



# REDEFINING POWER:

STRENGTHENING THE RIGHTS  
OF THE CHILD AS THE KEY TO  
A FUTURE-PROOF EUROPE

CONFERENCE  
REPORT

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Mid-term evaluation of the  
Strategy for the Rights of the  
Child (2016-2021)



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*Family photo: conference participants*

## The conference, in brief

On 13-14 November, and organised within the framework of the French Presidency of the Committee of Ministers, the Council of Europe opened its doors to an international conference on children's rights. The conference, entitled "Redefining Power: Strengthening the rights of the child as the key to a future-proof Europe", provided an opportunity to take stock of the progress, as well as persistent and emerging challenges, resulting from the [mid-term evaluation of the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child \(2016-2021\)](#). These reflections are particularly timely: in November 2019, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the Council of Europe also marked its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the same year. While these events bring much to celebrate, they also make it particularly apt to consider, renew and strengthen the Council of Europe's, and its member States', commitments to strengthening children's rights within and across Europe.

## The Council of Europe Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2016-2021

The current [Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#) was launched in 2016 (Bulgaria, Sofia). It is the Council of Europe's most ambitious children's rights strategy to date and is the driving force for all of the Council of Europe's action in the area. The strategy contains five priority areas:

1. Equal opportunities for all children
2. Participation of all children
3. A life free from violence for all children
4. Child-friendly justice for all children
5. Rights of the child in the digital environment.

Three years after its launch, in 2019, the Sofia Strategy underwent a mid-term evaluation process, with input from governments, civil society, international organisations and children. A separate survey and [report](#) were dedicated to violence against children. The evaluation found that, while there had been significant and promising progress across all priority areas, there was much left to be achieved: both in tackling persistent challenges and in keeping an eye to the emergence of new trends. The conference aimed to shed light on some of the biggest challenges identified by the evaluation and bring together relevant stakeholders to discuss ways forward. The results will be used to guide the Council of Europe's action – and that of the newly-established Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF) - in the remaining years of the Strategy's implementation (2020-2021) and beyond.

## Redefining power

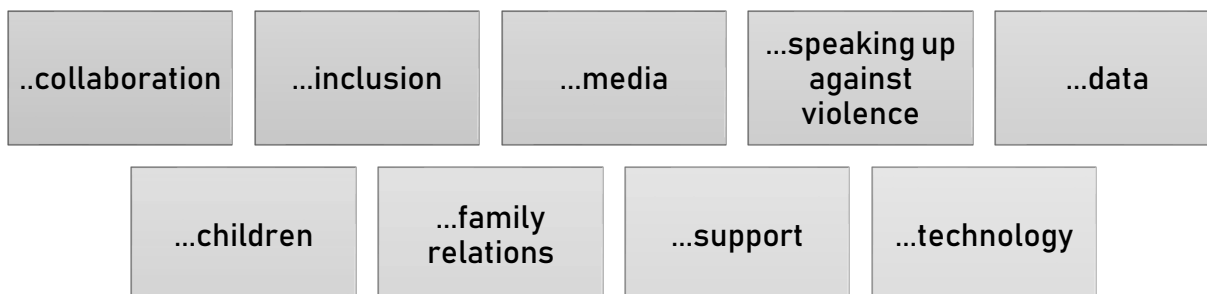
30 years after the adoption of the UNCRC, children remain disempowered and silenced in many walks of life. The conference was themed on redefining power for children's rights: how can stakeholders harness their power to enhance children's rights? How can children themselves be empowered to grasp and fight for their rights? And how do power structures need to be reconfigured, if they are to take children – and their rights – seriously? These questions were addressed through nine thematic "Power Talks": international experts were invited to present short, dynamic talks, which focus on forward-thinking and practical solutions. The topics were selected to get to the heart of issues where change is most needed: and, often, where those in power will require the most bravery and strength to achieve it.

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***Power is key. Who has it. And who doesn't. Who has too much of it; And who is asking for just a little bit.***

*- Veronica Yates, CRIN  
Second high-level plenary session*

## The nine "Power Talks": The power of...



## Participation

The conference was attended by more than 300 participants representing all stakeholders: from government and international organisations, to civil society, academia and children. A full list of speakers can be found on the [event webpage](#).



*Young delegates Elene and Emma participated in the second high-level plenary session*

Since the beginning of its programme "Building a Europe for and with children", the Council of Europe has directly involved children in its work. Following and strengthening this legacy, a delegation of 13 children (aged 10-18) from 10 member states took an active role in the conference, as speakers during high-level plenary sessions and "power challengers" during Power Talks. The following young delegates were selected for their experiences or activism in areas relevant to the conference themes: Amadea (Albania), Amelie (Germany), Andre (Malta), Andrea (Serbia), Bright (Ireland), Capucine (France), Elene (Georgia), Emma (United Kingdom), James (United Kingdom), Kasra (Cyprus), Liam (Ireland), Lucas (France), Rostyslav (Ukraine).

## Conference events



Roxana Maracineanu, French Minister of Sports, launching the "Start to Talk" Campaign in France

The conference was punctuated by a number of diverse events. On 14 November, and in the margins of the main programme, the French Minister of Sports launched the **"Start to Talk" campaign against child sexual abuse in sports** in France. Young musicians performed for conference participants on two occasions. A dinner performance, offered by the Hungarian Permanent Representation to the Council of Europe, was provided by the Hungarian Foundation "Snétberger Music Talent Center". Participants of the international "Sounds of Children's

Rights" contest, held by the Federal Chancellery of the Republic of Austria on the occasion of the UNCRF's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, performed two of the winning pieces through video link. In the theatrical performance of "Take it Like a Man", Council of Europe staff member Mark Neville and young actor, Darragh Malone, recounted Mark's first-hand experience of corporal punishment at school, and the contribution of the European Court of Human Rights in ending this punishment.

## Exhibitions

Exhibitions showcasing the work of (I)NGOs and other stakeholders were displayed outside the Hemicycle for the duration of the conference. The following table provides an overview:

<b>Organisations providing exhibitions</b>	<b>Country/level of operation</b>
<u>Child Rights Centre Albania CRCA/ECPAT Albania</u>	Albania
<u>Child Well-being Fund</u>	Ukraine
<u>Childpotential</u>	Austria
<u>Children in Northern Ireland</u>	Northern Ireland
<u>Cordelia Foundation</u>	Hungary
<u>Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS)</u>	Baltic Sea State region
<u>Croatian Omudsperson</u>	Croatia
<u>Ensemble pour l'éducation de la petite enfance</u>	France
<u>EU Fundamental Rights Agency</u>	European Union
<u>Fédération nationale de protection de l'enfant (CNAPE)</u>	France
<u>International Social Service Germany (representing the network ISS)</u>	International
<u>La Strada Moldova</u>	Moldova
<u>La Strada Ukraine</u>	Ukraine
<u>National Center for Child Abuse Prevention (NCCAP)</u>	Moldova
<u>Public Health Foundation</u>	Georgia
<u>Reliable Future</u>	Azerbaijan
<u>Resource Center "Development"</u>	Russian Federation
<u>SOS Children's Villages International</u>	International
<u>SOS Il Telefono Azzurro Onlus</u>	Italy
<u>StopVEO, Enfance sans violences</u>	France
<u>Young in prison foundation</u>	International

## Opening ceremony

In her welcome address, the **Secretary General of the Council of Europe**, Ms Marija Pejčinović Burić, emphasised that the **young delegates' participation** – in this event and in others - was of paramount importance, in deliberations on how to prepare the Europe of tomorrow, and to strengthen the rights of the child. In light of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UNCRC, she recalled that all Council of Europe initiatives in this area were designed to help implement the Convention.



