

Title: A Youth-Led Congress on Children's Mental Health: Voices, Experiences, and Policy Implications

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Abstract:

This report synthesizes the proceedings of a youth-led congress focused on the profound impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's mental health. The congress provided a platform for children to articulate their experiences, express concerns, and propose recommendations. The findings underscore the need for policymakers to heed the voices of children in shaping mental health policies and support systems.

Keywords: Youth-led congress, Children's mental health, COVID-19, Policymaking, Well-being

SUMMARY

1. Introduction: The congress was organized by children in the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society on the 26th of February, 2022 with participation of children from Malta, Estonia, Serbia, Italy, India, Portugal and Greece. It facilitated a dynamic exchange of ideas among children, shedding light on the multifaceted challenges posed by the pandemic to their mental well-being. This report seeks to distil the essence of their experiences and articulate their proposed solutions, providing a foundation for informed policymaking.

2. Methodology: The congress comprised individual presentations made by the children as speakers as well as interactive workshops where children engaged in discussions, sharing personal experiences and collectively proposing solutions. The insights gained were collated to identify overarching themes and specific recommendations.

3. Key Themes:

The discussions at the congress brought forth key themes ranging from the impact of social isolation to the challenges of educational disruptions, offering a comprehensive view of the multifaceted experiences of children during the pandemic. Specifically:

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Isolation and Loneliness: Children highlighted the adverse effects of social isolation, emphasizing the need for strategies to foster connections and mitigate loneliness.

Educational Disruptions: The impact of school closures emerged as a significant concern, prompting calls for targeted support to address disruptions in learning.

Digital Well-being: Workshop discussions illuminated the dual nature of digital engagement, emphasizing the importance of balancing online activities to safeguard mental health.

Stress and Anxiety: The pervasive stress induced by the pandemic featured prominently, necessitating tailored interventions to alleviate anxiety and build resilience.

4. Recommendations:

In response to these insights, the children articulated a set of recommendations that not only address immediate concerns but also pave the way for long-term strategies, presenting a roadmap for policymakers and stakeholders to navigate the complexities of the post-pandemic era.

Formalized Support Systems: Children advocated for the establishment of formalized support systems within educational institutions, recognizing the role of schools in providing holistic well-being.

Digital Literacy Programs: To address the digital well-being challenges, participants proposed the implementation of digital literacy programs to empower children to navigate online spaces responsibly.

Mental Health Education: Incorporating mental health education into curricula emerged as a consensus recommendation to foster understanding and destigmatize mental health issues.

Youth-Inclusive Decision-Making: Participants emphasized the importance of involving youth in decision-making processes, ensuring that policies directly reflect their needs and perspectives.

5. Implications for Policymakers:

Responsive Mental Health Policies: Policymakers are urged to craft policies that respond directly to the nuanced challenges faced by children during the pandemic, with a focus on preventive measures and accessible mental health resources.

Youth-Driven Initiatives: The congress underscored the efficacy of youth-led initiatives in addressing mental health concerns. Policymakers should actively incorporate such initiatives into broader strategies.

Cross-Sectoral Collaboration: Collaboration across education, health, and social sectors is imperative to create comprehensive support systems that holistically address the mental health needs of children.

6. Conclusion: This youth-led congress serves as a poignant reminder of the resilience and agency of children in the face of unprecedented challenges. The findings provide actionable insights for policymakers, urging them to prioritize the mental well-being of the youngest members of society through targeted and inclusive policies.

Background

Unravelling the Impact of COVID-19 on Children's Well-being

The backdrop against which the youth-led congress unfolded is framed by the unprecedented global disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This public health crisis, characterized by the rapid spread of the novel coronavirus, instigated a seismic shift in the daily lives of individuals across the globe. Amid the multifaceted challenges posed by the pandemic, children emerged as a particularly vulnerable demographic, grappling with disruptions that extended beyond the immediate health implications of the virus.

1. Educational Turmoil: School closures, a prominent consequence of pandemic control measures, disrupted traditional modes of learning and social interaction for children. The abrupt shift to remote or hybrid learning models exposed the digital divide, exacerbating existing disparities in access to education. The seismic impact of these disruptions underscored the need for innovative and adaptive educational approaches.

