The harmonized number for child helplines in Europe: gaps and opportunities
116 111 – SAME NUMBER, SAME SERVICE
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Glossary of Terms
- National Child Helplines – Child helplines that provides support, guidance and referrals
- 116 111 Child Helplines – Specifically, national child helplines that are accessible through the harmonized 116 111 number.
- Issue-Based Child Helplines – Child helplines that provides support on one specific issue or to a specific group of children, e.g. child online safety, eating disorders or children in migration.

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Sixteen years since its inception, the harmonized 116 111 number for child helplines stands as a testament to the progress and impact of child helplines in Europe. Operating in 23 of the 27 EU countries and seven additional European nations, these 116 111 child helplines, together with other national child helplines across Europe, play a pivotal role for children’s rights and well-being, providing counselling to between 1 million to 1.5 million individual contacts each year—most of them children—on any issues they are facing.

Over the years, 116 111 child helplines and other national child helplines have become entrenched in national child protection and well-being structures in most European countries. Many of us will remember child helplines from our own childhood. Widely recognized and trusted as an accessible support service for children directly, they play vital roles in prevention, support, and referral services related to key child rights and well-being issues. Notably, approximately 65% of contacts to child helplines in Europe concerned issues relating to violence and mental health—two key child rights priorities in Europe, as well as the international community. In essence, child helplines are key in upholding the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

However, despite this widespread recognition, many European child helplines grapple with inadequate resources—particularly in responding to emerging crises such as war, pandemics and natural disasters—as well as providing the same service to children with specific communication needs such as children in migration or children with disabilities. Child helplines are not always sufficiently supported by their national governments, and the protection of 116 111 and national child helplines in European regional policy is insufficient, leaving these child helplines vulnerable and at risk of being taken for granted.

This report outlines the gaps, opportunities and requests to EU and European agencies, national governments, telecoms and mobile operators on how we can ensure the continued protection of 116 111 child helplines and national child helplines, to ensure that all children have access to a high-quality child helpline on any issue they are facing.

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2. Child Helpline International data reports (various years): https://childhelplineinternational.org/resources/data-reports/
The importance of harmonized numbers

The harmonized 116 111 number for child helplines stands as an essential service for children seeking support, recognizing the significance of providing easily memorable numbers in times of distress. Its crucial role lies in simplifying access to assistance, notably reducing help-seeking barriers as 116 111 is connected to organizations that children recognize and trust with their issues.

A harmonized number also provides opportunities for cross-border consistency and establishes a recognizable pan-European brand. This consistency is paramount in promoting the number across diverse sectors, minimizing confusion, and ensuring the maintenance of up-to-date information across agencies. Beyond mere accessibility, the harmonized 116 XYZ numbers present a unique opportunity to set a pan-European quality standard for these services to ensure that contacting the same number results in the same level of service (“same number – same service”). In essence, the harmonized 116 111 is key, not only for its accessibility but also for the unified and reliable support the child helplines behind it provide to children across Europe during times of need.

### 116 111 – A brief history

At the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2003 and 2005, the necessity of child helplines and easily-remembered, accessible and toll-free numbers was underscored. In 2005, Child Helpline International embarked on a mission to Brussels, engaging with Members of the European Parliament to champion harmonized and toll-free numbers. With the invaluable assistance of MEP Gröner, we gathered around 400 MEP signatures, forming the impactful “Declaration on Child Helplines in Europe”. This declaration advocated for further EU support, recognizing child helplines as essential components of national child protection systems, and emphasizing the need for a common toll-free number throughout the EU.

On 15 February 2007, the European Commission made an important decision to reserve national telephone numbers that start with 116, aiming to create easy-to-remember, free-of-charge and harmonized numbers for valuable social services across the European Union (EU). Later that year, on 29 October 2007, the number 116 111 was officially chosen for child helpline services. This significant achievement was a testament to the robust advocacy efforts of Child Helpline International and child rights partners.

The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) called for the global adoption of 116 111 on 16 June 2008. Although this global adoption has not happened, different regions – including Africa, Asia and Latin America – have introduced similar numbers for child helplines, proving the value of harmonized numbers.

This journey toward the harmonized 116 111 number reflects a collective commitment to simplifying access to essential support services such as child helplines. It underscores the essential role of advocacy, collaboration, and a shared vision for the safety and well-being of children and young people across Europe.

