



PROMOTING THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF THE NEW GENERATIONS

Policy position of Mental Health Europe

*"If you want happiness for a lifetime,
help the next generation"*

Policy statement

Mental Health Europe believes that the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people is fundamental to the future social and economic growth of the European region and that much more can be done to promote mental health and well-being and prevent mental disorders in the early years of life and amongst children and young people. This requires progressive universal policies and action across a wide range of policy areas, particularly child and family policy, education, employment and training policy and through support for parents during the early years of a child's life. Targeted support and actions are also required particularly where there is increased evidence of risk factors for poor mental health and mental illness.

Good mental health in childhood is a prerequisite for optimal emotional and psychological development, productive social relationships, effective learning, ability to care for oneself, good physical health and effective economic participation as adults. Whilst the majority of young people in the EU enjoy good mental health, with around 80% of young people in Europe reporting a high level of mental well-being¹ up to 50-75% of mental disorders present in adult life have their onset during adolescence. Mental health problems have risen to achieve significant importance within child and adolescent health and can be identified in between 10% and 20% of young people, with higher rates among disadvantaged population groups².

Mental Health Europe calls upon policy and decision makers at all levels to work towards the implementation of child and youth sensitive policies and services for the promotion of positive mental health among children and youth. As Commissioners Figel and Špidla said, the destiny of Europe depends on its ability to foster societies that are child and youth friendly³.

¹ Mental Health in Youth and Education, Consensus Paper, <http://www.ec-mental-health-process.net/consensus.html>

² European Pact for Mental Health and Wellbeing, European Commission, 13 June 2008:
http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/life_style/mental/docs/pact_en.pdf

³ Communication from the Commission to the Council on European policies concerning youth - from Mr. Figel' in association with Mr. Špidla [COM(2005) 206 final]

Policy context

The need for strengthening knowledge and actions to protect the mental health of children has been largely recommended by international and European organisations.

Mental health and wellbeing of children and young people is one of the key topics addressed by the **World Health Organization** through many programmes and initiatives, such as the Global school health initiative⁴, the Health Behaviour of School-Aged Children (HBSC) Forum process⁵, and the Commission on Social Determinants of Health (CSDH).⁶

The **European Pact for Mental Health and Wellbeing**⁷, launched on 13 June 2008 by the European Commission with the support of the World Health Organisation, calls on the EU institutions, the Member States and key actors and players to cooperate and take actions on priority areas for the promotion of the mental health and well-being of the population. It recognises that mental health promotion in educational and community settings can play an important role in reaching children and young people and determining their level of mental health and wellbeing.

The European Parliament Committee for Health and Environment is due to vote on the **motion for a European Parliament resolution on Mental Health**. Taking forward the commitments taken in the Mental Health Pact, the report calls on the Member States to organise support programmes for school personnel to develop a healthy school climate, as well as to build relationships between schools, parents, health service providers and the community in order to strengthen the social integration of young people.

In the frame of the **EU Lisbon strategy** for growth and jobs, the **Commission's Social Inclusion Strategy** refers indirectly to the mental health and well-being of children by putting the fight against child poverty as a priority.⁸ The Commission communication on "**Promoting young people's full participation in education, employment and society**", which acknowledges the fact that the socioeconomic status and levels of education are inter-related with the occurrence of mental and physical health problems of young people and that family, school and social circumstances play a crucial role for young people's favourable development.⁹

In follow-up to the above communication, the **French, Czech and Swedish presidencies of the Council of the European Union** have identified young people's health as a key priority area in their work programme, including a commitment to promote youth mental health.

Children's rights are one of the main priorities since two decades with the implementation of the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**, including Article 24 on "the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health".

⁴ http://www.who.int/school_youth_health/gshi/en/

⁵ The knowledge about adolescent mental health and well-being is supported by the WHO collaborative cross-national Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study. The WHO/HBSC Forum includes an annual European consultation and the production of case studies and background papers, supports Member States in translating the findings of the studies into action. See <http://www.hbsc.org/>

⁶ The Commission on Social Determinants of Health brings together leading scientists and practitioners to provide evidence on policies that improve health by addressing the social conditions which people live and work. See the WHO website at http://www.who.int/social_determinants/en/

⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/life_style/mental/docs/pact_en.pdf

⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/child_poverty_en.htm

⁹ Commission Communication "Promoting young people's full participation in education, employment and society" COM(2007)498 final http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2007/com2007_0498en01.pdf

In July 2006, the European Commission adopted a communication on "**Towards an EU strategy on the rights of the child**"¹⁰ that also included healthcare and education as a concern. In July 2008, the European Parliament approved the text for a new **EU directive on anti-discrimination**. This text targets different grounds of discrimination including disability and age and will be applied to protect children and youth from being discriminated in their education and working settings¹¹.