2. Social Isolation and Loneliness: Lockdowns and social distancing measures, while essential for curbing the spread of the virus, imposed a profound sense of isolation on children. The loss of regular social interactions, extracurricular activities, and the supportive school environment contributed to heightened feelings of loneliness. The congress illuminated the profound toll of social isolation on children's mental health, emphasizing the imperative to address these emotional challenges.

3. Digital Pervasiveness and Challenges: The surge in digital reliance, encompassing online learning, socializing, and entertainment, brought to the forefront the dual nature of technology. While serving as a lifeline for connectivity, it also posed challenges related to screen time, cyberbullying, and the potential for digital fatigue. Navigating this digital landscape became a central concern for both children and those responsible for their well-being.

4. Heightened Mental Health Strain: The pervasive stress induced by the pandemic, coupled with uncertainties about the future, significantly impacted children's mental health. Reports of increased anxiety, depression, and emotional distress underscored the need for targeted interventions to alleviate psychological strain and build resilience among the younger generation.

5. Unprecedented Call for Action: Against this backdrop of challenges, the youth-led congress emerged as a beacon of collective voices, providing a platform for children to articulate their experiences, express concerns, and propose solutions. The congress not only highlighted the acute challenges faced by children during the pandemic but also underscored the resilience, creativity, and leadership potential embedded within the younger generation.

The background of the COVID-19 pandemic serves as the canvas upon which the narratives of children's experiences, challenges, and aspirations were painted during the youth-led congress. Understanding the profound disruptions caused by the pandemic is paramount in comprehending the urgency and relevance of the proposed solutions and recommendations put forth by the children. As society navigates the path to recovery, the insights gleaned from this period will shape future strategies to fortify the well-being of the youngest members of our global community.

Organization of the Congress: Amplifying Children's Voices in the Face of Adversity

On May 12, 2021, an initial meeting took place with Her Excellency, the President Emeritus, **Dr Marie Louise Coleiro Preca** alongside officers and academics from the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society (**MFWS**) and the authors. During this meeting, the decision to organize a Children's Congress

on mental health was reached. In July, it was decided that **Eurochild** would oversee this conference, extending participation to children from the Euro-Mediterranean region. In August 2021, a preparatory meeting was convened to finalize the proposal, leading to its presentation to the children's hub, with the call for applications commencing in September 2021. Following the application review process, the first core group meeting convened on September 23, 2021. These core group meetings recurred weekly, amounting to a total of 20 sessions. The congress took place on the 26th February 2022, online, under the title “**COVID and YOU**”. It was attended by children and young adults in their early 20s.

A Collaborative Effort

The youth-led congress was a collaborative effort orchestrated by young minds from diverse corners of the world, manifested as a powerful testament to resilience and the unwavering spirit of advocacy. The organizational dynamics of the congress reflected meticulous planning, purposeful inclusivity, and a commitment to providing a platform for children to voice their experiences amid the complexities of the COVID-19 era. It presented the following characteristics:

1. Visionary Leadership: Spearheaded by visionary young leaders, the congress transcended geographical boundaries, bringing together participants who represented the collective voice of children navigating the challenges posed by the pandemic. The organizers demonstrated a profound understanding of the need to center the experiences of children in discussions about their well-being, ensuring that their narratives took center stage.

2. Inclusive Representation: The organizers exhibited a dedication to inclusivity, fostering representation from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and age groups. This deliberate effort ensured that the congress captured a mosaic of perspectives, enriching the discourse and enabling a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic on children.

3. Technological Innovation: Leveraging the digital realm, the young organizers adeptly harnessed technology to create a virtual space that transcended physical limitations. This technological innovation not only facilitated transnational participation but also showcased the adaptability of the younger generation in utilizing digital platforms for meaningful conversations and collective action.

4. Child-Centric Approach: Central to the organization was a child-centric approach, with an emphasis on creating an environment where children felt empowered to share their experiences openly. The congress provided a safe space for children to articulate their concerns, propose solutions, and engage in dialogues that reflected the complexities of their lived realities.

5. Collaborative Engagement: Collaboration was at the heart of the congress, with children actively participating in core group meetings, organization exchanges, paper presentations, workshops, discussions, and the formulation of proposals. The collaborative engagement model extended beyond the virtual conference, fostering a sense of collective responsibility and solidarity among participants during the post congress work including transcription and evaluation.