*The Council of Europe Secretary General during the opening ceremony*

She highlighted a number of the Organisation's success stories, from the **Lanzarote Convention** to the recent **Guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment**, but also pointed to several blind spots where action was insufficient. She recalled that the Organisation had taken steps to address some of these difficult issues, from corporal punishment, to gender-based violence and sexual violence in the circle of trust. Today, more must be done to defend the rights of children who could be perceived as a danger to the rest of society; children's rights must be put first in the face of chronic and **rising inequalities**; and where **protection systems** fail, this must be acknowledged.



*Adrien Taquet, French Secretary of State on Child Protection during the opening ceremony*

The **French Secretary of State on Child Protection**, Mr Adrien Taquet, recalled that protecting human rights in Europe a project which has no end.

Unfortunately, children's rights are still not being fully respected in Europe, 70 years after the Council of Europe project began. While one in five children are subject to **sexual abuse**, one in six are facing **social exclusion**. New challenges, particularly those presented by the **digital era**, also mean thinking anew about how to protect children.

In France, significant steps have been taken recently in responding to the challenge of protecting children and enhancing their rights, including: a full ban on corporal punishment; justice reform for minors; and a strategy on preventing and combating poverty. Children's rights are a priority for the French government and will remain so in the years to come.

## First high-level plenary session

In conversation with the Secretary General



*The Secretary General in conversation with Linos-Alexandre Sicilianos, President of the European Court of Human Rights*

activities were carried out across the Organisation.

Since its inception, the Council of Europe has implemented the Children's Rights Programme through a series of strategies. To ensure success, all bodies of the Council of Europe must coordinate and cooperate in their efforts to enhance children's rights. In other words, children's rights must be mainstreamed and championed by leaders across the entire Organisation. During the first three years of the current Strategy's implementation, nearly 300 children's rights-enhancing

In the first high-level plenary session, the **Secretary General** discussed the Council of Europe's role in furthering children's rights with representatives of some of the Organisation's key bodies: **President of the Parliamentary Assembly (PACE)**, Ms Liliane Maury Pasquier; **President of the European Court of Human Rights**, Mr Linos-Alexandre Sicilianos; and the **Commissioner for Human Rights**, Ms Dunja Mijatović.

Each body fills a unique function in **protecting and enhancing children's rights**. Among other things the Human Rights Commissioner has integrated children's rights concerns as an essential component of her human rights fact-finding missions to member states. The Assembly has conducted awareness-raising campaigns aimed at furthering children's rights in national parliaments and among the public. Meanwhile, the Court has ensured that the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) is applied fully and equally to children, while taking into account their particular needs and vulnerabilities, including where **children's rights conflict with that of their parents**. In situations of acrimonious divorce, custody and visitation rights, the Court has ensured that the best interests, as well as the effective representation of the child, are of paramount importance.

The panellists considered that **social norms** still acted as an obstacle to implementing children's rights. While children's rights are sometimes seen as a luxury that states cannot afford in times of crisis, it is precisely in these circumstances that children are most vulnerable, and most in need of protection. The President of the Assembly called for mobilisation of public opinion and within national parliaments to ensure that children's rights, as well as related **social, economic and budgetary issues**, are at the top of the agenda.

Many also fail to understand that children do not "earn", and need not show themselves to be "deserving" of, their rights: it is something to which they are entitled as full human rights bearers. From children who misbehave, to those in conflict with the law, children and their rights must be protected. Children often do not realise the consequences of their actions for themselves and for others, including when they display **harmful sexual behaviours**.

The Assembly has been increasingly concerned with the potential consequences of “**sexting**” for children. In line with the Lanzarote Committee, criminal proceedings for these actions should be seen as a last resort, with a focus instead on preventive measures, like mandatory **sexuality education**.

Similarly, the use of **corporal punishment** as a pedagogical tool cannot be reconciled with human rights principles: violence against children can never be justified. The Commissioner and the President of the Assembly reiterated their commitments to enforce full prohibition of corporal punishment. In turn, children should not be punished for the actions of their parents: for the Human Rights Commissioner, it followed that the **children of foreign fighters** should be repatriated to their respective member states.

Finally, there have been significant recent developments in the interplay between children’s rights and the **environment**. While children often have little power to be heard – particularly through formal systems like voting – children and young people have served as sources for inspiration through their climate change activism. The Assembly President emphasised the importance of giving support to this type of **participation**. It is also important to reflect on the Council of Europe’s role in protecting human rights in this context. Although the European Convention on Human Rights contains no explicit provisions on environmental protection, numerous of its articles have been invoked to protect individuals from dangerous environments, pollution and toxins. The President of the Court considered that, in the future, it would be most interesting to see **how children’s rights, in particular, might be taken into account in relation to the environment**.

#### Key conclusions

- Prioritisation and mainstreaming of children’s rights across the Council of Europe is vital to the Programme’s success: its bodies offer unique, added value, while addressing the particular needs and human rights challenges faced by children, today.
- Challenges identified by the Organisation’s bodies are remarkably similar: social norms, particularly in relation to justice systems and violence against children, act as major, potential obstacles to children’s rights.
- From budgetary concerns, to parental rights and environmental degradation, children’s rights are implicated in many walks of life, and in complex ways.
- The Organisation’s bodies must continue to demonstrate and encourage ambition and mobilise public opinion, if the protection of children’s rights is to be maximised in these difficult areas.



## Second high-level plenary session

In the words of governments and stakeholders



High level governmental officials from Iceland, Italy and Poland spoke with moderator Jeroen Schokkenbroek, Director of Anti-Discrimination

The success of the Council of Europe's work in the area of children's rights hangs on the commitment of national governments and other key stakeholders, from international organisations, to civil society and ombudspersons. The mid-term evaluation process revealed that many member states and other actors had taken considerable action in the field, and that, overall, more children were better enjoying their rights across all five Strategy priority areas. Yet much remains to be done.

The second high-level plenary session invited stakeholders to outline their commitment to and priorities within children's rights, while considering the challenges and methods of how power can be redefined across Europe. Young delegates **Emma** (18) and **Elene** (15) reminded participants that the challenges talked about are not abstract problems, but part of their lived experiences. On behalf of children across Europe, they presented the adults in the room with demands for action.

### The young delegates' 3 demands

1. Change attitudes
2. Protect children from poverty and violence
3. Ensure children have access to equal opportunities, no matter the cost or context.

Recounting his own experience of fighting for children's rights, the **Icelandic Minister of Social Affairs and Children**, Mr Ásmundur Einar Daðason, underscored the need for political courage, and the need to go beyond mere words of commitment. In this vein, Iceland has begun important reforms of its **child protection system**, which build on the success of the multidisciplinary Barnahus (Children's House), inspired by the Icelandic model. **Italy's Minister for Equal Opportunities and Family**, Ms Elena Bonetti, spoke of national initiatives to protect children from **discrimination**, particularly in and through **education**, while underscoring the need to protect children from **all forms of violence**. Finally, the **Polish Under-Secretary of State**, Mr Kasimierz Kuberski, emphasised national efforts to enhance **equal opportunities** for children, particularly in the family setting.

Further interventions were provided by the **UNSRSG on Violence against Children**, Dr Najat Maalla M'jid; the **UNICEF Regional director For Europe and Central Asia**, Ms Afshan Khan; **Chairperson of the ENOC (European Network of Ombudspersons for Children)**, Ms Koulla Yiasouma; and **Director of CRIN (Child Rights International Network)**, Ms Veronica Yates.

The stakeholders restated their commitment to **work together** with the Council of Europe and other bodies in furtherance of children's rights. The **Council of Europe's role** in furthering children's rights at the national level was highlighted, particularly in relation to various forms of violence against children and the digital environment. Stakeholders called for further action by the Council of Europe in pushing for coordinated responses **to children on the move** and **children facing poverty or social exclusion**; as well as in ensuring **implementation of international obligations**.

