of children's rights in the EU

Overall measures of child wellbeing in Europe

The CRC commits governments to providing every child with an adequate standard of living, to ensure physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development, including support for those in need (Article 27), access to education (Article 28), and health (Article 24).

Social and economic disadvantages in early life have repercussions into adulthood and across generations, making child wellbeing vital for individuals and society. Children growing up in poverty are more likely to have more difficulties in achieving their full potential at school and later in life, risk unemployment and social exclusion, as well as poor health conditions. [Family situations](#), in particular the labour situation of parents and their level of education, are the main factors affecting child poverty. Children with [disabilities](#), [Roma children](#) and [refugee and migrant children](#), face particular problems accessing health services, uneven opportunities for education and higher rates of poverty, and those in the older age range are disproportionately likely not to be in education, employment or training ([NEETs](#)).

UNICEF has been [measuring](#) child wellbeing in high-income countries for the past 20 years. Its reports reveal the lasting impact of the 2008 financial and economic crisis on child-wellbeing in Europe and how far countries have allowed their most disadvantaged children to [fall behind](#) the 'average' child. In 2018, the FRA [found](#) that children were the age group most at risk of poverty or social exclusion in over half of EU countries. The COVID-19 pandemic, along with food and energy [inflation](#) and the climate crisis, have [exacerbated](#) the situation both globally and within the EU. According to [Eurostat](#), the percentage of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion decreased slightly from 24.8 % in 2023 to 24.2 % in 2024 for the EU-27. However, this is still higher than the 24 % figure reported in 2020. This means that nearly one in four children in the EU is at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

EU response

While responsibility for fighting child poverty lies mainly with the Member States, the EU has shown an [increasing willingness](#) to act in this area. A 2013 Commission recommendation, [Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage](#), set out guidelines to help Member States to improve children's access to adequate resources and affordable, high quality services. It also provided for [monitoring, information exchange and cooperation](#) in the field of family and child policies in the EU.

The [Pillar of Social Rights](#) pays significant attention to child wellbeing. Principle 11 explicitly reflects that the fight against child poverty is a priority of today's social Europe, while referring to children's right to protection from poverty. It defines childcare and support for children as a joint responsibility of the European institutions, Member States, social partners and other stakeholders. The related [social pillar action plan](#), adopted in 2021, sets a target of lifting 15 million people out of poverty or social exclusion by 2030, including at least 5 million children, in order to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

In September 2022, the Commission proposed a new [European care strategy](#), including revised targets for the provision of affordable, good quality early childhood education and care, with a

particular focus on 'closing the attendance gap between children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, children with disabilities or special needs and the overall population of children'.

A crucial instrument in the fight against child poverty has been the [European Child Guarantee](#) (ECG), introduced in 2021 which ensures that children in need have effective access to key services. To implement the ECG, EU Member States were required to submit national action plans by March 2022, outlining how they planned to implement the guarantee by 2030. Member States can draw on EU funding, particularly from the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and [Next Generation EU](#). Between 2021 and 2027, Member States where the risk of child poverty or social exclusion was higher than the EU average in the 2017–2019 period must earmark 5 % of their European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) resources to combatting child poverty, while others should allocate appropriate amounts. In January 2024, a Child Guarantee Monitoring [Framework](#) was established to track children's access to key services through statistical indicators. EU countries are encouraged to use this framework when drafting their biannual progress reports, and the Commission will use it during the European Semester.

That same year, three years after the publication of their national action plans, Member States submitted progress reports, which generally highlight the need for better monitoring and clearer targets, tackling regional inequalities, expanding successful pilot projects, improving data sharing, reaching more vulnerable children, strengthening the workforce and ensuring stable long-term funding.

Protecting children from violence, abuse and exploitation

The CRC commits governments to protect children from all forms of violence and abuse (Article 19) and sexual exploitation (Article 34).

UNICEF has [documented](#) widespread violence against children globally. Although such violence is [difficult](#) to measure accurately, available estimates give grounds for concern. In addition to [child migrants](#), vulnerable children include [children with disabilities](#) and girls at risk of female genital mutilation (FGM). [Institutionalisation](#) can also be considered a form of violence, with children in institutions thought to be particularly vulnerable. The digital environment also poses [risks](#) for children, as online child sexual abuse [continues to rise](#), according to Europol. Child rights [organisations](#) and [policymakers](#) warn that the online world, while offering multiple opportunities for children to learn, also creates opportunities for those who want to harm children with [inappropriate content](#), [cyberbullying](#) and [hate](#).