6. Catalyst for Change: The congress, in its essence, became a catalyst for change, challenging pre-existing norms and advocating for a paradigm shift in how society perceives and responds to the needs of children. The organizational structure of the congress facilitated the emergence of actionable proposals and recommendations, setting the stage for policy considerations and impactful interventions.

Thus, the organizational prowess of this youth-led congress transcended the landscape, creating a dynamic space where the resilience, creativity, and leadership potential of children were magnified.

By placing children at the forefront of discussions on their well-being, the organizers paved the way for a transformative dialogue that resonates far beyond the confines of the congress. In doing so, they demonstrated that, when given the opportunity, children can not only navigate the challenges of the present but also contribute meaningfully to shaping a more equitable and compassionate future.

Key Themes

Upon the conclusion of the congress, the video recording underwent a meticulous transcription process. Subsequently, a comprehensive study and analysis were conducted. Employing thematic analysis, the entire transcript was carefully navigated, revealing the emergence of the following prominent themes.

A. Isolation and Loneliness

The profound insights shared by children during the workshops brought to the forefront the stark realities of social isolation and its deleterious effects on their mental well-being. The resounding consensus was an acknowledgment of the adverse consequences of prolonged isolation, emphasizing the urgent need for targeted strategies to nurture connections and alleviate the pervasive loneliness experienced by children.

More focused analysis of the data revealed the following impact on children's well-being:

- 1. Emotional Toll:** Children articulated the emotional toll exacted by social isolation, describing feelings of loneliness, frustration, and a sense of disconnect. These sentiments echoed across diverse age groups and cultural backgrounds, underscoring the universal nature of the challenges imposed by enforced isolation.
- 2. Educational Ramifications:** Beyond emotional distress, participants highlighted the impact on educational experiences. School closures and restrictions on social interactions hindered the development of crucial social skills, exacerbating feelings of isolation among children who yearned for peer connections.
- 3. Need for Connection:** The unanimous plea for strategies to foster connections reflects a deep-seated desire among children to rebuild social bonds. It emphasizes the inherent need for social interaction in their lives and signals a collective call to action for interventions that address this fundamental aspect of their well-being.

B. Educational Disruptions

The resonance of concern expressed by children regarding the impact of school closures underscores the critical need for nuanced and targeted support to mitigate disruptions in learning. This section analyzes the multifaceted challenges posed by educational disruptions and proposes strategic interventions to address these concerns.

More focused analysis of the data revealed the following impact on children's learning:

- 1. Learning Loss:** Children articulated a collective apprehension about the substantial learning loss resulting from extended school closures. The disruption in traditional educational settings heightened anxiety about academic progress, with students voicing concerns about the potential long-term ramifications.

2. Social Interaction Deficit: Beyond the academic sphere, participants emphasized the invaluable role of schools as hubs for social interaction. The absence of daily interactions with peers and educators was acutely felt, contributing to a broader narrative of the negative impact on holistic development.

3. Digital Divide: The digital divide emerged as a prominent theme, with children underscoring disparities in access to online learning resources. Those lacking adequate digital infrastructure faced additional hurdles, accentuating existing inequalities in educational opportunities.

C. Digital Well-being

The discourse surrounding digital well-being within workshop discussions provided profound insights into the nuanced relationship children share with online platforms. This section analyzes the dichotomy of digital engagement, unraveling the delicate balance required to protect mental health amidst the pervasive influence of the digital landscape. More specifically:

1. Digital Opportunities: Participants acknowledged the myriad opportunities presented by digital platforms, highlighting avenues for learning, creativity, and social connectivity. The positive aspects of online engagement were evident, with children expressing gratitude for the educational and recreational possibilities afforded by digital spaces.

2. Mental Health Concerns: Simultaneously, children voiced concerns about the potential impact of excessive screen time on their mental health. Workshop discussions underscored the need for a balanced approach, recognizing the fine line between harnessing digital opportunities and safeguarding mental well-being.

3. Social Pressures: The digital realm's influence on self-esteem and social dynamics emerged as a critical theme. Participants shared experiences of navigating social pressures amplified by online interactions, shedding light on the intricate interplay between digital engagement and mental health.