All stakeholders have, as a **common goal**, the **national implementation of the UNCRC and Sustainable Development Goals**. The UNICEF Regional Director reminded that it is important not to lose sight of developments over the 30 years' operation of the UNCRC: they include drastic reductions in child mortality rates and record levels of children at school. Yet in 2019 and beyond, governments must take action to ensure that children do more than survive. Similarly, the Chairperson of ENOC pointed to the need for greater focus on children's **mental health**. Those most **vulnerable children**, at the margins of society, also cannot be left behind. The development of the **world wide web**, more **protracted conflicts** displacing large groups of the population, and increasing concern over **climate change**, have emerged as threats to children's rights which could hardly have been foreseen 30 years ago. These changes must be responded to in full, and with bold action from all.

On the other hand, the UNSRSG on violence against children underlined that faster, better and more coordinated action is required if we are to **end all forms of violence against children** by 2030, in line with Target 16.2 of the UN SDGs. Among other things, this requires adequate **financing of and investment in children, involvement at all levels of society** and **meaningful participation of children**.

The Director of CRIN focused on the meaning and many facets of power. While children are the **least empowered to influence society**, they are most exposed to its exercise by others. Invisible powers, in the form of **social norms and hierarchies, stop children from being seen as full human rights bearers**. Power should not just be redefined, but redistributed. She concluded by outlining the potential power of the collective – and indeed, of children - demonstrated by **youth climate action**.

#### Key conclusions

- Governments and stakeholders have shown commitment to implementing key priority areas of the Strategy, and ensuring implementation of international standards like the UNCRC.
- Non-governmental stakeholders play key and complementary roles in supporting member states to protect children's rights and hold them to account: this work must continue, and cooperation must be strengthened, in order to ensure that international obligations are met.
- Perceptions must be changed on what it means to protect children and their rights: they must not merely survive, but thrive. At the same time, the world in which children are growing up has drastically changed: stakeholders must ensure that they are prepared to meet the rights challenges of the day.
- Inequality, violence and social attitudes are major challenges identified by all stakeholders.

## Power talk 1: The power of collaboration

Stepping up the coordination of global and pan-European agendas to increase their impact on children's human rights

There are no solo performers on the international stage: much more can be achieved by working together. The mid-term evaluation process underlined progress in collaborative efforts – as well as the need to step up this action. But where, exactly, are there gaps to be filled? How can effective coordination be promoted? And how can visions, developed at the global and pan-European level, be turned into concrete actions to take the rights of all children forward?

The first power talk considered some of the most pressing, current global issues. About half of all children in the world are **subjected to some form of violence** during their childhood, and large numbers of children **witness violence** around them. Globally, increasing numbers of children are being **detained in migration detention facilities**. The [UN Global study on children deprived of liberty](#) has revealed worrying developmental and other consequences for **children who are deprived of their liberty**. Panellists also noted a concerning trend in the disappearance of the term “child” from international political discourse.

International obligations and agreements form an important, but by no means sufficient, part of the solution. Actors at all levels must ensure that they are being met. It was recalled that member states have vital obligations to implement the UNCRC and achieve the UN SDGs, particularly in relation to **ending all forms of violence against children (Target 16.2)**. While there has been much recent legal and policy reform in the area at national level, there is an urgent need for increased support for, and focus on, **effective implementation**. The Council of Europe supports and promotes the implementation of the UN SDGs: among other things the Council of Europe can ensure that its future work and Strategy **comprehensively map out the relevant UN SDGs** and make obvious their links with the rights of the child.

The panellists considered what was required for collaboration and coordination. Collaboration cannot be considered a “one shot” method. **Long-term, sustainable structures must be set up**. There must be exchanges not only of good practices, but also in the challenges faced. Further, the Council of Europe should engage not only in collaboration within Europe, but **with other regions**, too. For collaboration to be coordinated, it requires **integration** and **accountability**, which ensures that each actor fulfils their responsibilities.

Vitality, a **bottom-up approach** is required. International agendas on the rights of the child should reflect the issues that children actually care about. This means that we must **move beyond mere gestures towards child participation**: children must be empowered to provide their views and to truly

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***Nobody can talk about children  
better than children themselves***

*- Amadea, Armenia  
Young delegate*

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get involved in processes. Organisations must consider how they can make themselves **more relevant and easier for children to access**. Methods and strategies of communication should be reviewed, and open discussions should be organised with children, with real and honest answers given about what organisations can and cannot do for children.

What do children care about? Young delegate **Amadea** (17) presented the research “Children for Children's Rights”, which contained results from consultations with over 300 children across Albania. Among their priorities, children felt that they were **not fully respected** in their schools, families and communities.

They were deeply concerned about **violence and bullying in schools**, as well as **unemployment and poverty**, both in their families and for their own future prospects: incidentally, priorities which substantially overlap with those raised by child consultees during the Council of Europe's mid-term evaluation process. It was also clear that children deeply care about **environmental sustainability and responsible consumption**: issues that organisations must accordingly begin to look at in more depth.

Finally, collaborative efforts at the national level should go beyond engagement with member state governments, in recognition of the important role that **private companies and associations** have in upholding children's rights. This is the case in the **sports environment**, for example, where children are particularly vulnerable to pressure, violence and abuse.

#### Key conclusions

- A global view of phenomena like violence, immigration detention, child deprivation of liberty and children's rights in political discourse, reveal disturbing, transversal trends and consequences.
- For international obligations to become a reality, the support and coordination of all actors, at all levels, is required. This work will be particularly important if Europe, and the world, are to reach the UN SDGs pertaining to children within the next decade.
- For collaboration and coordination to be meaningful, it must be long-term, integrated and sustainable. Actors must be ready to share not only success stories, but challenges; and importantly, they must be accountable.
- A bottom-up approach, with international agendas truly reflecting the issues that affect and concern children, is vital.
- Collaboration at the national level must extend to the private sector and others who play an important role in upholding children's rights.

## Power talk 2: The power of inclusion

Fighting precarity, poverty and exclusion, and promoting equal opportunities for all children

Ensuring equal opportunities for children is the first key priority area of the Strategy (2016-2021). Yet across European Union member states, 25 million children are currently living in low-income households, where living conditions are unacceptable and hunger is common ([FRA, 2018](#)). During the midterm evaluation process, persistent or rising child poverty and child homelessness were cited by stakeholders as major concerns.

Power Talk 2 considered the roots of child poverty across Europe. The 2008 financial crisis had been a significant contributing factor. The ways in which many member states had reacted to the crisis, continued, to this day, to affect the most vulnerable groups of society, including children. **Austerity measures** and protection of banking systems have been **prioritised over investment in children and social protection**, which has exacerbated societal inequality. The result is that poverty is increasingly prevalent even in prosperous cities and wealthier countries. Speakers pointed to further factors, including **challenging labour market** situations, an aging population, **geographical inequality** of opportunities and resources, and the impact of **low levels of education**.

It is also important to view child poverty through an **intersectional lens**. Children belonging to **marginalised minorities and ethnic groups**, including Roma children, are significantly more likely to be affected by poverty. The same is true of **single-parent families**, particularly those headed by women, as well as families in which a member has a **disability**.

Speakers highlighted some of the main effects of child poverty. It was important to realise that child poverty **goes beyond merely low income or material possessions**. A child living in poverty is **excluded from aspects of everyday life** which their peers enjoy: from “normal” clothes, extracurricular activities and social events with friends, to being given three healthy meals a day. Overall, the effects of living in poverty or social exclusion can be considered to violate the child’s **human dignity**. Child poverty can also **lead to further children’s rights violations**, through increased vulnerability to homelessness or living on the streets; risks from traffickers, as well as sexual abuse and exploitation; and increased likelihood of child labour, with attendant risks of having to participate in strenuous and even dangerous activities.

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*Every child has the right to have a place they call home. How can we say we’re an equal society if some children don’t even have a home?*

*- Bright, Ireland  
Young delegate*

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There is a paradigm shift in the way that poverty is perceived: from the responsibility of the individual, to a societal responsibility. This is reflected by its characterisation at the European level. **Article 30 of the European Social Charter** is the only provision under international human rights law that explicitly provides for a right to protection from poverty. Other provisions of the Charter provide rights to quality services, to education, healthcare, housing and measures to protect families. A [new report](#) of the European Committee on Social Rights outlines the potential of these articles in tackling child poverty. The EU’s [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), launched in 2017, provides a number of principles aimed at tackling poverty and social exclusion. A [Child Guarantee](#) scheme is currently under consideration at the EU.