EU response

The EU has adopted legislation to eradicate various forms of violence to which children are subjected, including [human trafficking](#), [sexual abuse, exploitation and child pornography](#) and to improve support for [child victims of crime](#). Some of the legislation has been under review, while some has recently been recast (e.g. the Directive on Human Trafficking was [revised](#) in June 2024 and now includes forced marriage and illegal adoption as forms of exploitation covered). Under the 2020–2025 strategy for a [more effective fight against child sexual abuse](#), four legislative proposals were put forward during the past term. In 2024, the Commission released a proposal for a [revision](#) of the Combating Child Sexual Abuse [Directive](#). The new rules would broaden the definitions of offences to include new forms of online child sexual abuse and would introduce stricter penalties as well as more specific requirements for preventing victimisation and supporting victims. A [regulation](#) aimed at strengthening Europol's mandate to combat child sexual abuse online was adopted in 2022. An interim [regulation](#), initially in force until August 2024 and later extended until 3 April 2026, allows online communication service providers to voluntarily detect and report child sexual abuse online, in derogation from the [ePrivacy](#) Directive.

A 2022 [proposal](#) for permanent rules to replace the interim regulation is still pending. These rules would [oblige](#) providers to detect child sexual abuse material on their services, and then to report and remove it, and envisage the creation of an EU centre to counter and prevent child sexual abuse. Furthermore, the Commission launched a [revision](#) of the Victims' Rights Directive and, in April 2024, adopted a [recommendation](#) on integrated child protection systems. Both initiatives aim to strengthen the EU's support network for child victims of violence. The recommendation urges Member States to prioritize the best interests of the child, ensuring children are recognised and safeguarded as rights holders with non-negotiable rights.

On violence experienced by children online, in 2022 the EU adopted a new strategy for a better internet for kids ([BIK+](#)), to protect children and arm them with skills and tools to use the internet safely and responsibly. The new BIK+ strategy [complements](#) the 2021 [EU strategy on the rights of the child](#) and 'reflects the [digital principle](#) that children and young people should be protected and empowered online'. The Commission's proposal to [extend the list of EU crimes](#) to include hate speech and hate crime recognises the importance of the BIK+ strategy and emphasises the impacts of these crimes on children's development.

In May 2024, the EU [adopted](#) the Violence against Women and Domestic Violence [Directive](#). The forms of violence covered include child marriage, FGM and cyber-violence. More broadly, the directive recognises child witnesses as direct victims of violence against women and domestic violence, and requires Member States to adopt specific measures to protect and support them. Member States must also establish safe and child-friendly reporting procedures, as well as safe places for children visiting parent offenders. In parallel, in 2023 the EU acceded to the Council of Europe's Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence ([Istanbul Convention](#)), which highlights the importance of taking the specific needs of children into account.

Child protection systems are an area where Member States have primary responsibility. However, the EU also supports national action. In 2015, the FRA first [mapped](#) national child protection systems across the EU, defining key principles to strengthen them. The mapping was [updated](#) in 2023 and informed a 2024 Commission [recommendation](#) aimed at helping Member States reinforce their child protection systems.

Children may also fall victim to parental abduction in cases of cross-border family disputes. In 2019, the Commission [reported](#) around 140 000 international divorces and around 1 800 cases of parental child abduction within the EU every year. To address these issues, [new rules](#) on cross-border parental-responsibility disputes and child abduction entered into force in August 2022, replacing and repealing the [Brussels IIa Regulation](#).

EU funding for combating violence against children

EU funding for preventing violence against children and promoting and protecting the rights of the child more broadly is available under the long running Daphne programme, now incorporated into the [citizens, equality, rights and values programme](#). The 2023–2025 [work programme](#) supports implementation of the EU strategy on the rights of the child, with a particular focus on addressing children's needs and safeguarding their rights in line with the new Commission [recommendation](#) on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interests of the child.

Protecting the rights of children on the move

Under Article 22 CRC, child refugees have the right to special protection and help. Under Article 38, governments are also committed to protect and care for children who are affected by armed conflict (Article 38) and to aid their recovery (Article 39).

The number of migrant children has been rising globally since the turn of the century. According to [estimates](#) by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in 2020, 35.5 million children were living outside their country of birth, 11.5 million more than in 2000. In [2023](#), more than 38 000

children were detected crossing the EU's external borders irregularly, more than 20 000 of them unaccompanied, i.e., arriving without an adult responsible for them. Between 2021 and 2023, at least 51 433 unaccompanied minors were reported to be [missing](#), an average of 47 children a day across Europe. Moreover, [children](#) represented 8.2 % of all third-country nationals found to be irregularly present in the EU. The overall number of children in this situation rose to 103 000 in 2023, the highest figure since 2016, when close to 153 000 children were recorded. The war in Ukraine and the resulting mass [displacement](#) have further worsened the situation, creating opportunities for criminal networks to take advantage of vulnerable people, particularly children.