D. Stress and Anxiety

The profound discussions on stress and anxiety during the youth-led congress, emphasized the pervasive impact of the pandemic on children's mental well-being. It underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions that not only alleviate immediate stressors but also fortify resilience in the face of ongoing challenges. More specifically:

1. Pervasive Stress: Participants vividly expressed the omnipresent stress induced by the prolonged pandemic. Children articulated the multifaceted nature of stressors, encompassing concerns about health, disrupted routines, and the broader societal upheaval. The collective sentiment highlighted the pressing need for interventions attuned to the unique stressors experienced by the younger demographic.

2. Anxiety Triggers: Workshop discussions unveiled specific triggers contributing to heightened anxiety levels. Uncertainty about the future, social isolation, and academic disruptions emerged as recurring themes. The qualitative data reflects the nuanced experiences of children grappling with anxiety-inducing factors, shedding light on the intricacies of their emotional landscapes.

3. Resilience Building: A resilient mindset surfaced as a focal point in the discussions. Participants emphasized the importance of equipping children with coping mechanisms to navigate stress and anxiety. The need for tailored interventions that foster resilience and empower children to confront and overcome adversity was a recurring motif in the narratives shared during the congress.

E. Empowering Youth Voices: A Call for Inclusive Decision-Making in Policy Formulation

The youth-led congress underscored a unanimous plea from children – a desire to be heard and actively included in decisions that profoundly impact their lives. The significance of integrating children's perspectives before formulating policies was a resounding theme, emphasizing the transformative benefits of such inclusive approaches.

Inclusive Decision-Making: A Catalyst for Change

1. Acknowledging Children's Experiences: Children highlighted a prevailing sense of exclusion from decision-making processes, particularly regarding matters that directly influence their lives. This acknowledgment resonated across workshops, emphasizing the need for a paradigm shift in the approach to policy formulation.

2. Fostering a Sense of Belonging: The narratives shared by children emphasized the transformative impact of feeling valued and included. Inclusive decision-making processes contribute to a sense of belonging, instilling confidence and a belief that their experiences and insights matter. This, in turn, nurtures a more profound connection between policymakers and the younger demographic.

3. Building Trust and Cooperation: Involving children in decision-making fosters trust and cooperation between generations. When children feel their perspectives are genuinely considered, a collaborative atmosphere emerges. This not only strengthens the democratic fabric of societies but also enhances the quality of decisions by tapping into diverse viewpoints.

Benefits of Child-Inclusive Decision-Making:

1. Tailored Solutions: Children possess unique insights into their daily challenges and aspirations. Integrating their perspectives ensures policies are attuned to the nuanced needs of the younger demographic, leading to more effective and tailored solutions.

2. Strengthening Democratic Values: Inclusion of children in decision-making aligns with democratic principles, emphasizing the participation of all stakeholders. This practice nurtures a sense of civic responsibility from an early age, contributing to the development of informed and engaged citizens.

3. Nurturing Empathy and Understanding: Policymakers gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of children through inclusive decision-making. This empathy-driven approach not only enriches policy discussions but also creates an environment where the unique challenges faced by children are acknowledged and addressed.

Implications for Policy:

In considering the profound insights shared by the young voices in this congress, it is imperative to explore the implications for policymakers. The experiences and recommendations articulated by the participants provide a unique lens through which policy adjustments can be envisioned. This section delves into the key considerations that policymakers should take into account, aiming to bridge the gap between the expressed needs of the youth and actionable policy initiatives.

A. Isolation and Loneliness

The data on isolation and loneliness provides a poignant narrative of the challenges faced by children. It underscores the imperative for policymakers to design comprehensive, youth-centric interventions

that address the emotional and educational dimensions of social isolation, fostering a supportive environment that promotes holistic well-being.

1. Tailored Support Systems: Policymakers must consider the implementation of tailored support systems within educational institutions, recognizing schools as pivotal spaces for fostering social connections. Initiatives that facilitate peer interactions, both within and outside the academic realm, can play a pivotal role in mitigating the effects of isolation.

2. Digital Solutions: Acknowledging the digital landscape as a potential tool for connection, policymakers could explore innovative digital solutions that facilitate safe and monitored online social interactions. Balancing screen time with meaningful engagement can contribute to reducing feelings of isolation.

3. Mental Health Education: Incorporating mental health education into the curriculum gains added significance in light of the revealed data. Educational initiatives that equip children with coping mechanisms and strategies to navigate the complexities of social isolation can empower them to proactively manage their mental well-being.