A number of practical measures to improve the situation at national level were discussed. Most obviously, **social protection expenditure** should be significantly increased.

**Sustainable social transfers** (i.e. social assistance) should be implemented, with sufficient investment behind them, in order to rectify vastly unequal income distributions. In order to ensure effective investment and policy-making, there must be sufficient **collection and disaggregation of data** over long periods of time, focusing on, inter alia, the distribution of population wages and living conditions. Extensive and sustainable **consultation processes** with relevant stakeholders should also be established: the experiences of those experiencing poverty, including children, should be taken onboard. The establishment of **national monitoring mechanisms** for measuring poverty can act as early warning signals. More radically, **country growth and development could be reconceived in terms of its citizens' well-being**, rather than mere GDP outputs: New Zealand's new "well-being budget", which began implementation in 2019, was cited as an example.

Given the relationship between low qualifications and poverty, children's **education must be ensured**, including through **making necessary resources accessible**, and through **inclusion programmes** for particularly vulnerable groups.

#### Key conclusions

- There are unacceptable levels of child precarity, poverty and exclusion across Europe. While there are many contributing factors, austerity measures and a lack of investment in children and social protection have played a significant role.
- Child poverty has a strong intersectional dimension, which implicates minority and ethnic status, gender and disability.
- Poverty is increasingly seen as a matter of social responsibility: a shift reflected in European obligations and frameworks, including the European Social Charter and the European Social Pillar.
- Greater investment and better-informed social policy decisions could help to alleviate child poverty. Member states should concretise their commitment to tackling poverty and ensure inclusive, accessible education.

## Power talk 3: The power of media

Inform, inspire and mobilise while respecting the rights of the child

The relationship between the media and children's rights is complex. The media can act as a watchdog for rights abuses, but it may also reinforce discrimination. It can provide children with a platform for their views, but also invade their privacy and violate other rights. Children learn from the media: but what is it teaching them? New media, too, acts as a double-edged sword: opening up both opportunities and risks to children and their rights.



Presentation extract from Ivaylo Spasov, UNICEF Bulgaria

Panellists discussed numerous human rights-related and ethical challenges in the way that journalists report on children and the potential impact upon their rights. Revealing **identificatory information about children** – such as names or photographs – can lead to privacy and other violations: for **child victims**, identification can lead to retraumatisation, while identifying **children who have committed crimes** – particularly in politically-charged contexts like terrorism – can hamper reintegration efforts. **Vulnerable groups of children**, including those with disabilities, are often portrayed by the media in simplistic ways which trigger pity, or which put them down. **Younger children** are often treated as objects, rather than humans with rights and views, while **teenagers** tend to be stigmatised as troublemakers. Little effort is given to really trying to find out the **views of children**.

Panellists agreed on the need for awareness of and guidelines on **ethical reporting** which is tailored towards children's issues. The [UNICEF Bulgaria Guidebook for ethical reporting on children and media](#), produced by journalists in the field, serves as a good practice model in responding to this need. Some examples were given of **empowering stories** in relation to children with disabilities: including the experience of [Maria](#), who campaigned to change the rules on taking the Cambridge Assessment in English exam and became the first person with cerebral palsy to sit it. More focus must be placed on **directly hearing the views of children** and on accompanying measures to **empower children to express themselves**.

There was also concern as to a general **lack of coverage of child and children's rights-related stories**. This must be changed, including through sensitisation and promotion of "constructive journalism". It was particularly important for journalists to take up the fight on human rights issues where there is a lack of political will – as in the case of **child returnees** from conflict areas.

Children are the biggest users of new and online media, including social media and video-hosting platforms like YouTube. The opportunities provided by this new media are clear: children can learn, share ideas, socialise, find entertainment and even create their own content. On the other hand, they risk being exposed to **inappropriate content** and harms inflicted by other users, including through peer **cyberbullying** or **sexting**.

Children's **privacy** is put at risk through inaccessible **terms and conditions** which sign away their rights, and by **parents** who share their photographs and other intimate aspects of their lives online. Panellists were also concerned about **over-use** and the impact upon children's **health and well-being**, particularly their **mental health**.

There is great **disparity in the regulation of offline and online media**. During the power talk, there was some uncertainty as to the extent to which certain forms of **regulation** would be fully feasible or effective. There was, however, agreement that it is the responsibility of governments to improve education and awareness-raising around **media and digital literacy**. **Peer-learning among children** can also be a powerful tool. Young delegate **Amelie** (13) provided an example of her school's response to cyberbullying: the children in her class produced a film on the topic, which was shown to other pupils and has led to children changing their behaviour on social media. **Parents and teachers** must also be targeted by awareness-raising efforts. There is a need for **clear information** on what to do if something goes wrong, and more emphasis should be placed on fostering **effective communication**, particularly between parents and children.

#### Key conclusions

- Media representation of children is often simplistic or stigmatising, particularly for those belonging to vulnerable groups. Too often, stories on individual children violate their rights by revealing their identities.
- Coverage of children and children's rights issues is lacking; yet journalists can play an important role in fighting for human rights issues that are not backed by political will.
- Raising awareness and providing guidance on ethical reporting on children can have a positive effect in mitigating risks; as can ensuring that children are empowered and able to have their views heard and reported on.
- Children's rights and wellbeing are disproportionately affected by new forms of media, including social media. There is urgent need for educational initiatives and awareness-raising programmes on media and digital literacy.



## Power talk 4: The power of speaking up against violence

Putting an end to violence against children

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***We need to (...) create a safe environment that promotes confidence and bravery to report any form of violence. Being passive is not a choice. We all need to step up!***

*- Kasra, Cyprus  
Young delegate*

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A life free from violence is the third key priority area of the Strategy. The mid-term evaluation specialised report on violence found that approximately two-thirds of member states now take an integrated approach to violence against children. As of December 2019, all but two member states have ratified the Lanzarote Convention. Eradicating this phenomenon is key: but when violence does occur, responses must be swift, child-friendly and effective.

In Europe today, children are being subjected to violence in places where they should feel safe: from schools and care institutions, to sports associations, and their own homes. Too many children do not feel safe to share their experiences, or confident that adults will take them seriously. Conversely, not enough adults are speaking up when they suspect that something is wrong. Power Talk 4 examined what must be done to tackle these issues head-on.

Late responses to incidents of violence against children are usually the result of late (or non-existent) reports. In the meantime, the child in question is susceptible to continued abuse and is unable to receive the care that they need. It is necessary, therefore, to improve the effectiveness of **reporting mechanisms for professionals** in contact with children, and to encourage reporting **within families**. Panellists encouraged **mandatory, interdisciplinary training** for all early, childhood, adolescence, health and care professionals on the importance of reporting, as well as when and how to do so. Not all member states have **mandatory reporting obligations** for all relevant professionals: if introduced, such obligations must be accompanied by adequate training.

At all stages, professionals and those working in the judicial system must have the capacity to listen to children who have experienced violence, and provide effective environments for doing so. Those who interview children must be receive training aimed at: **reducing their own bias** against children's accounts; providing environments which reduces the **risk of suggestibility** through environmental and interviewing techniques; and avoiding, as much as possible, **multiple interviews** which, among other things, may retraumatise the child. **Protocols for collecting children's views** must be made mandatory, while there must be **sensitisation** towards and accommodation of each child's language and comprehension skills, age, socio-economic and cultural background. More broadly, effective access to justice means that all child victims should be granted **legal aid**.

