

Uniting Voices For Children

**CHILDREN'S
RIGHTS**

ALLIANCE

**Submission to the Joint Committee on Education,
Further and Higher Education, Research,
Innovation and Science on Primary and Post-
Primary Mental Health Supports**

September 2022



Founded in 1995, the Children's Rights Alliance unites over 140 members working together to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child. We change the lives of all children in Ireland by making sure that their rights are respected and protected in our laws, policies and services.

Accompaniment Support Service for Children (A.S.S.C.)
Alcohol Action Ireland
Amnesty International Ireland
An Cosán
Aoibhneas
AsIAM
Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI)
ATD Fourth World – Ireland Ltd
Atheist Ireland
Barnardos
Barretstown Camp
Bedford Row Family Project
BeLonG To Youth Services
Blossom Ireland
Bodywhys
Catholic Guides of Ireland
Child Law Project
Childhood Development Initiative
Childminding Ireland
Children in Hospital Ireland
Children's Books Ireland
Children's Grief Centre
Clarecare
COPE Galway
Cork Life Centre
Cork Migrant Centre
Crann Centre
Crosscare
CyberSafeKids
Cycle Against Suicide
Dalkey School Project National School
Daughters of Charity Child and Family Service
Dental Health Foundation of Ireland
Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy,
UCC
Disability Federation of Ireland
Doras
Down Syndrome Ireland
Dublin Rape Crisis Centre
Dyslexia Association of Ireland
Dyspraxia/DCD Ireland
Early Childhood Ireland
Early Learning Initiative (National College of Ireland)
Educate Together
EPIC
Equality for Children
Extern Ireland
FamiliBase
Féach
Focus Ireland
Foróige
Gaeilscoileanna Teo
Galway Traveller Movement
Good Shepherd Cork
Immigrant Council of Ireland
Inclusion Ireland
Institute of Guidance Counsellors
Irish Aftercare Network
Irish Association for Infant Mental Health
Irish Association of Social Workers
Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU)
Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL)
Irish Foster Care Association
Irish Girl Guides
Irish Heart Foundation
Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO)
Irish Penal Reform Trust
Irish Primary Principals' Network
Irish Refugee Council
Irish Second Level Students' Union (ISSU)
Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
Irish Traveller Movement
Irish Youth Foundation
iScoil
Jack and Jill Children's Foundation
Jigsaw
Katharine Howard Foundation
Kids' Own Publishing Partnership
Kinship Care
Leap Ireland
Let's Grow Together! Infant and Childhood Partnerships CLG.
LGBT Ireland
Mecpaths
Mental Health Reform
Mercy Law Resource Centre
Migrant Rights Centre Ireland
Mothers' Union
My Mind
My Project Minding You
Museum of Childhood Ireland
Music Generation
New Directions
National Childhood Network
National Council for the Blind of Ireland
National Forum of Family Resource Centres
National Parents Council Post Primary
National Parents Council Primary
National Youth Council of Ireland
Novas
One Family
One in Four
Parents Plus
Pavee Point
Peter McVerry Trust
Prevention and Early Intervention Network
Psychological Society of Ireland
Rainbow Club Cork
Rainbows Ireland
Rape Crisis Network Ireland (RCNI)
Realt Beag/Ballyfermot Star
Respond Housing
SAFE Ireland
Saoirse Housing Association
SAOL Beag Children's Centre
Scouting Ireland
School of Education UCD
Sexual Violence Centre Cork
SIPTU
Simon Communities of Ireland
Social Care Ireland
Society of St. Vincent de Paul
SPHE Network
SpunOut.ie
St. Nicholas Montessori College
St. Nicholas Montessori Teachers' Association
St. Patrick's Mental Health Services
TASC
Teachers' Union of Ireland
Terenure College Rugby Football Club
Transgender Equality Network Ireland
The Anne Sullivan Foundation
The Ark, A Cultural Centre for Children
The Irish Red Cross
The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUI Galway
Traveller Visibility Group Ltd
Treoir
UNICEF Ireland
Women's Aid
Youngballymun
Young Social Innovators
Youth Advocate Programme Ireland (YAP)
Youth Work Ireland

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Introduction

The Children's Rights Alliance unites over 140 members working together to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child. We change the lives of all children by making sure their rights are respected and protected in our laws, policies and services. We also provide legal information and advice to children, young people and their families through our legal information line and nationwide legal advice outreach clinics.

