Child Helpline International

SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH IN EUROPE: THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF CHILD HELPLINES

This briefing summarizes evidence and insights from child helplines in Europe (2020–2024), highlighting key trends and insights relating to **mental health** that EU policymakers may wish to consider in ongoing legislative and implementation processes.

Key Messages

- Mental health is the most common reason children and young people contact child helplines in Europe, with **2,899,950** mental-health-related contacts over the last five years, including **579,909** contacts in 2024 alone. Self-harm and suicidal thoughts accounted for **695,385** contacts over five years, with girls and nonbinary children disproportionately affected.
- Mental-health support remains difficult to access. Statutory services are uneven, under-resourced and hard to reach due to long waiting lists, affordability barriers and parental gatekeeping. In 2024, **21,931** children and young people contacted child helplines for help accessing mental-health services, underscoring persistent gaps and unmet need.
- Digital harms are increasingly impacting children's mental well-being. Their complexity and rapid evolution make them difficult to detect and mitigate. Some young people are turning to generative AI tools for emotional or crisis support, despite their lack of safeguarding, emotional nuance and risk-identification capabilities.
- Child helplines offer immediate, free and confidential support and often represent the first place where children disclose distress. They play a critical role as early-intervention and referral actors, connecting children to follow-up services when needed.
- Current EU frameworks recognize mental health and digital safety, but child-specific entry points remain insufficiently addressed. The implementation of the Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, the Child Guarantee, the Recommendation on Integrated Child Protection Systems and the DSA must more clearly integrate child helplines as essential actors.

Why This Matters

Across Europe, children and young people are experiencing rising levels of anxiety, loneliness, emotional distress and pressures linked to school, family life, peer relationships and their digital environments. Cyberbullying, exposure to repeated harmful content, online exploitation and addictive platform design further intensify these mental-health challenges.

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Yet statutory mental-health services remain uneven, under-resourced and difficult to access. Long waiting lists, affordability issues and parental gatekeeping continue to create significant barriers to timely support.

Digital harms, and their increasing consequences for children's mental well-being, are difficult to detect and mitigate given the complexity and rapid evolution of digital services. This negatively impacts the quality of support available and help-seeking behaviours.

At the same time, emerging trends show some young people turning to generative AI tools for emotional or crisis support when they feel unable to speak to a trusted adult or professional. While such tools may offer immediate responses, they remain underregulated, lack adequate safeguards, emotional nuance and the ability to identify risk. This shift underscores the increasing importance of human-led, child-centred support and reinforces the unique role of child helplines in providing safe, empathetic intervention.

Child helplines provide a vital lifeline, offering real-time, confidential support and a safe space for children to express emotions, seek guidance and access referrals. They reduce barriers faced by children who cannot access, or are afraid to access, mental-health services. One clear example of this is the availability of anonymous online chat counselling, which meets children where they are.

As gateways into protection and care systems, child helplines identify early warning signs, de-escalate crises and guide children to appropriate services. Their frontline perspective makes them an indispensable partner in strengthening Europe's mental-health response for children and young people, both offline and online.

What Data from Child Helplines Show

Child helplines across Europe handle over one million counselling contacts every year, with mental health consistently the most common reason for reaching out. Over the last five years, **2,899,950** counselling contacts have been related to mental health, with **579,909** contacts received in 2024 alone (36.8% of all counselling contacts). Key trends include:

- Fear, anxiety and mood problems accounted for **1,057,675** counselling contacts over the last five years.
- A significant number of children expressing self-harm or suicidal thoughts, representing **695,385** contacts over the last five years (24% of all mental-health related contacts), often disclosed for the first time.
- In 2024, child helplines across Europe received **21,931** contacts from children and young people specifically seeking help to access mental-health services, underscoring persistent gaps and unmet needs.
- Girls represent the majority of contacts for most mental-health challenges, including problems with eating behaviour (**70%**), self-harm (**65%)** and suicide (**57%**). In cases involving addictive behaviours, boys accounted for **48%** of contacts related to this

issue. Among nonbinary children and young people, suicidal thoughts and attempts were the most commonly reported concern, with **1,543** contacts in 2024.

These trends underscore the urgency of meaningfully integrating child helplines into national mental-health systems, both as early-intervention services and early detection mechanisms that provide unique, real-time insights into children's needs. The data also point to the need for stronger, safer use of digital technologies to identify early signs of distress and ensure children can access child helplines and other national support services quickly and easily.

EU Policy Landscape

The EU has made meaningful progress in recent years through frameworks such as the Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health (2023), the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021) and the European Child Guarantee (2021). More recently, the Recommendation on Integrated Child Protection Systems (2024) sets out clear expectations for accessible, child-friendly support services. It calls on Member States to establish safe, confidential, well-publicised reporting and complaint mechanisms, including 24/7 helplines, hotlines and online services.