Historical abuse cases demonstrate past cultural and other failings which have led to many child victims being silenced. Addressing these injustices is not only important for survivors, but for fostering a **cultural environment** in which victims – as well as others – feel confident in speaking out. The German Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse has created the ["Geschichten, die zählen"](#) (*stories which count*) project, which enables survivors to share their stories: so far, over 1,000 private hearings have been conducted. Other **initiatives and counselling centres** should be invested in, with the aim of helping victims to speak about and process their experiences.

**Schools are a key forum** for awareness-raising and preventive measures. Panellists spoke of government efforts across member states to ensure that schools have policies and training in place which protect children, and enable them to speak up and get help if they are suffering abuse. In France, children are themselves encouraged to become key actors in the fight against violence, through a scheme of **student ambassadors**, who are appointed in schools for this purpose.

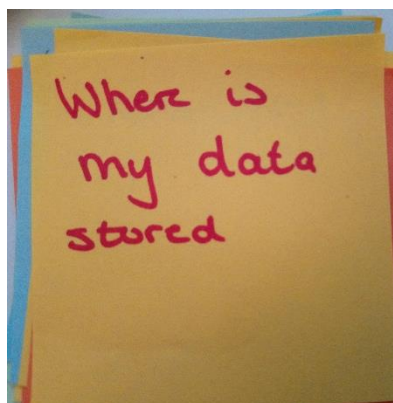
Finally, panellists emphasised the need to improve **data collection and analysis**: in line with the UN SDGs, countries must take stock of how they are progressing towards the elimination of violence, through specific and practical indicators.

#### Key conclusions

- A range of cultural, practical and systemic factors contribute to individuals at all levels feeling unsure about or unable to speak up about violence. Among other things, this means that victims are not getting the help that they need.
- The effectiveness of reporting mechanisms for all actors must be improved, through mandatory training of all relevant professionals and, possibly, through the introduction or strengthening of reporting obligations through legislation.
- In order to ensure that child victims' experiences are taken seriously and dealt with appropriately, those working in the justice system and involved in interviewing children must be specifically trained.
- A cultural environment must be fostered in which all feel empowered to speak out. This involves addressing historical abuse, raising public awareness and crucially, involving schools and children as key actors for change.
- Data collection and analysis are key to tracking progress on violence against children, and are anchored in the relevant UN SDGs.

## Power talk 5: The power of data

Balancing transparency, freedom of expression and privacy of children



*Children's views on data protection*

In today's data-driven societies, childhood and family life are being increasingly "datafied" and children's privacy and other rights are being challenged as a result. Privacy is a key focus under the fifth Strategy priority area (children's rights in the digital environment); according to the mid-term evaluation process, its protection is a major challenge and concern for stakeholders.

Although nearly everything that children do today produces some kind of data, they are **rarely consulted** on data protection matters. Many of the apps and services which children use are aimed at the general public, and are **not specifically designed** with children in mind.

Power talk 5 considered the results of [consultations](#) with children between 11 and 16 on their views about privacy and data protection. It revealed that children thought a lot about their privacy, but they were **not always aware** of the extent to which their data was being used online. Children were confused – and even outraged – by the fact that businesses are so interested in their data. They also complained that the **language** used by companies in this context was not clear: "private" and "delete" settings do not necessarily mean what children think they should. Children wanted services to be made **private by default**, for these to ensure **age-appropriate provisions and care**, and to be told **where their data is going**.

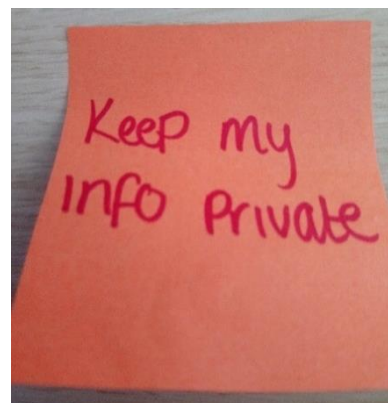
Panellists outlined some specific areas of concern in relation to data collection: apart from **apps and online services**, concerns were raised on data collected in **schools**, as well as through new and emerging technologies, such as **connected toys**. Children's data should be seen as sensitive, and its **uses should be limited**.

A number of **legal standards** provide important frameworks in this area. The Council of Europe's **Convention 108** for the Protection of Individuals with Regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data has offered a system of protection for over 30 years and was fully modernised in 2018. The **Council of Europe Guidelines** to Respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment have a dedicated section on children's online privacy and protection. Recently, the EU's **General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)** came into effect across its member states, which provides some specific provisions on protection of children's data.

**Data protection authorities** also have an important role to play, and have strengthened their know-how in a dynamic field through, inter alia, the **International Working Group on Digital Education** composed of members across 66 countries. The group engages in exchange of views and practices, including in relation to children's data.

Panellists further emphasised the importance of **education and awareness-raising** on the topic; something which children are calling for. According to the GDPR, specific attention should be paid to awareness-raising and other activities aimed at children (Article 57(b)).

Panellists provided an overview of good practice tools and platforms aimed at raising children's awareness of data protection issues, as well as the Working Group's international competency framework on personal data protection aimed at school students and for **educational curricula**. It is currently available in numerous languages and adapted to different age groups. Educational materials developed by the Council of Europe's [Digital Citizenship Education project](#) also serve as useful resources.



*Presentation extract from Professor  
Sonia Livingstone, LSE*

It is not only children who need better education on data protection. As young delegate **Andrea** (16) highlighted, **parents** should be taught how to act online in a way which respects their, and their children's, privacy. **Teachers** also need to be made aware of how and why data should be protected. More broadly, on a **societal level**, there must be greater awareness of the importance and standards of data protection, particularly insofar as they relate to children.

#### Key conclusions

- Children care about their privacy, but they are often not consulted on data protection matters and are frequently unaware of the extent to which companies collect and use their data.
- Services and apps used by children are often not designed with them in mind; children want businesses to implement privacy-by-default, more child- and user-friendly language in their terms and services, and greater information on what happens to their data.
- A number of key European legal standards and tools provide a framework for promoting children's data protection: including Convention 108+, the GDPR and the Guidelines to Respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment.
- Digital education and awareness-raising is crucial for protecting children's data and a number of tools and resources already exist as good practices and models. Children, but also parents, teachers and the public, must be empowered and better informed on data protection issues.

## Power talk 6: The power of children

Shaping or shaking up political agendas for a new generation of activists



*Presentation extract from Ourania Dovou, youth activist*

Children have the right to have their views heard and taken into account in decisions which affect them (Article 12 UNCRC). That is why participation for all children is the second Strategy key priority area. Across Europe and the world, more and more children are making their voices heard. Power Talk 6 explored what more can be done to foster an engaged, curious and courageous generation, as well as what protections are needed to ensure that

children can safely and securely exercise their participation rights.

The panel took stock of child participation today. With a growing number of **high-profile child activists**, this is a topic which has been climbing on the political agenda. While this is to be commended, to fully implement Article 12 UNCRC a lot of less visible work is required which effects **systematic change** and ensures that **children are listened to on a day-to-day basis**. Member state implementation of the Council of Europe's **Child Participation Assessment Tool (CPAT)** can support this change.

There are numerous spheres of child participation: children must be given sufficient opportunities to engage and participate in **community life** – with advances in the internet and social media, this increasingly includes **digital communities**. In **schools**, children should not only be given the opportunity to learn about their participatory rights, but also to practice them through having a stake in the way that their schools and classrooms are run. **Political engagement** has many facets: children must be given opportunities to be heard in **decision-making** at all levels, whether through **consultation, activism** or **voting rights**. Effective participation is important for securing children's enjoyment of a number of their rights; but it also ensures that policy and other decisions are representative of the views, issues and experiences that these young citizens face.

A number of significant barriers stand in the way to full implementation. Children with disabilities and those belonging to minority and vulnerable groups, are **seldom heard** and often **excluded** from participating. They must be provided with support including through adapted materials, for example. There is also a **lack of awareness** – even among children – of children's participation rights, which must be remedied by better **educational initiatives and awareness-raising**.