The Children's Rights Alliance welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and High Education, Research, Innovation and Science on primary and post-primary mental health supports.

Ireland's Commitments under International Human Rights Law

Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) affords every child the right to the highest attainable standard of health, including mental health. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has drawn a link between high rates of mental health problems among adolescents with 'violence, ill-treatment, abuse and neglect, including sexual abuse, unrealistically high expectations, and/or bullying or hazing in and outside school' and has recommended that States provide young people with all necessary services.¹ The Committee has further noted that young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI+) commonly experience violence, stigmatization and bullying which has been associated with low self-esteem, higher rates of depression, suicide and homelessness.² It has recommended that States take effective action to prevent forms of violence, discrimination or bullying by raising public awareness and implementing safety and support measures.³ In 2016, the Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended Ireland improve its mental healthcare services for primary and post-primary children and adolescents.⁴

1 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 4 (2003) Adolescent health and development in the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, para 22.

2 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 20 (2016) on the Implementation of the Rights of the Child during Adolescence CRC/C/GC/20, para 33.

3 Ibid, para 34.

4 Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'Concluding Observations on the Combined Third and Fourth Periodic Reports of Ireland' (29 January 2016) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/3-4, para 53 (b).

Mental Health and Schools

Approximately one in three young people in Ireland will have experienced some type of mental disorder by the age of 13, with this rate rising to more than one in two by the age of 24 years.⁵ While mental health problems are not selective, certain groups of children are at greater risk of poor mental health, including; children who have experienced abuse or neglect,⁶ including domestic abuse;⁷ children living in poverty;⁸ children who have experienced discrimination, including homophobia or transphobia;⁹ and children with chronic physical health conditions.¹⁰

A common site of mental health difficulties for children is school. Children and young people in Ireland have identified bullying and peer pressure as among the worst things about being a child in Ireland.³⁰ 7.6 per cent of those aged 11 to 15 years encounter chronic bullying.¹¹ This compares with the OECD average of 10.8 per cent.¹² These numbers are particularly disquieting given young people who have experienced bullying are statistically more likely to report experiencing functionally impairing levels of anxiety or depression.¹³

The Government's *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* notes that 'a programme of supports' for pupils affected by bullying should be put in place, which may include 'counselling and/or opportunities to participate in activities designed to raise their self-esteem, to develop their friendship and social skills and thereby build resilience whenever this is needed'.¹⁴ However, 2018 research completed with 918 principals in Ireland highlighted the 'lack of access to counsellors and psychological support risks a situation where problems associated with mental or emotional health become worse without early intervention'.¹⁵ It also recognised that in the absence of these supports, 'responsibility for dealing with mental health issues often falls to teachers' yet notes that this 'is not an effective anti-bullying strategy as school staff are rarely appropriately skilled to deal with serious psychological issues and there is often no follow-up for those involved in terms of their mental health and/ or their coping strategies'.¹⁶ This mirrors 2017 research which found that primary schools are experiencing a significant burden responding to serious mental health difficulties amongst their pupils, with one third of schools providing ad-hoc counselling onsite in the absence of a dedicated service for schools.¹⁷

5 Cannon and Coughlan *et al*, *The Mental Health of Young People in Ireland: a report of the Psychiatric Epidemiology Research across the Lifespan (PERL) Group* (Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland 2013) p.7.