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The World Summit on the Information Society emphasized the need for child helplines and easy-to-remember, accessible and toll-free numbers.5

December 2005
Child Helpline International goes to Brussels to talk to Members of the European Parliament, seeking their support through a petition for child helplines in the EU.

17 January 2006
The Declaration of Child Helplines in Europe.6

17 January 2007
World leaders meet in Paris to call for action to protect children from abduction and abuse.7

15 February 2007
European Commission decision8 to launch the pan-European number 116, and the introduction of 116 000 for missing children.

29 October 2007
The 116 111 number was officially reserved for child helplines in Europe.

16 June 2008
The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) advocates for the global adoption of 116 111.9

5. www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs2/pc3/contributions/co54.doc
The harmonized 116 111 child helpline number operates in 23 of the 27 EU countries and seven other European nations. Beyond those child helplines using 116 111, there are national child helplines in the additional four EU countries and other countries within Europe who are not using the harmonized number.

In most countries in Europe, 116 111 child helplines and national child helplines have existed for many years and are viewed as an established part of national child protection and child wellbeing structures. Child helplines are often considered to the be first contact a child has with a national child protection system. They are involved in prevention, support and referral of contacts surrounding key child rights and child well-being issues. Furthermore, all child helplines collect data on the contacts they receive and can use this data to improve their services and (where resources exist) advocate on behalf of children through the amplification of their voices. The strength of child helplines is also reflected in their referral networks, where they can refer children for more information and long-term support when necessary.

The pressure on child helplines increased significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic, since many services for children had to close. This was also a time when national and regional policymakers and the international community further acknowledged the importance of professional, accessible remote support services for children. Post-pandemic, we are again facing a situation where child helplines are sadly at risk of being taken for granted. Our members are providing strong support for children, but many also lack long-term sustainable resources to operate to their full potential, including the capacity to provide extensive services to children with specific communication needs, such as refugee children or children with disabilities. Operating to their full potential also includes the capacity to collect, analyse and share data with key stakeholders, as well as for the child helpline’s own advocacy to improve the lives of children. Only some child helplines receive support from their national governments, and the percentage varies.

At the EU level, 116 111 child helplines and national child helplines are often briefly mentioned in EU policy, but not necessarily prioritized as key stakeholders in child rights implementation. Within Europe, but outside of the EU, looking at the Council of Europe (CoE) there is no reference to child helplines in relation to children’s rights strategy and action. The lack of requests to EU and CoE member states on supporting child helplines has, or risks having, a negative impact on the sustainable resourcing of child helplines, hindering them from operating sustainably and to their full potential.

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According to the 2007 Commission Decision\textsuperscript{13} of the European Commission (EC) on reserving the national numbering range beginning with 116 for harmonized numbers of social value, child helpline services operating the 116 111 number should:

- Help children in need of care and protection and link them to services and resources.
- Provide children with an opportunity to express their concerns, talk about issues directly affecting them, and contact the relevant services in an emergency situation.
- Offer their help, by means of counselling, free of charge.
- Be open to all citizens without any requirement of prior registration.
- Be open 24 hours a day, seven days a week – or ensure that information about availability is made publicly available in an easily accessible form, and – if the service is unavailable – advise callers to the child helpline when it will next become available.

This appropriately outlines the role and scope of 116 111 child helplines, but it does not say anything about the quality of operations or the responsibility of national governments to provide financial resources to support the operation and promotion of 116 111 services. Neither does it address the accessibility of child helplines specifically, for example for children with disabilities or children in migration.

Furthermore, the European Electronic Communications Code (EECC)\textsuperscript{14} mentions child helplines in the following way:

- (253) In parallel with the missing children hotline number 116000, many Member States also ensure that children have access to a child-friendly service operating a helpline that helps children in need of care and protection through the use of the 116111 number. Such Member States and the Commission should ensure that awareness is raised among citizens, and in particular among children and among national child protection systems, about the existence of the 116111 helpline.
- (Article 96.4) Member States and the Commission shall ensure that end-users are adequately informed of the existence and use of services provided under the numbers 116000 and, where appropriate, 116111.