There is much **scepticism** about the value of children's opinions and views: particularly when it comes to **political matters**. In this regard, research was presented on Austria's experience of lowering the voting age to 16: the first Council of Europe member state to do so for elections at all levels. Contrary to concerns, early results showed that the turnout rates, interest-levels, knowledge and quality of vote choice among 16-17-year olds were better in comparison to young adults, with **education at school** an apparently important factor in helping to prepare for political involvement. Over time, this group has continued to show high political engagement. Children also want to be given greater political participation rights. Young delegate **James (17)** pointed to the results of a recent survey of 700 people: they identified the voting age as one of the top issues facing young people.

A final challenge was the **backlash and abuse**, particularly through social media, that child activists faced as a response to exercising their participation rights. Power talk 6 considered the need for and main considerations of **safeguarding** children who want to get involved in activism. Among other things, it should be recognised that organisations and individuals have a **duty of care** towards these children; **children must be involved in the planning** of campaigns; and **additional vulnerabilities** must be taken into consideration. There is a wealth of resources for child activism and safeguarding, including [UNICEF's Youth Advocacy Toolkit](#).

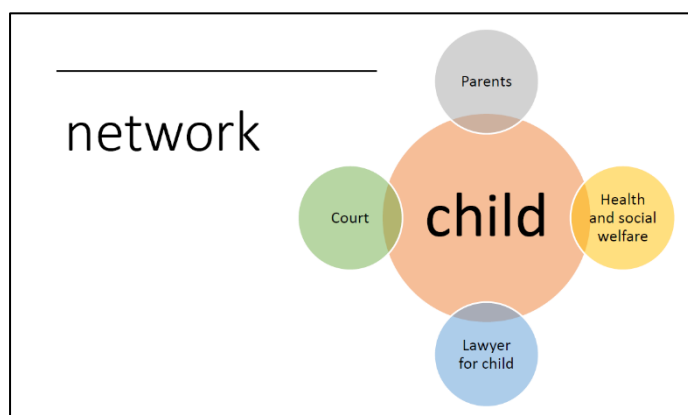
A number of other good examples in implementing child participation were noted. James had participated in the Council of Europe's consultative [research](#) on children with disabilities' experiences in the digital environment. Youth activist **Ourania Douvou** spoke on behalf of young people from the [Initiative for Article 12](#), while both young speakers had experience of platforms such as **local youth councils** or **ombudsman youth advisory panels**. Overall, panellists underscored that good child participation methods allowed for **feedback**, so that children knew what had been done about their input; and for children to see that their input had some **influence**.

#### Key conclusions

- Child participation affects many spheres of life, from the social to the political. For Article 12 UNCRC to be implemented, governments and stakeholders must prioritise systematic and sustainable change.
- Children face numerous barriers to enjoying their participation rights, many of which are rooted in culture. Work must continue to raise awareness of and break down prejudices against child participation.
- An intersectional approach must be taken, which recognises the extra needs of, and vulnerabilities faced by, "seldom heard" groups.
- Children are interested in and able to engage in political participation: lowering the voting age and supporting child activism and advocacy are some ways to further this.
- For child participation to be meaningful and safe, it must be accompanied by educational initiatives, feedback and evidence of impact and, where appropriate, strong safeguarding measures.

## Power talk 7: The power of family relations

Respecting the best interests of the child in divorce and separation



*Presentation extract from Judge Lana Petö Kujundžić*

Child-friendly justice is the fourth key priority area of the Council of Europe's Strategy for the Rights of the Child. Across Europe, justice systems, which were designed primarily with adults in mind, are struggling to adapt to the needs of children. Meanwhile, the image and role of the modern family and the child's place therein, is changing. Today, the first contact that children have with the justice system comes too often as the result of disputes relating to divorce and

separation, custody or visitation rights: situations that can deeply impact and traumatise the children involved.

Power Talk 7 sought to question how to strike the right balance between the interests of parents and children, and considered how to better deal with cases of intra-familial conflict.

When parents of dependent children decide to separate or divorce, this profoundly affects their children. Accordingly, and in line with Article 12 UNCRC, these children have a right to participate in proceedings. Yet legal proceedings are often **not structured to accommodate the hearing of children's views and ensure their best interest**: they are usually private law disputes between two parents, to which the child is not a procedural party. When children are heard in court, judges are often **not trained in family law** and **do not have expertise in children's rights**. Nowadays, less interventionist approaches – such as mediation – are more and more frequently used. While these out-of-court negotiations may come with certain benefits, they risk further **side-lining the views and needs of children**.

When discussing the terms of custody and access, there are frequently conflicting interests and claims made by parents, with children at risk of being caught in the middle. Judges may **defer to a parent's interpretation of the child's best interest**, rather than listening to the child and/or ensuring an independent assessment.

Panellists discussed a number of solutions to ensure that children are adequately protected and heard in these proceedings. In out-of-court proceedings, it was suggested that **mandatory hearings** of the child could be introduced, before parents come to any agreement on the terms of custody and access. When a court seeks to decide on custody or access, children should be **heard directly**, and/or **independent experts** should be appointed to provide **state-funded assessment reports of the child's best interest**. When determining their views and interests, children should be asked about more than which parent they would prefer to live with: factors such as their ability to stay at a particular school, or wish to continue with extracurricular activities, were important to **ensuring a stable environment**.

Appropriate **training, and resources for training**, must be provided for the judiciary, but also lawyers, support services, social workers and others. Whenever children participate, they should be **accompanied by an expert** (whether a psychologist, psychiatrist or social worker) who has undergone appropriate training. Where concerns arise, during custody hearings, as to the presence of **domestic abuse**, or where a decision as to custody or visitation is not being enforced, the need for child-friendly judicial training and **specialised family court systems** is even more pressing.

Several good practices were highlighted in this context: in Ireland, for example, every separation and divorce settlement, even when sought through mediation, is subject to court approval. In the wake of a 2012 referendum decision, in making a decision in relation to custody or access, the best interest of the child must be the paramount consideration for the court; for any child capable of forming their own views, the court must ascertain these and give them due weight.

In order to ensure meaningful participation, children must be **informed** of their rights, including their right to participate, and of the proceedings before them. It is also important that children are informed of the **results** of proceedings, and, if it happens, the **reasons why their views were overruled**. To facilitate this, judges could include **child-friendly sections in judgments**, and/or specialised lawyers could be appointed to **explain the decision** to the child.

#### Key conclusions

- Whether before a judge or out-of-court, proceedings related to divorce, separation, custody and access deeply impact on children; yet they are often not structured or conducted in ways which promote their views and best interest.
- More emphasis should be placed on hearing children directly, including in out-of-court proceedings, and through gaining independent assessments of their interests. These must take into account broad considerations, including the importance of maintaining a stable environment.
- All those working in the field must be given specific training, with appropriate resources to accompany it. Specialised court family systems should also be considered.
- Particular consideration needs to be given to situations where violence in the family has occurred as well as solutions to the non-enforcement of custody or visitation rights decisions.



## Power talk 8: The power of support

Responding to and preventing sexual violence by children



*Presentation extract from Rostyslav (Ukraine), young delegate*

The world is slowly opening up to the need to talk about sexual violence against children: but how ready are we to talk about sexual violence and harmful behaviours carried out or displayed by children? How can we ensure the child-friendly justice rights of both the harmer and harmed, while strengthening efforts to prevent these situations from arising in the first place? And what role does the digital environment play, which has made access and exposure to sexual content easier and more prevalent than ever before?

Sexual violence carried out by children is **not a rare problem**. In one UK study, over two-thirds of child victims of sexual abuse said that the perpetrator had been under the age of 18. **Sexting among children** (sending sexual messages and/or images through ICTs) is also not a rare phenomenon: in one study, one in eight children said that they had sent a “sext”, while one in four said they had received a “sext”. Of these, half of boys and 75% of girls said that they had been distressed by receiving the message, and had not requested it. Sharing another’s sexual photographs without permission often leads to victimisation and blaming of the person depicted: tragically, some children have taken their own lives as a result. Other forms of sexual bullying can take place online, while in many cases, child harmful sexual behaviours are **displayed towards other, young members of the family**. At the same time, it was important to conceptualise these behaviours as a continuum, with many of them not reaching the threshold of criminal offending.