EU response

The EU, together with its Member States, has been active in this context for many years. Existing EU policies and legal instruments provide the framework for the protection of children in migration, including reception conditions, the treatment of their applications and integration, building on the awareness of the special needs of unaccompanied children in migration since the action plan on unaccompanied minors ([2010–2014](#)). Nevertheless, the increasing number of migrants and asylum-seekers, including children, has placed Member States under pressure and highlighted some of the shortcomings of the existing framework. The long-awaited reform of the EU [rules](#) on migration and asylum, adopted in May 2024, has addressed existing protection gaps to some extent, introducing several procedural guarantees and safeguards for unaccompanied [minors](#).

The EU strategy on the rights of the child and the [Action plan on integration and inclusion 2021–2027](#) stress that children arriving in the EU need additional targeted support to [integrate](#), particularly when they are unaccompanied, as do children with a migrant background. Special provisions have been made for children displaced from Ukraine under the [Temporary Protection Directive](#).

Protecting children's right to be heard and to participate

Article 12 CRC gives all children the right to participate, to be consulted in decisions that concern them, to engage, be listened to and be heard, in accordance with their age and maturity, and for their views to be taken seriously.

Research shows that when children are given the possibility to participate in decisions that affect their care, education, or treatment in the asylum and justice systems, this can have direct, positive outcomes for their wellbeing and safety. An [evaluation](#) of legislation, policy and practice in the area of child participation in the EU, published by the European Commission in 2015, also found that, when children are engaged in participatory democracy through youth councils, public debates, and participatory research, it can have very significant benefits for their confidence and self-esteem, and help to develop their leadership skills and civic and social responsibility. However, it also concluded that, although the direction of travel in Europe is positive, further action was needed to strengthen children's right to participate.

EU response

In May 2019, children from across the EU signed the [Bucharest Declaration](#) setting out how they would like the EU to encourage children's involvement in decision-making, and consult them on issues that have a direct influence on their lives, including full implementation of the recommendations set out in the evaluation. Across the EU, several [initiatives](#) have been established to support and strengthen children's participation in democratic life. These initiatives include forums such as children's and youth parliaments and councils, as well as institutions such as the national Ombudsperson for Children. The current [EU strategy on the rights of the child](#) stresses the need to empower children to become [active citizens](#) in democratic societies and proposes, among other measures, the creation of an EU children's participation [platform](#) together with the European Parliament and children's rights organisations, to connect the existing child participation mechanisms at local, national and EU level, which was launched in 2022.

The EU has already taken steps in recent years to ensure that children are heard, with a particular focus on the [justice](#) system, through [child-friendly justice initiatives](#). These have included a [directive on special safeguards for children suspected or accused in criminal proceedings](#) and the new [rules](#) on cross-border family matters, repealing Brussels IIa Regulation. Finally, the 2020–2025 [Strategy](#) on victims' rights stressed again the principle that when a child is the victim of a crime, the child's best interests shall be the primary concern. This principle is also included in the proposal for the revision of the [Victims' Rights Directive](#).

Position of the European Parliament on children's rights

Parliament speaks out regularly on children's rights. Regarding the UN's CRC, its 2014 [resolution](#) marking the Convention's 25th anniversary called, not least, for better mainstreaming of children's rights in all EU legislative proposals, policies and financial decisions, and monitoring of their compliance with the EU *acquis* on children and with obligations under the Convention. It also asked the Commission to consider how the EU could accede to the Convention, a call reiterated in Parliament's 2019 [resolution](#) on the Convention's 30th anniversary. The latter welcomed the Commission's commitment to introduce a comprehensive strategy on children's rights and establish a 'child guarantee'. Both resolutions called for sufficient EU funding for children's rights and the 2019 resolution called, specifically, for a 'child marker' in the Commission's budgets to enable effective measurement and monitoring of EU investment in children. Both resolutions also stressed the importance of a gender-sensitive and intersectional approach, and highlighted specific issues around wellbeing, combating violence, migration and justice, which are expanded in Parliament's 2021 [resolution](#) on the EU strategy on the rights of the child and other resolutions on specific issues.