The EECC only speaks of access via the 116 111 number and awareness raising of the existence of the number. It says nothing about the requirement of national governments to resource the child helpline, ensure it is a high-quality service and sufficiently promote its services to children and young people. This stands in stark contrast to the text of the EECC in relation to 116 000 for missing children, which outlines access, awareness-raising, sufficient level of service quality, access for users with disabilities, and resourcing. This is problematic and hinders the full operational capacity of child helplines. At a minimum, the 116 111 and the 116 000 should have similar rights assigned in the EECC, as should all 116 XYZ harmonized numbers of social value. The EECC should also reflect the developments regarding communication preferences for children, including towards text-based channels.

\textsuperscript{13} https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A02007D0116-20071030
\textsuperscript{14} https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2018/1972/oj
EU Child Rights Strategy

The 116 111 child helplines are mentioned in the EU Child Rights Strategy in relation to Covid-19 and violence, with an invitation to member states to support:

- “The Covid-19 pandemic has led to an increase in certain forms of violence, such as domestic violence, while complaint and reporting mechanisms need to adapt to the new circumstances. The capacity and access to the child helplines (116 111) and the missing children hotlines (116 000) need to be improved.”
- “Improve the functioning of child protection systems at national level, in particular: (...) establish (where not yet available), and improve child helpline (116 111) and missing children hotline (116 000), including through funding and capacity building; (...) support and promote the work of the EU co-funded Safer Internet Centres, and support child helplines and hotlines in developing online avenues for communication.”

The EU Child Rights strategy brings up the importance of child helplines in relation to protecting children from violence, and focuses on capacity and access, as well as funding. However, this is an invitation to Member States and not a requirement. There is also no commitment by the European Commission to co-fund 116 111 child helplines to ensure the implementation of these goals. Furthermore, the mention of child helplines in relation to violence is connected to Covid-19; while it can be interpreted more widely, the role of child helplines more generally in protecting children against violence could be strengthened. In addition, child helplines are not mentioned at all in relation to mental health. The role of child helplines in supporting children’s mental health is vital, with almost 500,000 contacts each year, ranging from suicide and self-harm to fear and anxiety and loneliness. Any future EU Child Rights Strategy must consider the full range of child rights interventions provided by national child helplines.

BIK+ Strategy

The Better Internet for Kids strategy\(^\text{16}\) (2022), focuses on Safer Internet Centres (SIC), an initiative co-funded by the EC, which includes a national awareness centre, a helpline and a reporting hotline. These form part of the Insafe network and the INHOPE network\(^\text{17}\) (reporting hotlines).

116 111 child helplines are only mentioned in the strategy in relation to cyberbullying, and not in relation to any other child online protection issues, including online child sexual exploitation and abuse:

- “Cyberbullying remains the most reported topic to the SIC helplines in the last decade. The existing 116 111 number is specially reserved for child helplines in the EU. Cyberbullying and other online problems can be addressed via this number, or directly by the SIC helplines. The strategy will make the support offered by SICs more visible through enhanced cooperation around 116 111 and related online services (e.g. helpline apps) which should be also accessible for children in vulnerable situations.”
- “The Commission will (...) ensure that the 116 111 harmonized number addresses cyberbullying, in cooperation with the EU co-funded SIC helplines, by 2023.”

There is commitment to co-funding the SIC helplines, not the 116 111 child helplines, even though they are listed as part of the implementation regarding cyberbullying:

- “The Commission will (...) co-fund the safer internet helplines and hotlines in the EU including those recognized in the future as ‘trusted flaggers’ under the DSA, to assist the public, in particular children, when confronted with harmful and illegal content, from 2022.”

The 116 111 child helplines and other national child helplines are key when it comes to online safety\(^\text{18, 19}\). Fortunately, there is an operational overlap between the 116 111 child helplines (or national child helplines) and the SIC helplines in 17 countries in the EU and connected states: Austria, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovenia and Sweden; meaning that part of their operations related to online child protection issues is co-funded by the EC. In regard to the EC’s ambition of having one recognisable, harmonized number for children to talk about any issue, the focus on issue-based child helplines without also supporting 116 111 child helplines and other national child helplines is problematic.