Yet despite these advances, and the strong emphasis on prevention and community-based care, child-specific entry points to mental-health support remain insufficiently addressed across EU policy.

Digital policy frameworks such as the Digital Services Act (2022/2024) and the BIK+ Strategy (2022) recognize the profound impact of digital environments on children's wellbeing. Most notably, the DSA Guidelines on the Protection of Minors outline online platforms' responsibility to ensure that children are provided with information about their relevant child helpline when encountering harmful or illegal content or behaviour.

As young people increasingly turn to AI-based tools for emotional or crisis support, frameworks like the Artificial Intelligence Act (2024) and BIK+ must also account for the risks associated with children relying on non-human systems that lack safeguards, emotional nuance, and the ability to detect risk. The frontline insights of child helplines can play a critical role in monitoring, understanding and responding to these emerging patterns.

Despite these developments, child helplines remain insufficiently recognized within EU mental-health policy as essential, frontline actors. Their role as accessible, confidential entry points for early detection, crisis support and referral pathways remains largely absent from key implementation frameworks, even as demand among children and young people continues to rise.

Recommendations for Policymakers

To meaningfully address the growing mental-health crisis among children and young people in Europe, Child Helpline International recommends:

1. Recognize and strengthen child helplines within mental-health systems

- **Recognize child helplines as essential mental-health support services** within EU frameworks and national strategies.
- **Strengthen child-specific provisions** in the EU Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health, ensuring early intervention through free, real-time, confidential support services.
- **Promote equitable access** to mental-health care across Member States, particularly in rural, marginalized and underserved communities.

2. Ensure sustainable and harmonized funding

- **Support sustainable national funding models** that guarantee the long-term operation of child helplines.
- **Complete and resource the rollout of the harmonized 116 111 number** across all Member States.

3. Build child-centred digital and AI systems

- **Ensure EU digital and AI policies account for children's growing use of generative AI tools for emotional and crisis support**, and emphasize the need for human-centred alternatives such as child helplines.
- **Promote safety-by-design in digital platforms**, grounded in real-world risk patterns identified by child helpline data.
- **Require child-friendly, safe and well-publicised reporting channels**, including clear signposting to child helplines as mandated in the DSA protection-of-minors guidelines.

4. Use child helpline data to drive policy

- **Encourage the systematic use of child helpline data** to inform EU and national mental-health strategies, prevention efforts and early-intervention systems.

About Child Helpline International

Child Helpline International is a global network of 143 child helplines in 124 countries and territories, with 30 members in 27 countries across Europe. In Europe, child helplines respond to millions of contacts each year, providing life-changing support to children and young people. Our work is dedicated to strengthening child protection systems, amplifying children's voices and ensuring access to safe, trusted support through the 116 111 number.

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Our Child Helplines Members in the EU

Child Helpline International have 30 child helpline members from 27 EU countries. The full list of EU members is listed in the table below.

Country	Member Organization/Child Helpline
Austria	147 Rat Auf Draht
Belgium	Jongerenlijn AWEL
Bulgaria	National 116111 Line (State Agency for Child Protection)
Croatia	Hrabri Telefon (Brave Phone)
Cyprus	SPAVO Hope for Children (116111)
Czechia	Linka Bezpečí
Denmark	BørneTelefonen (Børns Vilkår)
Estonia	Lasteabi
Finland	Lasten ja Nuorten Puhelin ja Netti - Child and Youth Phone
France	119 - Allô Enfance en Danger (SNATED)
Germany	Kinder- und Jugendtelefon (Nummer Gegen Kummer eV)
Greece	The Smile of the Child Together for Children 11525 Helpline
Hungary	Lelkisegély-vonal (Kék Vonal Child Crisis Foundation)
Ireland	Childline Ireland (ISPCC)
Italy	Fondazione S.O.S Il Telefono Azzurro
Latvia	Uzticības Tālruni / Child & Adolescent Helpline 116111
Lithuania	Vaiku Linija
Luxembourg	Kanner Jugendtelefon (KJT)
Malta	Kellimni (SOS Malta) Support Line 179 (Agenzija Appoġġ)
Netherlands	De Kindertelefoon Helpwanted.nl, Offlimits
Poland	Telefon Zaufania
Portugal	SOS Criança e Jovem
Romania	Telefonul Copilului 116111
Slovakia	Linka Detskej Istoty
Slovenia	TOM Helpline
Spain	Teléfono ANAR
Sweden	BRIS