With respect to **children's wellbeing**, Parliament [contributed](#) to new family leave and flexible work arrangements, allowing couples to share [parental leave](#), and has called for [universal quality education](#). In 2022, Parliament called for [common European action on care](#) and for Member States to use EU funding to invest in high-quality public childcare for every child, including children facing poverty, social exclusion and intersecting forms of discrimination. In 2023, Parliament [called](#) on Member States to allow children to grow up in families and communities rather than institutions. It also adopted its first [resolution](#) on mental health, calling on the Commission and the Member States to prioritise mental health and well-being among children. In 2024, Parliament also held a [debate](#) on stepping up the fight against the recruitment of minors for criminal acts.

[Child poverty](#) is a longstanding concern for Parliament: in 2015, it [called](#) for the reduction of **child poverty** to be made more visible in the European Semester. It has also [suggested](#) establishing a 'European authority for children' to support and monitor national implementation of the European child guarantee and ensure the exchange of good practices. Regarding the [European Child Guarantee](#), Parliament played a key role in its introduction by first calling for it in 2015. Over the years, Parliament has continuously called for its enhancement and increased funding. In [March 2025](#), Parliament requested an ambitious budget in the next multiannual financial framework.

As co-legislator, Parliament plays a leading role in the adoption of EU legislation to eradicate **violence against children**. It has [highlighted](#) shortcomings in the implementation of EU legislation on victims' rights when it comes to support services for children. It has also highlighted the necessity for improved [data](#) on sexual abuse and exploitation of children.

In 2012, Parliament was already [warning](#) about the risks to children in the **digital world** and the need to tackle harmful content. In [2019](#) and [2021](#), it voiced its concerns about the surge in online child sexual abuse, and stressed that ICT companies and online platforms should take their share of responsibility in the fight against it. It also emphasised the [necessity](#) of eliminating online child abuse material and called for a strategy against cyberbullying.

In the area of **migration**, Parliament has stressed the need to [protect](#) all child migrants and refugees,

and specifically [unaccompanied minors](#) and [girls](#), and called for an end to immigration [detention](#) for children. Parliament has also stressed the need to host unaccompanied children in separate facilities from adults to avoid risk of violence and sexual abuse. In its [resolution](#) on EU protection of children and young people fleeing the war in Ukraine, Parliament stressed the need to identify vulnerable groups and to swiftly appoint guardians for unaccompanied children, while calling on child protection services in the country of reception to monitor these children continuously for their well-being after their arrival in the EU. In [May 2025](#), it also demanded the safe and unconditional return of Ukrainian children deported by force.

Parliament has highlighted the needs of other groups of **vulnerable children**, [calling](#) for a child-sensitive approach in the post-2020 Strategic EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, and [emphasising](#) the need for, inter alia, inclusive education, high quality and affordable pre-school childcare for children with a disability, and accessible and tailor-made services, in order to end violence against children with disabilities and support the victims of violence. In 2022, Parliament [drew attention](#) to the disproportionate impact of poverty on racialised children and called for full use of the child guarantee to tackle structural racism. In [2023](#), it noted the vulnerability of LGBTIQ+ young people, and in [2024](#), it recalled the right of rainbow families to free movement.

In the area of **justice**, Parliament has emphasised the need to safeguard the [best interests of the child](#) across the EU in all decisions relating to childcare, and more specifically related to transnational abduction and child placement and adoption decisions (the subject of many petitions addressed to the European Parliament). In this context, it has [called](#) for reinforced judicial cooperation and more child-friendly hearing procedures in [transnational parental abduction cases](#). Parliament has also [called for](#) EU legislation requiring all EU countries to recognise each other's adoption certificates automatically and for the creation of an EU-wide adoption certificate. In 2022 Parliament [urged](#) the Commission to draw up common guidelines to ensure child-friendly justice, to harmonise procedural safeguards for children in cross-border family law proceedings, and to present a new proposal for a regulation on cross-border mediation. In 2023, it also [advocated](#) for children deprived of liberty throughout the world.

In [2024](#) **Parliament's Coordinator on Children's Rights** hosted events on the role of primary schools in building inclusive societies, public policies for children, missing children and child protection. She also took part in various events, for example, on the wellbeing of children and young people, as well as dealing with individual enquiries on parental child abductions, cross-border family cases and other child related issues. The use of mediation in disputes involving children in cross-border family cases remains an important issue that Vice-President Kopacz advocated for in 2024, highlighting its importance to parents and experts involved in such disputes.

Stakeholder views

Stakeholder organisations tackle a wide range of issues affecting children in Europe and globally. For example, child poverty is a primary focus for [Eurochild](#) and other networks that are part of the [European Alliance for Investing in Children](#). The alliance has [welcomed](#) the European child guarantee proposal and [called](#) on EU Member States to adopt ambitious national action plans that take account of the impacts of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. More recently, it has [urged](#) the EU to allocate funds to the fight against child poverty through the 2028–2034 MFF. The alliance has also [endorsed](#) the Commission's proposal for an EU care strategy and suggested that the strategy place a stronger focus on access to alternative family and community care for all children deprived of parental care, in line with the [UN guidelines](#).