There is a **gender dimension** to the phenomenon, with girls making up the majority of victims and up to 90% of children referred for these behaviours being boys. Many children displaying these behaviours may have **extra vulnerabilities**: including a disability or disempowering factor, or having themselves been the victim of abuse. In many instances, children who sexually harm are not aware of the consequences of their actions; and in particular, many do not understand concepts like consent. **Contextual factors**, including group pressures and **cultural norms**, played an important role in these behaviours. At the same time, it was important to treat these children as individuals, and harmful sexual behaviours as a **multi-faceted issue** – there are many different motivations and factors which play a role, and responses must be tailored accordingly.

Responding to these behaviours requires a fine balance which actors often get wrong. It cannot be overlooked that these children have rights, and often need support and recognition of their own vulnerabilities. Practitioners from two specialised centres, **Stichting Halt** and **Barnaverndarstofa**, shared important principles to implementing **alternative** and **diversionary** measures for children who have committed more serious harms. Responses should be **speedy**, provide sufficiently **long-term support** and involve the **whole community** in the child’s life: from parents to schools. Emphasis may be placed on **restorative justice**, raising the child’s awareness of the consequences of their actions for the victim and enabling them to learn from their mistakes, while learning about healthy sexuality.

The aim should not be to stop children from showing sexuality, which can be a normal part of their development, but to tackle behaviours which harm others, and ensure that these children can grow up to maintain good relationships. These alternative and supportive measures tended to result in **low rates of recidivism**.

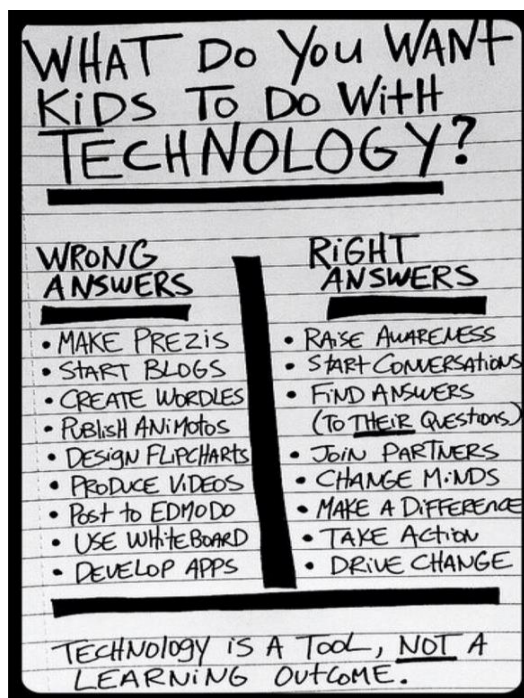
Finally, panellists emphasised the need for broader, society-wide measures based on **prevention, awareness** and **education**. Children should receive comprehensive **relationship and sexuality education** – many [resources](#) are available to support this, while experts could be invited into schools to deliver content. **Open communication** was also vital: parents and other adults in children’s lives must push past the taboo of talking about sexuality with children. Importantly, children want to see these measures introduced, too: they form part of key recommendations from a recent, child-led project, which was represented by young delegate **Rostyslav** (15).

#### Key conclusions

- Sexual violence and harmful sexual behaviours displayed by children are not a rare problem; the digital environment can provide a platform for sexual bullying and non-consensual sending or sharing of sexual content, including “sexts”.
- Many children displaying these behaviours are themselves vulnerable. Tailored, alternative and diversionary responses which focus on awareness-raising and support, rather than punishment, can lead to low recidivism rates.
- These behaviours should be seen through a gender dimension, and within the broader context of cultural norms. It is therefore important to focus on preventive and awareness-raising measures: including relationship and sexuality education and more open communication about healthy sexuality and relationships.

## Power talk 9: The power of technology

Seizing opportunities and responding to new challenges in the relations between children and technologies



Presentation extract from Andre (Malta), young delegate

Today, technology is an integral and inescapable part of children's lives. With such rapid advancement in new technologies, we have barely begun to imagine their applications and implications. All of this brings great opportunities for children and their rights – but it also comes with risks. Power talk 9 explored some of the many potential facets of technologies: as an equaliser and barrier; a tool for protection and education; and as a weapon in the hands of both those who commit, and fight against, child abuse and exploitation.

For **children with disabilities**, technology can have a transformative effect on their everyday lives. Young delegate **Emma** (18), who has a hearing impairment, spoke of her experiences of technology: the device she uses has helped her to follow group conversations and to **feel less excluded** from social life. On the other hand, technology for those with disabilities is **not always sufficient, or sufficiently used**, because others are not aware of the need for it. The newest technologies are

also not always accessible to children with disabilities, due to cost and a **lack of public funding**.

The **internet** has opened up a wealth of opportunities, providing, for example, unprecedented **access to information** and learning resources. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that the internet, and many of its most popular platforms and tools, was **not designed with child-users in mind**. Interacting with and gaining feedback from peers is important for children's identity development, and this can be fostered through the internet – but information may be shared much more widely, or remain available much longer, than intended. **Parents' behaviour online** and through social media may also have **privacy** implications for their children, through sharing their photographs or information. There is therefore a need to consider how to make the internet more child-friendly: for example, through **age verification** systems, a **stronger role for parental consent**, **help centres** placed directly on platforms, and by **age-adapted measures**, which progressively provide children with greater freedom.

**Encryption** and **anonymisation** tools present a double-edged sword for children's rights: while they can protect children's privacy, these same technologies can **hamper efforts in identifying perpetrators and fighting online crimes** against them. In 2018, for example, 2.88 million accounts related to child sexual abuse material were detected on the **dark web**.

How to maximise these opportunities, while reducing its risks? Panellists considered that there was a need for greater **regulation** and leadership, particularly at the **regional level**. While governments of course have a role to play, there is a need to recognise the **vital role and responsibilities of businesses and private enterprises**.

In order to effect real change, voluntary action by businesses may not be sufficient: instead, legal obligations could be introduced for companies to **detect child sexual abuse and materials on their platforms**, through the use of technologies; to **take down** these materials and to **report them** and cooperate with authorities. In some circumstances it may be necessary for businesses to be able to **identify their users**, and to implement **effective age-checks for certain services**.

Clearly, there is a need to ensure that children – and those around them – **are taught how safely navigate** new technologies, including in the online space. Young delegate **Andre** (11) also wanted educational programmes and adults’ attitudes to go further: by **treating technology not as a learning outcome, but as a tool** for children to use in creating, learning and inspiring positive change.

Finally, panellists touched on the game-changing opportunities presented by advances in **Artificial Intelligence (AI)**, from safeguarding children’s privacy, to improving educational tools and even in tackling online child sexual abuse images. AI must be harnessed strategically and with children’s rights in mind, through groups like the EU’s High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence and the Council of Europe’s Ad hoc Committee on Artificial Intelligence.

#### Key conclusions

- The benefits of technology should not be forgotten; they range from assisting children with disabilities, to providing unparalleled access to information, as well as platforms for creativity and inspiring change.
- Parents, educators and others must be sensitised to the ways in which technologies can be used and applied, so that their child-rights enhancing potential can be fully realised.
- Technologies like encryption, anonymising tools and Artificial Intelligence cut both ways when it comes to children’s rights: they necessitate strategic, child-sensitive action and leadership.
- Businesses and private enterprises play a vital role, and have important responsibilities, in upholding the rights of children and making technologies more child-friendly. They must be held to these, potentially through greater legal obligations.

