

Autism-Europe’s response to Commission’s call for evidence on Child protection – integrating systems

Position paper – October 2023

Autism-Europe (AE) is an international association representing autistic people and their families with 90 members in 40 countries including 26 EU member states.

We welcome the “initiative aimed at supporting the development and strengthening of integrated child protection systems” as part of key action 3 “an EU that helps children grow free from violence” within the EU strategy on the rights of the child. These measures are in line with Article 16 of the United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) on freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse¹ and Article 7 on children with disabilities.² Like all children with disabilities, autistic children are particularly in need of such initiative because they are more likely to be victimised.³

AE aligns itself with the European Disability Forum (EDF) when calling for EU action on integrated child protection systems that include children with disabilities. The risk of abuse and violence is particularly high for children with disabilities⁴⁵. The systemic violence children with disabilities are subjected to hinders their development and puts them at risk. Institutionalisation of children with disabilities significantly increases their risk of abuse and severe disciplining⁶, including corporal punishment and restraint⁷, as well as cases of forced sterilisation⁸, which is still legal to inflict upon minors in three EU Member States. In addition, growing up in an institution can have an impact on a child with disabilities, well into their adult life. Furthermore, children and young people with disabilities in institutions are shown to be less likely to attend school than their peers, missing the crucially formative contribution that education can provide in preparing a person with disabilities for independence in adulthood⁹. Therefore, we call on the European Commission to support EU member states in their transition away from institutions and towards family-based care for all children.

¹ [UNCRPD Article 16 - Freedom From Exploitation, Violence And Abuse](#)

² [UNCRPD Article 7 –Children with Disabilities](#)

³ [Prevalence of Victimization in Autistic Individuals: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis.](#)
[Victimisation in a French population of children and youths with autism spectrum disorder: a case control study.](#)
[Violent crime against children with disabilities: A nationwide prospective birth cohort-study.](#)

⁴ [Physical violence against children with disabilities: A Danish national birth cohort prospective study - PMC](#)

⁵ [Violence against children with disabilities: legislation, policies and programmes in the EU \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁶ [Effects of Institutional Care | Better Care Network](#)

⁷ [Factsheet Lumos Risks.pdf \(contentfiles.net\)](#)

⁸ [Forced sterilisation of persons with disabilities in the EU \(edf-feph.org\)](#)

⁹ [Effects of Institutional Care | Better Care Network](#)

AE would also like to highlight the occurrences of abusive placements of autistic children in the child protection system (e.g. “Affaire Rachel” in France¹⁰) notably due to a lack of understanding of autism and how it manifests itself. There is a need for autism-specific training of professionals working in the field of child protection, law enforcement, healthcare, education, etc. both on how to recognise (undiagnosed) autistic children and how to meet their needs. Autism-Europe calls on the European Commission and EU Member states to facilitate exchange of good practices on autism trainings for professionals and develop guidelines for supporting autistic children in child protection systems. Moreover, there should be specific case-by-case systematic assessments of children placed in childcare for emotional and learning issues to detect possible disabilities or conditions that may have been mistaken for signs of child abuse. Additionally, systems for child protection must pay special attention to the link between disability and the precarity of households (notably due to stress, lack of adequate support services, loss of income and additional costs). It is thus necessary to collect data on disabled children who live in disadvantaged family contexts so that policies and actions to support their quality of life are effective and do not lead to institutionalisation as the only alternative.

Autistic children are more likely to be bullied, including through cyberbullying,¹¹ including cyber bullying, compared to non-autistic children but also compared to children with other disabilities. Adequate systems must be developed to report such issues and hold the perpetrators accountable. A study in several EU countries found that children with and without special needs education can identify bullying more easily when trained about it.^{12 13} A study from Sweden found autistic children and adolescents are a group particularly targeted for sexual abuse.¹⁴ Autistic children and especially those with mental issues are also disproportionately affected by suicide.¹⁵ AE calls on the European Commission and the EU Member States to pay particular attention to all these different interrelated issues and the support needs of autistic people and facilitate the exchange of trainings of professionals and peers as well as prevention measures for autistic children.



¹⁰ [Rachel, l'autisme à l'épreuve de la justice, documentaire, 6 avril 2019, Public Sénat](#)

¹¹ [Prevalence of Victimization in Autistic Individuals: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis.](#)

[The traits of Autism Spectrum Disorder and bullying victimization in an epidemiological population.](#)

¹² [Knowledge About Bullying by Young Adults With Special Educational Needs With or Without Disabilities \(SEN/D\).](#)

¹³ [Scoping Bullying and Cyberbullying Victimization Among a Sample of Gifted Adolescents in Ireland.](#)

[Cyberbullying and empathy among elementary school students: Do special educational needs make a difference?](#)

¹⁴ [Neurodevelopmental disorders and subsequent risk of violent victimization: Exploring sex differences and mechanisms.](#)

¹⁵ [Prevalence and Risk-Markers of Self-Harm in Autistic Children and Adults.](#)

[Suicidal Ideation and Suicidal Attempts in Referred Adolescents with High Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder and Comorbid Bipolar Disorder: A Pilot Study.](#)