

Mental health and wellbeing of children and young people: a societal challenge

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A major national cause in 2025, the issue of mental health is finally being addressed at a time when the mental health of children and adolescents is at an all-time low. While these are crucial years in their development, the situation continues to deteriorate. The ESEC is sounding the alarm: we must equip ourselves with the means to take a preventive and holistic approach and take action in public policy to combat the growing malaise among young people.

A continuing deterioration in the mental health of young people

The mental health of young people aged 5 to 25 has been deteriorating in a worrying and persistent manner for several years. Given that 75% of mental health disorders develop before the age of 25, it is crucial to identify and better address this issue among the youngest members of society in order to put in place a genuine prevention strategy and offer appropriate support.

In middle and high school, **more than one in two pupils report recurring feelings of unhappiness, and one in four high school pupils say they have had suicidal thoughts** during the year. Among young adults, episodes of depression, suicide attempts and suicidal thoughts are also on the rise.

The findings are clear, but beyond raising awareness and destigmatising mental health issues, **a genuine approach to prevention and action on the factors that impact mental health is essential**. The time for observations is over; now is the time to seek solutions.

A panel of young people involved in the work

The ESEC directly involved young people in its work on mental health:

20 young people aged between 12 and 18, from all types of areas (urban, peri-urban and rural), worked for several days to identify factors that can influence young people's mental health, define their real mental health needs and come up with possible solutions.

The ESEC's approach was **to base this opinion on the views of those most directly affected**. The report by the panel of children and adolescents, which is appended in full to the opinion, forms an integral part of the ESEC's message to the public authorities.

+ 60%
of young people
on antidepressants
between 2019
and 2023

The ESEC believes that children and young people themselves should be more involved in shaping public policy. Children and young people have a right to express themselves and participate; they have a say in all policies that affect them.

Beyond the figures, what can be done to improve young people's mental health?

OPINION

The ESEC identifies several factors that impact young people's mental health and on which it is possible and necessary to take action. The full list of determining factors and recommendations can be found in the opinion.

1 TRAIN AND PROVIDE THE TOOLS TO BETTER IDENTIFY AND SUPPORT

→ **The figure: among young people who reported feeling unwell, 7 out of 10 said they had not discussed it with anyone..**

Mental health prevention must become an issue for all public policies: it must be made a priority and action must be taken on young people's living conditions and environment, enabling them to express their distress in good time. The earlier disorders are identified, the better children, adolescents and young adults can be referred to the appropriate services that can provide tailored responses.

→ **What does the ESEC recommend?**

Develop training programmes for adult supervisors and those involved with children and young people, through initiatives such as 'mental health first aid' (MHFA). Train and recruit child psychiatrists on a large scale and as a matter of urgency in order to meet constantly growing demand..

2 TAKING ACTION ON THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

→ **The figure: more than one in four teenagers say that school is a source of anxiety.**

The school system, as it currently operates, weighs heavily on the well-being of children and adolescents. Fear of grades, homework, and the expectations of teachers and parents are the primary sources of stress, coupled with a pace that seems unsuitable and relationships with adults and peers that can be sources of conflict, discrimination, or judgement.

→ **What does the ESEC recommend?**

Review school schedules to better meet children's fundamental needs. Teach and train in psychosocial skills.

3 TAKING ACTION ON DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

→ **The figure: on average, 7-19 year olds spend more than 3 hours a day in front of screens outside school hours.**

→ Screens and social media have become an integral part of young people's daily lives. And these can have dramatic effects on mental health with increasingly early exposure to inappropriate, violent, stereotypical, sexist, racist content, etc..

→ **What does the ESEC recommend?**

Regulate and control rather than ban. This requires digital education for young people, but also for their parents. It also requires stronger regulation, through a digital curfew for minors from 10 p.m. to 8 a.m. and the widespread adoption of 'digital breaks' in all schools. Finally, the responsibility of platforms must be strengthened, and they should be required to adopt the status of publishers.

THE RAPPORTEUR

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