Child Helpline International

PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM VIOLENCE: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF CHILD HELPLINES

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

Key Messages

- Violence against children remains widespread across Europe. Over the last five years, child helplines recorded **1.3 million** violence-related counselling contacts, including **286,592** in 2024 alone. Violence is the second most common reason why children seek help (17.4% of all contacts).
- Bullying is the leading form of violence reported, with nearly **80,000** contacts in 2024 and more than **300,000** contacts recorded over the last five years.
- Physical, emotional and sexual violence remain pervasive. Technology-facilitated sexual abuse and exploitation (TF-CSEA) continues to rise, increasing from **6,200** contacts in 2023 to **10,107** in 2024.
- Children increasingly rely on online, text-based channels when seeking help. In 2024, **31.4%** of all contacts to European child helplines were made via webchat, messaging apps or social media.
- Child helplines fill critical gaps in national protection systems, particularly where children cannot safely disclose abuse to parents, teachers or social services. They provide safe, confidential ways to disclose violence, including first-time disclosures.
- EU policy developments (the Directive on Combating Violence Against Women & Domestic Violence, the Victims' Rights Directive revision, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and European Child Guarantee) have advanced protections, but children's specific experiences of violence, and their need for child-friendly reporting pathways, remain insufficiently addressed.
- Digital policy reforms, including the Digital Services Act, must safeguard children's ability to reach helplines discreetly, even as age-verification or platform restrictions expand across Europe.
- Child helpline data offers real-time insights on emerging patterns of violence and is essential for evidence-based EU and national policymaking.
- Policymakers should recognize child helplines as essential child-protection services across domestic-violence, anti-bullying and digital-safety frameworks, supported by sustainable funding and integrated referral pathways.

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Why This Matters

Violence against children remains pervasive across Europe, affecting hundreds of thousands of children and young people every year. Child helplines consistently report that violence is one of the most common reasons for contact, with an average of **195,323** counselling contacts annually related to violence over the last five years (representing **17.9%** of all counselling contacts).

Bullying remains the most frequently reported form of violence, with nearly **80,000** contacts in 2024 alone. Violence in the home, whether experienced directly or witnessed, is also one of the most persistent and least visible forms of harm. Domestic violence is closely linked with emotional distress, behavioural difficulties, mental-health challenges, school dropout, homelessness and long-term trauma. Yet children's experiences continue to be insufficiently recognised in policy and practice.

Many children are unable to seek help from teachers, social workers, or family members due to fear of reprisal, stigma or a lack of privacy. Child helplines fill this critical gap by offering safe, confidential and accessible support, and can be the first place where children disclose violence. Children are also increasingly relying on text-based channels to communicate discreetly and safely.

This is why the recent policy discussions on social media bans and age-verification measures must be approached with caution. For children experiencing violence at home, online messaging channels may be the only safe way to reach a helpline without alerting an abuser. Policies that do not take this reality into account risk cutting off essential pathways to protection.

Child helplines across Europe also highlight systemic gaps in national protection systems, including under-resourced social services, untrained or inconsistent police responses, limited follow-up after referrals, and weak inter-agency coordination. In some countries, the absence of a complete legal ban on corporal punishment continues to reinforce social acceptance of violence. We welcome the recent steps by Czechia and Switzerland, both of which have now prohibited all corporal punishment of children.

Child helplines play a vital role in early detection, helping children navigate fear and uncertainty, assess their risk, and connect with protection services. Their data provides real-time insight into emerging forms of violence and remains an essential evidence base for strengthening child-protection policy across Europe.

What Data from Child Helplines Show

Across Europe, child helplines continue to receive large numbers of violence-related contacts. Over the last five years, **1,313,050** counselling contacts have been related to violence, including **286,592** contacts in 2024 alone. Violence is the second most common reason for contacting a child helpline in Europe, representing **17.4%** of all counselling contacts. Key trends include:

- Bullying, both online and offline, remains the most common violence-related issue. In 2024, it accounted for **27.5%** of all violence-related contacts. Over the last five years, child helplines recorded **303,782** bullying-related contacts, with boys and girls contacting at similar rates (**40%** and **43%** respectively).
- Psychological/emotional, physical and sexual violence remain widespread, with **708,675** contacts recorded across Europe over the last five years.
- Technology-facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation (TF-CSEA) is increasing. TF-CSEA contacts rose from **6,200** (2.5% of violence-related contacts) in 2023 to **10,107** in 2024 (3.5%). Notably, in TF-CSEA-related contacts, the gender of the child or young person victim was often unknown (**57%** of contacts), with the remaining cases involving approximately **one-fifth** girls and **17%** boys. Limited data prevents clear patterns for nonbinary children at this stage.
- In 2024, **girls** contacted child helplines more frequently than boys across nearly all forms of violence. This was particularly evident in contacts involving Child/Early/Forced marriage (**74%**), Harmful traditional practices (other than child marriage and FGM) (**67%**), and Gender-based harmful traditional practices (other than FGM) (**62%**). The only exception was Child Labour, where boys slightly outnumbered girls (**43%** and **42%**, respectively).
- Through one-off surveys in 2025, EU child helplines reported **24,975** domestic-violence-related contacts in 2024. This figure is likely higher, as domestic violence is not yet a specific category in our annual data collection.
- Children and young people are increasingly relying on text-based channels for discreet, safe communication. In 2024, **31.4%** of all contacts to European child helplines were received through online chat channels (webchat, messaging apps or social media).

These insights demonstrate the crucial role child helplines play in detecting violence early, supporting children to access safety, and informing evidence-based, trauma-informed responses. Child helplines must be meaningfully integrated into EU and national child-protection systems and supported in delivering secure, confidential online support as more children seek help digitally.

EU Policy Landscape

Recent key EU developments, including the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence (2024), the Victims' Rights Directive (2012, under revision 2023) and the EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention, have strengthened protections for victims and expanded access to specialized support services. However, these frameworks still fall short in addressing the specific ways children experience, disclose and seek help for violence. The recast Directive on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children, as well as the proposed Regulation to prevent and combat child sexual abuse, are important opportunities to close these gaps.

The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021) and the European Child Guarantee (2021) reaffirm the right of every child to protection, but they do not sufficiently ensure that children are recognized as direct victims of domestic violence. Nor do they guarantee accessible, child-friendly reporting pathways that allow children to seek help independently of adults.

The ongoing revision of the Victims' Rights Directive and the forthcoming EU Action Plan Against Cyberbullying present crucial opportunities to explicitly recognise child helplines as key support services for children experiencing violence, both online and offline.

Digital legislation, including the Digital Services Act (2022/2024), will shape how children seek help online. Most notably, the DSA Guidelines on the Protection of Minors outline online platforms' responsibility to ensure that children are provided with information about the relevant child helpline when they encounter harmful or illegal content or behaviour. As Member States introduce stricter age verification or social media limits, safeguards must ensure that children experiencing violence can still access discreet digital pathways to child helplines. Policymakers should embed explicit exceptions and protections for children in unsafe environments.

Across all these frameworks, effective implementation depends on strong national systems, accessible reporting and complaint mechanisms, and sustainable funding for child helplines to operate as essential child-protection entry points.

Recommendations for Policymakers

1. Strengthen prevention, early detection and protection for all forms of violence

- Strengthen prevention and early-identification measures across schools, health, justice and community services.
- Recognize children as direct victims of domestic violence within EU policy and ensure the full transposition into national legislation.
- Promote the integration of child helplines into national referral pathways for domestic violence, bullying and other forms of harm, recognizing them as child-friendly, confidential and trusted entry points.

2. Expand safe, child-friendly reporting and help-seeking channels

- Ensure children can access safe, confidential and well-publicised reporting mechanisms, including digital tools they can use independently.
- Require online platforms to provide clear signposting to child helplines, as outlined in the DSA Guidelines on the Protection of Minors.
- Ensure that age-verification and social-media regulations include safeguards that protect children's ability to seek help discreetly, especially in cases of domestic violence or other high-risk situations.

3. Ensure sustainable funding and coordinated national systems

- Secure long-term, sustainable national funding for child helplines and other child-protection services to ensure continuity, accessibility and quality.

- Develop EU-level minimum standards for follow-up after referrals from child helplines to guarantee consistent, child-centred responses across Member States.
- Strengthen cross-sector cooperation between child helplines, police, social services, online platforms, schools and health systems to enable timely, coordinated interventions.

4. Use child helpline data to drive evidence-based policy

Encourage systematic use of child helpline data to identify trends, guide policy development, and strengthen national and EU-wide protection frameworks.

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