Migration, war and conflict and their impact on children are also a particular concern for several stakeholders. [Save the Children](#), for example, has consistently raised awareness about the plight of children in conflict zones and areas affected by natural disasters, as well as child refugees.

The online safety of children has also been highlighted. Most recently, [Terre des Hommes International Federation](#) has [advocated](#) for stronger child safety measures in the guidelines under Article 28 of the Digital Services Act, and has raised [awareness](#) about the impact of AI on child rights.

Future challenges

Although significant progress has been made on protecting children's rights in the EU, there is still much that needs to be done, partly as a response to ongoing and emerging challenges. The term '[permacrisis](#)' is increasingly used to describe the current period of uncertainty and volatility in [Europe](#) and globally. In this context, a key challenge will be to ensure that the impacts on children are fully considered at EU and national levels. Experts at the [14th European forum on the rights of the child](#) in 2022 placed special focus on the impact of Russia's war on Ukraine on children's rights and the EU's child protection response. At the 2025 [15th forum](#), young members of the EU Children Participation Platform presented a call to action to decision-makers. They focused on five priority areas: promoting intergenerational fairness and well-being in schools, expanding the Erasmus programme, strengthening online safety, combating cyberbullying and advancing climate action.

The protection of children's rights in the digital world is an issue of great concern, and [research](#) by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre stresses that we have only just begun to consider the specific risks and opportunities that AI brings for children's rights. Another emerging issue is how to protect children in the [metaverse](#).

Other challenges include combating [child labour](#) and improving the [mental health](#) of children. The [recruitment](#) of children by organised crime is also a growing area of concern.

MAIN REFERENCES

[Children's rights](#), Topical Digest, EPRS, European Parliament, October 2025.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The EU's external action on children's rights is guided by the EU strategy on the rights of the child and other complementary policy frameworks, in particular the [EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024](#), which mainstreams children's rights, [Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child](#), [Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict](#), the [EU Gender Action Plan for external action \(2021-2025\)](#), and the [Child Rights Toolkit](#). In October 2022, the Commission and the High Representative adopted the first ever [Youth Action Plan \(YAP\)](#) for 2022-2027, which aims to strengthen [meaningful youth participation](#) in the EU's external action policies.
- ² The Coordinator works with parents involved in such disputes, providing information and support, and with professionals, advocating closer cooperation and mutual trust between countries in the field of cross-border family law.

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Annex I

Summary of key legal provisions on the rights of the child

EU	Issues covered	Council of Europe
Articles 24 and 32 Charter of Fundamental Rights (CFR) Article 3 (3) TEU	The child as a holder of rights	Article 4 (d) Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings Article 3 (a) Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse - Lanzarote Convention
Article 24 (2) CFR Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU), <i>Dynamic Medien Vertriebs GmbH v Avides Media AG</i> , C-244/06, 2008 CJEU, C-112/20, <i>M. A. v. État belge</i> , 2021	Best interests of the child	Article 4 (d) Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, Article 3 (a) Lanzarote Convention
Article 24 (1) CFR	Children's rights to participation and to be heard	Article 9 Lanzarote Convention Article 6 Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Dignity of the Human Being with regard to the Application of Biology and Medicine: Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine – Oviedo Convention
Directive on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography (2011/93/EU)	Protection from violence and/or sexual violence	Articles 2 (right to life), 3 (torture, inhuman or degrading treatment) and 8 (physical integrity) European Convention on Human Rights – ECHR Lanzarote Convention
Article 14 (2) CFR (right to education)	Right to receive free compulsory education	Article 17 (2) (right to appropriate social, legal and economic protection) European Social Charter – ESC (revised) Article 2, Protocol 1 ECHR
Article 21 CFR (non-discrimination)	Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of age	Article 14 (prohibition of discrimination) ECHR Article 1, Protocol 12 ECHR
Article 7 CFR (respect for private and family life) Article 24 (3) CFR (contact with parents)	Right to respect for private and family life	Article 8 (right to respect for private and family life) ECHR Convention on the Legal Status of Children Born out of Wedlock Convention on the Adoption of Children (revised) Convention on Contact concerning Children Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), <i>Maslov v Austria [GC]</i> , No. 1638/03, 2008 (deportation of the applicant, convicted of criminal offences as a child)

Source: [Handbook on European law relating to the rights of the child 2022 edition](#), pp. 15-16, FRA, 2022.