6 Schaefer and Moffitt *et al*, *Adolescent victimization and early-adult psychopathology: Approaching causal inference using a longitudinal twin study to rule out non-causal explanations*, (2018) *Clinical Psychological Science* 352.

7 Roberts and Campbell *et al*, *The role of parenting stress in young Children's mental health functioning after exposure to family violence* (2013) 26(5) *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 605.

8 Wickham, Whitehead, Taylor-Robinson, Barr, *The effect of a transition into poverty on child and maternal mental health: A longitudinal analysis of the UK millennium cohort study* (2017) 2(3) *The Lancet Public Health*, 141

9 Tina Dürrbaum, Frank A. Sattler, *Minority stress and mental health in lesbian, gay male, and bisexual youths: A meta-analysis* (2020) 17(3) *Journal of LGBT Youth* 298.

10 Vanessa E. Cobham, *et al.*, *Systematic Review: Anxiety in Children and Adolescents With Chronic Medical Conditions*, (2020) 59(5) *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 595.

11 UNICEF, *Building the Future: Children and the sustainable development goals in rich countries*, Innocenti Report Card 14, (2017 UNICEF) 49.

12 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The national policy framework for Children & Young People 2014 – 2020* (DCYA 2014) 79.

13 Nip in the Bud, *How bullying can affect long term mental health in children* <<https://nipinthebud.org/2020/06/19/how-bullying-can-affect-long-term-mental-health-in-children/>>

14 Department of Education and Skills, *'Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* (September 2013) 6.8.15

15 Foody, Murphy, Downes and O'Higgins Norman, *Anti-bullying procedures for schools in Ireland: principals' responses and perceptions* (2018) *Pastoral Care in Education*, 36:2, 126-140

16 *Ibid.*

17 Rosaleen McElvaney, Deirdre Judge & Evelyn Gordon, *The Primary Schools Counselling Study (PSCS): Demand and provision of school based counselling in Ireland* (2017 Dublin City University).

While there has been a welcome increase in educational psychologists employed in Irish schools over the past five years, current provision is just 221 posts¹⁸ to support all students in almost 4,000 primary and secondary schools.¹⁹ Two reports published by the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, one on the Impact of Covid on Primary and Secondary Education²⁰ and a second on mental health and school bullying²¹, have recommended that emotional counselling and therapeutic supports be provided in all primary and secondary schools. Research indicates that the needs of children in Irish primary schools in relation to their psychological wellbeing are complex and highlights the serious nature of critical incidents that schools are dealing with.²² A new service, offering a model through which primary school children could receive the mental health awareness and support they require is being piloted in Limerick and is indicating positive outcomes.²³ Such a service would not only strengthen and support the mental wellbeing of thousands of children, but would also support parents and teachers, and would reduce the number of children requiring specialist mental health treatment.

Recommendations:

- Expand the in-school psychology service.
- Implement a pilot programme which would situate emotional and therapeutic services in a select number of secondary schools across the country.
- Establish a new primary school-based mental health supports on a pilot basis as a matter of urgency, and subject to evaluation, expanded and make the service available on a national basis.

18 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education , 28 January 2022.

19 Oireachtas Library and Research Services, 'Education in Ireland Statistical snapshot' (Oireachtas Library and Research Services, 2020) <<https://bit.ly/2LZzIWh>> accessed 12 August 2022.

20 Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, *The Impact of Covid on Primary and Secondary Education* (Houses of the Oireachtas 2021).

21 Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, *School Bullying and the Impact on Mental Health* (Houses of the Oireachtas 2021).

22 R McElvaney, et al, *The Primary Schools Counselling Study (PSCS): Demand and provision of school based counselling in Ireland.* (DCU 2017).

23 University of Limerick, 'Psychotherapeutic support, disadvantaged area, families, children, DEIS primary school, mindfulness, psychological well-being' <<https://bit.ly/3JMWiW9>> accessed 12 August 2022.