\(^{17}\) https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/policy/insafe-inhope
\(^{18}\) https://childhelplineinternational.org/2023-ocsea-report-factsheet/
\(^{19}\) https://childhelplineinternational.org/2023-position-paper-child-helplines-csea/
Ensuring the Quality of Child Helplines

Currently, there are no EU-level guidelines as to what constitutes a high-quality child helpline. There is also no reference to member states in EU policy providing sufficient resources for operating the 116 111 child helplines to a certain level of quality, for example in the European Electronic Communications Code.

Child Helpline International provides a Core Quality Standards for Child Helplines Framework (CQS), developed together with members and expert partners, which should form the basis for resourcing and quality assurance for operating a 116 111 or national child helpline. This will ensure the pan-European commitment to the “same number – same service” of high quality. This is essential for children who are contacting child helplines in times of distress, in many cases seeking support for the first time.

Establishing 116 111 outside of the EU

The official assignment of the 116 111 number is only valid in the EU. However, due to the importance of harmonized numbers, several of our child helpline members in European countries outside of the EU also desire to operate the number. As mentioned above, the International Telecommunications Union proposed 116 111 as a global number in 2008. While this is no longer desirable, as other regions have put their own harmonized number structures in place, 116 111 is still the preferred harmonized number within Europe.

The Council of Europe would be well placed regarding promotion of the implementation of 116 111 for child helplines outside of the EU. Currently, the CoE does not refer to child helplines or the 116 111 number at all in its recent child rights strategy.

National governments, mobile operators and national regulatory authorities must also work together to address this issue outside of the EU.

20. https://childhelplineinternational.org/about/members/core-quality-standards/
Accessibility gaps

Phone

The 116 111 number must be free of charge for everyone who uses the number, and it should not be itemized on the phone bill. In reality, this only works for certain if the child is using a SIM card from the in-country operator for the country in which they find themselves. The 116 111 number is routed differently in different countries, and therefore how it works beyond that depends on the country. Child Helpline International have received reports that the number is not accessible if using a SIM card from outside of the EU – for example, this became evident when refugee children from Ukraine arrived in the EU.

Other issues related to calling 116 111 that we have identified include:

- Children with SIM cards from countries other than the one that they are currently in cannot access 116 111 for free.
- Children with SIM cards from a country other than the one that they are in need to dial the country code before 116 111.
- 116 111 is itemized up on the phone bill of children calling 116 111 from a SIM card from a country other than the one they are making the call in – this raises a child protection issue.
- Children cannot access 116 111 if they do not have credit on their phone.

In addition, in some countries, operating the 116 111 harmonized number is not free for the child helpline, meaning it must designate resources towards this instead of focussing on service delivery. In most countries, there is an agreement with mobile operators, the government and the national regulatory authorities to ensure this is not the case.

Text-based services

Text-based services – via chat, social media or text apps – are becoming increasingly common as a preferred method of contact for children. In 2022, around one third of all contacts made to child helplines in Europe were through text or web-based channels. These also provide opportunities for children who are not comfortable with talking on the phone about their issues to access support. and they facilitate translation to other languages. They also simplify direct reporting for online child rights issues, including cyberbullying and online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Many of our child helpline members in Europe provide text-based services, but not all. Text-based counselling takes significantly more time than phone-based counselling, making it a more resource-heavy method of contact. Child helplines therefore need additional resources to be able to provide more support via text-based services.

It is also an issue that children cannot access child helplines via chat if they do not have access to 4G network services. Public wi-fi networks, though often accessible, can also compromise privacy. While a solution has been found enabling access to child helplines even when there is not enough credit to make other phone calls, there is a need to find solutions for issues affecting text-based services.
Tailored engagement for children with pronounced vulnerabilities

Children with certain communication needs – such as those in migration who do not speak the languages of the countries in which they find themselves, or children with disabilities with communication needs or preferences – subsequently have reduced accessibility to child helplines than children without such needs.

“Children with disabilities” is a highly diverse group with diverse communication needs. For example, only one of our child helpline members in Europe provides counselling via sign language.12

Children in migration need support services in a language they are comfortable with, and may need different kinds of support and information, for example legal advice, help with accommodation, and information about access to education and health care and the asylum process. Providing services to children in migration may also require certain cultural knowledge to be able to give the most helpful support and guidance. There may also be a lack of awareness and lack of trust for unfamiliar organizations such as the child helpline, necessitating a targeted marketing and awareness-raising approach.