The **Council resolution on the health and well-being of young people** recognizes that "special attention should be paid to young people's mental health, particularly promoting good mental health especially through schools and youth work". This was also acknowledged in the conclusions of the latest "Education, Youth and Culture" Council¹² on preparing young generations for the schools of the 21st century.

Key recommendations from Mental Health Europe

Acknowledging the fact that there is a need for a significant political step to make mental health and wellbeing a key priority, and taking forward the recommendations of the European Pact for Mental Health and wellbeing in children, youth and education, Mental Health Europe invites policy makers and stakeholders to take the following actions:

- **Emphasising the importance of support in the early years** and especially for those children and families most at risk and those living in poverty. Key actions will include supporting parents in the early years of their children's lives. These supports will involve emotional and psychological supports.
- **The education sector at all levels shall be engaged** as a key player in promoting and achieving health through a whole school approach that includes promoting mental health awareness as core to overall health and wellbeing and to improving resilience and life skills. The education sector should also be aware of common mental health problems, risk and protective factors in childhood and youth and act to help identify problems and distress and intervene early with school based support working in partnership with health and social care agencies. To also enable people to recognise signs and symptoms of mental health distress, all young age groups, from early childhood to adolescence and beyond, shall be educated on the importance of maintaining good mental health as much as physical health.
- **Innovative ways of delivering integrated social and health services** need to be developed and encouraged to meet the mental health needs of young people. Integrated services and accessible, non-stigmatising facilities must be created taking into account that different stages of development of youth require different approaches. Attempts should always be made to ensure that services and supports help enable a child or young person to live a normal life, and participate fully in education and training.
- **Emotional and mental health literacy for workers - To train and develop the skills and confidence of the children and young people's mental health workforce** (youth workers, general practitioners, psychiatrists, counsellors, all those with contact with children and young people etc.) enabling them to understand the mental health, social, emotional and psychological needs of children and young people and to refer them to or provide best practice and care for young people. Families and friends shall

¹⁰ Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. COM (2006) 367
http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home/fsj/children/fsj_children_intro_en.htm

¹¹ As foreseen by the Council Resolution of November 2005 on the implementation of the European Pact for Youth and promotion of active citizenship.

¹² Draft Conclusions of the Council and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on preparing young people for the 21st century: an agenda for European cooperation on schools

be involved and provided support too as their role is crucial for the social, emotional and psychological development of young people.

- **Establishing inter-sectoral collaborations and encouraging active participation of young people** in the policy making process to create and improve the infrastructures for young people. Potential partners to engage are schools, sports and youth organisations, local authorities, NGOs, and local City Councils. Young people shall be encouraged to take part in the social and cultural life of their communities, by creating supportive environments and implementing peer-led activities for adolescents and young people.
- **Ensuring that the most vulnerable children and youth** are supported. Particularly looked after children who still experience grossly unequal outcomes in education, health and contact with the criminal justice system compared with non looked after children. Specific efforts need to be made to support looked after children.

Finally, Mental Health Europe wants to express its deep concern regarding the growing incidence of stigma and discrimination faced by children and young people suffering from mental health problems and calls on:

- **National, regional and local authorities to put in place public anti-stigma and discrimination campaigns targeting and involving young people** in order to educate and support them to look critically at society's attitude to mental illness and the factors which influence such attitudes and behaviours. Media, testimonials and youth heroes such as athletes and singers shall be involved as key partners helping to deliver positive messages and to challenge young people's attitudes and misconceptions as regards mental illness. And to consider developing positive children and young people's programmes that highlight the positive aspects of childhood and youth.
- **The European Community to adopt of a broad directive on implementing the principle of equal treatment** between persons irrespective of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, which clearly protects people with psychosocial disabilities and people with mental health problems from discrimination in all areas of life.
- **The EU Member States to revise their discrimination laws**, so as to provide a clear definition of disability which is in line with the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

*Mental Health Europe
Brussels, 3 December 2008*

About Mental Health Europe

Mental Health Europe (MHE) is an organisation committed to the promotion of positive mental health, the prevention of mental distress, the improvement of care, advocacy for social inclusion and the protection of human rights for people with mental health problems, their families and carers. MHE vision is of a Europe where mental health and well-being is given high priority in the political spectrum and on the European health and social agenda, where people with mental health problems live as full citizens with access to appropriate services and support when needed, and where meaningful participation is guaranteed at all levels of decision-making and administration. MHE's values are based on dignity and respect, equal opportunities, freedom of choice, anti-discrimination, social inclusion, democracy and participation.

www.mhe-sme.org