## Redefining priorities for 2020–2021 and beyond

### Final plenary session: The “fishbowl”



*Young delegate Amadea (Albania) enters the fishbowl...*

In the final plenary session of the conference, the **Head of the Council of Europe’s Children’s Rights Division**, Ms Regína Jensdóttir, recalled the main theme and purpose of the conference: to reflect on the power that children have in today’s societies, to identify areas where they need more power and support, and to strengthen the commitment of powerful adults to engage and be accountable for their protection and well-being. Panellists were asked what should be done to redefine and give more power to children, as well as how

to ensure that the words expressed at the conference were turned into action.

A number of challengers representing all stakeholders, from parliamentarians, ombudspersons and NGOs, to academia and children, were invited to pose questions to the panel through a “fish-bowl format”. They challenged the panellists to provide concrete commitments to tackling children’s rights issues.

Focussing on violence in sports institutions, **French Minister of Sports**, Ms Roxana Maracineanu, spoke of the power dynamics between child athletes and their coaches. Many athletes feel like they live in a bubble; it can be difficult to step outside that bubble and find the **power to speak up against violence**. That is why France chose to launch its national “[Start to Talk](#)” campaign at the margins of this conference: a campaign which will give a platform to athletes and harness the **media** to spread awareness.

**Council of Europe Director General of Democracy**, Ms Snežana Samardžić-Marković, highlighted the strong links between furthering children’s rights and safeguarding democracy. Among others, children cannot be expected to be confident in the future of democracy if they experience discrimination, hatred and exclusion. Actors need to draw on the **power of inclusion** and of tolerance, to ensure that no one is left behind. In this regard, a new, inter-governmental Steering Committee on Anti-discrimination will guide and strengthen inclusivity at the national level. Democratic citizenship should not be merely theoretical; we need to foster the **power of children** and ensure their participation in decisions which are being made now: the implementation of tools like the Child Participation Assessment Tool can provide concrete guidance in this difficult task.

**Council of Europe Director General of Human Rights and Rule of Law**, Mr Christos Giakoumopoulos, emphasised that children’s rights, and its advocates, have been instrumental in furthering the dynamic interpretation of human rights: from the development of social rights, to the introduction of transgenerational justice, for example, through demands for older generations to ensure a **healthy environment**. The two different Council of Europe directorates have much scope for working together to shift the power in favour of children’s rights. In particular, cross-directorate projects are planned to ensure that **data protection** measures are adapted to safeguard children in the digital environment; and to put children on more equal levels of power within **family relations**, in the context of separation and divorce proceedings. To tackle child **poverty**, there is a need to improve acceptance of the ECSR collective complaints mechanism.

The Council of Europe also had a role to play in encouraging sufficient investment in children's rights-based policies, and in children's rights action plans, while bodies such as the PACE played a vital part in raising children's rights issues on national political agendas.

**Director of the European Commission's DG Justice and Consumers**, Mr Emmanuel Crabit, noted the timeliness of this conference, on the tenth anniversary of the EU Charter on Fundamental Rights and at the beginning of a new policy cycle, where children's rights are set to be high on the agenda. A new, comprehensive strategy on children's rights will cover many of the areas prioritised by the Council of Europe, including **child-friendly justice** and **online protection**. To foster meaningful **child participation**, the EU will be launching a study on political life to map out problems and practices. He urged the two organisations to continue their excellent history of **collaboration** and cooperation with one another, with both bringing their unique strengths to the table.

## Closing the conference: General Rapporteur



In closing the conference, **general rapporteur and 2018-2019 chairperson of the ad hoc Committee on the Rights of the Child (CAHENF)**, Ms Maria-Andriani Kostopoulou, sought to draw some of the main threads together, focusing on how discussions map on to the five Strategy priority areas as well as the role of the to-be established Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child.

A lack of **equal opportunities**, through a rise or persistence in poverty, exclusion

and discrimination, destroys children's dreams and aspirations and divides societies. The Committee counts on the ECSR to keep the focus on states in addressing child poverty in a comprehensive manner.

The conference had demonstrated, through its young delegates, how to put theory into practice in ensuring meaningful **child participation**. But from the media to politics and even online, children are systematically shut out from meaningful opportunities to be involved. She challenged all, including the Committee, to consider whether they are truly hearing what children have to say.

It was clear that the world is still far from achieving Target 16.2 and guaranteeing **a life free from violence for all children**. Tackling this violence is a key priority for the Committee: they would be looking carefully at how to foster environments where everyone speaks up against violence. Children who themselves display harmful sexual behaviours must be supported, while solutions must be found to tackle and prevent the underlying causes of this behaviour.

**Child-friendly justice** has not been an area of focus for the Committee. But it was clear that this must change. Justice systems must be supported to ensure that children's views and interests are placed more at the centre of family disputes. Meanwhile, attitudes which challenge the universality of children's human rights – including where children, or their families, come into conflict with the law - must be resisted at all costs.

The conference had made clear the importance of ensuring **children's rights in the digital environment**, which touches on nearly all aspects of children's lives in some way or another. The committee would ensure that its recent Guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child were being fully implemented as a framework for maximising the opportunities and minimising the risks of new technologies. Meanwhile, there was a need to ensure that data protection safeguards were appropriately adapted to children's needs and rights.

Finally, the general rapporteur turned to the question of **how to deliver the Strategy** over the next biennium and ensure a "future proof" Europe for children's rights. Confronted with such complex, global challenges, it is clear that all stakeholders, at all levels, must redouble their efforts in working together. Through harnessing all stakeholders' passion and power in the fight for children's rights, and through empowering children to do the same, all can play a key role in redefining and redistributing power in Europe.

## Going forward: addressing concerns through systemic action

The conference confirmed that **the five main Strategy priority areas remain as pertinent as ever**. Power talks offered key expert insight and an opportunity for deeper reflection on many of the main challenges and emerging trends identified by stakeholders during the mid-term evaluation process.

The conference underlined that there are **no “quick fixes”** to children’s rights challenges: changes must be **system-wide** and supported by adequate **investment**. They must aim at **cultural** change and take an **intersectional** approach.

In a globalised and connected world, the challenges faced are also increasingly **global**, and must be approached as such: work across the region and beyond must be coordinated. With the **growing influence of businesses and private companies**, work must be done to ensure that they are upholding their responsibilities towards children and their rights. Today, the **digital environment** is inescapable, and it impacts numerous children’s rights. Finally, children’s rights work must include a bottom-up approach, **involving children from the very start and as key stakeholders**.

In the wake of the conference, the Council of Europe, and in particular its new Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child ([CDENF](#)), have a **strengthened mandate for 2020-2021** to take action forward in areas such as: enhancing the implementation of standards on violence against children and the development of new guidance on certain “blind spots” of current policies (e.g. reporting mechanisms, peer violence etc.); considering the rights and best interests of children in parental separation, child-care proceedings, and other processes; addressing welfare and protection issues for child returnees; and ensuring children’s privacy and data protection; strengthening effective child participation in decision-making in various contexts and implementing adequate safeguarding; contributing to the achievement of the UN SDGs, among others.

Taken together, the mid-term evaluation process and conference have identified a number of **possible areas for future consideration and work, possibly extending beyond 2021 and for reflecting in the upcoming Strategy cycle (2022-2027)**. This includes exploration of:

- links between children’s rights and the environment
- promoting the development of relationship and sexuality education
- strengthening and promoting child political participation
- exploring the impact of technologies upon children, including social media, artificial intelligence exposure/access to sexual content.

The next biennium under the “Sofia Strategy” will be characterised by a combined approach of pursuing work along current priority areas to finalise the implementation of ongoing activities, consolidating the delivery of these priorities through new specific activities and exploring new areas and innovative tools for strengthening children’s rights across Europe. The aim will be to effectively deliver the current Strategy while preparing for a new, pertinent Strategy cycle. A handover will be organised at a major event in early 2022, for which the Council of Europe is counting on its key partners amongst governments, international organisations, civil society and other stakeholders, including children.