Child helplines have the infrastructure and knowledge to further develop these services but they require additional resources to do so.

Telecoms and Mobile Operators should:
Ensure that 116 111 remains free and address any technical issues that arises with accessibility by:

- Partnering with and providing support for child helplines.
- Ensuring free access to 116 111 and national child helplines for children, and for the child helpline, also outside of the EU.
- Exploring and addressing any accessibility issues arising with 116 111 or the national child helpline, also outside of the EU.

National governments should:
Adequately and sustainably fund child helplines to operate in line with the Core Quality Standards for Child Helplines and ensure they are accessible for all children by:

- Engaging directly with the 116 111 child helpline or national child helpline to establish long-term partnerships around resourcing and child rights issues.
- Ensuring that the child helpline is resourced to operate 24/7, offering multiple methods of contact, including phone and text-based.
- Providing additional support for child helplines during times of crisis, when the support needs of children may be enhanced.
- Ensuring that the child helpline is sustainably resourced to provide services to all children, including children with disabilities and children in migration.
- Cementing the ongoing support for child helplines in national child rights policy and strategy.

European Union agencies and the Council of Europe should:
Provide clear and high-level policy guidance on child helplines, incorporate recommendations to Member States in pan-European policies, strategies and action plans, and operationalize support to enhance the quality of operations and awareness of 116 111 across Europe by:

- Ensuring direct reference to 116 111 and national child helplines and their role in child rights is promoted in all future child rights and child mental health strategy and policy.
- Updating the 116 XYZ Communication from 2007 to include reference to the accessibility of 116 XYZ numbers for all children, as well as a certain level of operational quality.
- Updating the European Electronic Communications Code to reflect the requirement for Member States to support and promote 116 111 and other 116 XYZ numbers to a certain level of quality.
- Actively contributing to awareness raising of 116 111 as integral components of all child rights initiatives, including within their own institutions, as this knowledge is often lacking.

The European Commission should launch a support fund for operating 116 111 child helplines, in cases where government support is lacking
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<td><a href="http://nadel-decijalinija.org">http://nadel-decijalinija.org</a></td>
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<td>SLOVAKIA</td>
<td>Linka Detskej Istoty</td>
<td>116 111 / 0800 500 500</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ldi.sk">http://www.ldi.sk</a></td>
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<td>SLOVENIA</td>
<td>National Telephone Helpline TOM</td>
<td>116 111</td>
<td><a href="https://le-tom.si/">https://le-tom.si/</a></td>
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<td>SWEDEN</td>
<td>BRIS</td>
<td>116 111</td>
<td><a href="http://www.bris.se">http://www.bris.se</a></td>
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<td>SWITZERLAND</td>
<td>Pro Juventute Beratung + Hilfe 147</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.147.ch">http://www.147.ch</a></td>
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<td>TÜRKIYE</td>
<td>Gencilik Destek Hatti</td>
<td>0850 455 0070</td>
<td><a href="http://www.gencilikdestekhatti.org.tr">http://www.gencilikdestekhatti.org.tr</a></td>
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<td>UNITED KINGDOM</td>
<td>BEAT</td>
<td>0808 801 0677</td>
<td><a href="http://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk">http://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk</a></td>
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<td>Childline UK</td>
<td>116 111 / 0800 1111</td>
<td><a href="http://www.childline.org.uk">http://www.childline.org.uk</a></td>
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<tr>
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<td>HopelineUK</td>
<td>0800 068 4141</td>
<td><a href="https://www.papyrus-uk.org/papyrus-HOPELINE247/">https://www.papyrus-uk.org/papyrus-HOPELINE247/</a></td>
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</table>
Every child has a voice.
No child should be left unheard.

Child Helpline International is a collective impact organization with over 150 members in more than 130 countries and territories around the world.

We coordinate information, viewpoints, knowledge and data from our child helpline members, partners and external sources. This exceptional resource is used to help and support child protection systems globally, regionally and nationally, and to help our members advocate for the rights of children and amplify their voices.

Child Helpline International
Bruggebouw Suite 5.08
Bos en Lommerplein 280
1055 RW Amsterdam
The Netherlands

www.childhelplineinternational.org

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