Parliamentary Assembly
Assemblée parlementaire
https://pace.coe.int

COUNCIL OF EUROPE
75
1949 - 2024
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Doc. 15961
12 April 2024

Preventing addictive behaviours in children

Reply to Recommendation[1]: Recommendation 2262 (2023)
Committee of Ministers

1. The Committee of Ministers has carefully examined Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 2262 (2023) "Preventing addictive behaviours in children". It recognises the paramount responsibility of member States to ensure the right of children to enjoy the best possible state of health. Addressing this issue includes adopting effective addiction prevention and treatment measures and by better understanding the causes of children's addictive behaviours. The Committee welcomes the attention given by the Assembly to this alarmingly growing public health concern which affects a vulnerable sector of our society.

2. The Committee of Ministers welcomes the Assembly's support for the Pompidou Group's initiative to develop activities for the prevention of addictive behaviours in children within its work programme 2023-2025, including the pioneering work on children and families affected by parental drug use. It encourages the Group to continue to address this issue in the future.

3. With regard to its recommendations in paragraph 4, suggesting that the Pompidou Group, *inter alia*, conduct studies on the use of cannabis among children, on behavioural addictions facilitated by online technologies and on the prevalence of the use of new psychoactive substances by children, the Committee of Ministers underlines that interventions which aim to prevent or delay the onset of drug use amongst young people should be based on the best evidence and standards. In this respect, several resources have been developed to assist European policy makers to prevent addictive behaviours in children. The European Drug Prevention Quality Standards (EDQPS) provides policy makers with a set of principles to help develop and assess the quality of drug prevention and assess the quality of drug prevention[2] and the European Prevention Curriculum[3] provides training for decision, opinion and policy makers on effective drug prevention interventions. Also, the EMCDDA (European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drug Addiction) Xchange registry[4] is a useful resource for policy makers to choose drug prevention interventions which have been rigorously assessed in terms of efficacy and impact.

4. The Committee of Ministers would further point out that the statistical school surveys on behaviour of children (15-16-year-olds) towards drug and alcohol use and possible related addictions have been implemented for 30 years via ESPAD (European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs) more than 40 countries, for the most part members of the Pompidou Group. ESPAD, initiated by the Pompidou Group at the time, is co-ordinated by an independent group of researchers whose data are used by the EMCDDA for its annual European report, since they are considered as an important epidemiology demand indicator. Conducted every four years, the ESPAD data also appear in a database available for all who want to further analyse. The distribution of tasks between the Pompidou Group, the EMCDDA and the ESPAD research network makes it possible that there is no duplication of work but rather a share of expertise.

---

1. Adopted at the 1495th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies (10 April 2024).
2. https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/manuals/prevention-standards_en
3. https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/best-practice/european-prevention-curriculum-eupc_en
4. https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/best-practice/xchange_en

5. In paragraph 6, the Assembly recommends the extension of MedSPAD, which is an adaptation of ESPAD to the Mediterranean Region, to all Pompidou Group member States. Within the MedSPAD committee, there are already some European countries which are part of MedNET (the Pompidou Group Mediterranean Co-operation Network on drugs and addictions), and which participate in the discussions during MedSPAD committees. MedSPAD has been able to introduce questions on parental use and Covid impact due to the smaller size of participating countries than ESPAD which enables an easier decision process. However, even if the link between ESPAD and MedSPAD is getting closer and closer, merely due to the fact that the research consultants in both networks are the same and that the MedNET Secretariat is aware of the value of both studies, MedSPAD cannot be imposed on the European countries which conduct ESPAD. It is step by step that the knowledge and the context of both networks could evolve towards a greater harmonisation taking into account their differences and even improve the use of these two school surveys instruments to develop and assess drug prevention policies.[5]

6. Regarding the specific recommendation on behavioural addictions facilitated by online technologies and practices, the Committee of Ministers informs the Assembly that the Pompidou Group's work at present on children and addictions is of a different nature and is focused on preparing guidelines based on integrated services for families affected by drug use, e.g. the current work on the role of fathers who use drugs.

7. The Committee of Ministers has noted that, in line with its revised statute, which extends the scope of its activities, the Pompidou Group also started in 2023 a pioneering work in the field of new forms of addictions, setting up a specific expert group in this respect. As a follow-up to the decisions of the 4th Council of Europe Summit, the expert group prepared a report on "Risks and harms associated with online gaming and gambling" (already available), and on this basis it is working on policy guidelines to be approved at the 94th meeting of the Pompidou Group Permanent correspondents (Naples, 30 May 2024). As a second step, it is foreseen that these policy guidelines would be discussed together with the Steering Committee on Media and Information Society (CDMSI), with a view to preparing a draft Committee of Ministers' recommendation addressing the issue of online addictions.

8. The Committee of Ministers would also draw attention to the important and relevant work carried out by its Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF) and encourages the support that it can extend to the work of the Pompidou Group by bringing a child rights perspective. The Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027), under its Strategic Objective 2 "Equal opportunities and social inclusion for all children", points to the increasing concern regarding children's mental health related difficulties, which include addictive behaviours, such as overuse or online addictions. In fact, children consulted to inform the Strategy suggested that the prevention of addiction to the digital environment and technologies, including virtual reality, is a challenge to be addressed urgently. Through the consultations, children asked for states to offer support services for the children and families concerned by these phenomena.

9. As regards addictive behaviours in children facilitated by online technologies and practices, the Committee of Ministers recalls its Guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment as well as the Handbook for policy makers on the rights for the child in the digital environment. The Handbook draws attention to the need to understand the risks related to artificial intelligence (AI), including for instance the use of AI to produce highly attractive and potentially "addictive" apps and toys, underlining the need for States to have in place systems to ensure children's rights to protection and safety. The Guidelines and the Handbook are being promoted and currently used in Council of Europe co-operation projects.

10. Finally, as part of the implementation of the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child, and under its mandate, the CDENF is currently preparing a mapping study on children's access to quality mental health care in Council of Europe member States, which is expected to be finalised in 2024. Following a human rights-based approach, this mapping study will assess how Council of Europe member States currently ensure children's access to quality mental healthcare, which is of most relevance for children presenting addictive behaviours, and will identify risks and barriers to accessing mental health services as well as promising practices in view of formulating recommendations on how member States may address challenges encountered in this context. The Committee of Ministers invites the CDENF to bear in mind, as appropriate, paragraph 5 of the Assembly recommendation while carrying out this work.

---

5. See the use of school surveys in policy and prevention planning and evaluation, results of the 2022 ESPAD MedSPAD bridge project a joint publication by the PG and the National Research Council of Europe also initiated by Pompidou Group), https://coe.int/en/web/pompidou/mednet/medspad.