B. Educational Disruptions

1. Targeted Educational Support: Policymakers are urged to implement targeted educational support programs that address the specific learning gaps created by school closures. Tailored interventions, such as remedial classes, additional learning resources, and mentorship programs, can be instrumental in mitigating the impact on academic progress.

2. Inclusive Digital Strategies: Addressing the digital divide necessitates the development of inclusive digital strategies. Policymakers should invest in initiatives that provide equitable access to digital resources, ensuring that all children, irrespective of socio-economic backgrounds, can actively participate in online learning.

3. Holistic Approach: Recognizing the multifaceted nature of educational disruptions, policymakers should adopt a holistic approach. Beyond academic recovery, initiatives should prioritize rebuilding social connections within educational settings, fostering a supportive environment for emotional and social development.

C. Digital Well-being

The discussions on digital well-being illuminate the complex interplay between the advantages and challenges of digital engagement in children's lives. Policymakers are tasked with crafting initiatives that harness the educational potential of online spaces while prioritizing mental health safeguards. The proposed strategies emphasize the importance of holistic digital literacy, mental health education, and collaborative efforts to create a digital landscape that nurtures the well-being of the younger generation.

1. Digital Literacy Programs: Policymakers are urged to implement comprehensive digital literacy programs that empower children to navigate online spaces responsibly. Educational initiatives should focus on fostering a critical understanding of digital content, enabling children to make informed choices that contribute to their overall well-being.

2. Mental Health Education: Integrating mental health education into school curricula can play a pivotal role in equipping children with the tools to manage the psychological impact of digital engagement. Promoting awareness about healthy online behaviors and coping mechanisms should be central to these educational efforts.

3. Collaborative Initiatives: Policymakers, educators, and digital platform developers should collaborate to create an environment conducive to positive digital experiences. Transparent guidelines, age-appropriate content filters, and mechanisms to address cyberbullying can collectively contribute to a safer and healthier online ecosystem.

D. Stress and Anxiety

The pervasive stress and anxiety discussed during the congress illuminate the urgent need for targeted interventions in children's mental health. Policymakers play a crucial role in shaping initiatives that address specific stressors, fortify resilience, and create a supportive environment conducive to the emotional well-being of the younger generation. The proposed strategies emphasize the importance of accessible mental health services, school-based programs, and community engagement in fostering a resilient response to the enduring challenges posed by the pandemic.

1. Mental Health Support Services: Policymakers are urged to allocate resources to bolster mental health support services tailored to children's needs. Accessible counseling, helplines, and community-based initiatives can serve as vital avenues for addressing stress and anxiety.

2. School-Based Mental Health Programs: Integrating mental health programs into school curricula is pivotal for early identification and intervention. Educational institutions should be equipped to provide resources and support structures that promote emotional well-being, creating a conducive environment for stress management.

3. Community Engagement: Policymakers should actively engage with communities to understand localized stressors and tailor interventions accordingly. Community-based mental health initiatives, collaborative partnerships with mental health professionals, and awareness campaigns can contribute to destigmatizing mental health discussions and fostering a supportive ecosystem.

E. Empowering Youth Voices: A Call for Inclusive Decision-Making in Policy Formulation

The resounding call for inclusive decision-making in the youth-led congress emphasizes the transformative impact of involving children in policy formulation. Policymakers are urged to recognize the benefits of integrating children's perspectives, fostering a sense of belonging, and nurturing collaboration between generations. The proposed strategies advocate for the establishment of youth advisory panels, the incorporation of child impact assessments, and the promotion of child-responsive governance to create a more inclusive and empathetic approach to policymaking.

1. Establishing Youth Advisory Panels: Policymakers are encouraged to establish youth advisory panels that actively engage children in decision-making processes. These panels can serve as platforms for dialogue, ensuring diverse perspectives are considered in policy formulation.

2. Incorporating Child Impact Assessments: Policy makers should integrate child impact assessments into policymaking frameworks to systematically evaluate the potential effects on children. This proactive approach ensures policies prioritize the well-being and interests of the younger demographic.

3. Promoting Child-Responsive Governance: Policymakers should commit to child-responsive governance, fostering an environment where children's voices are not only heard but also actively contribute to shaping policies that directly influence their lives.

Lessons Learned and Future Imperatives: Insights from the Youth-Led Congress on Children's Well-being

The youth-led congress served as an invaluable platform, not only amplifying the voices of the younger generation but also illuminating crucial lessons that should guide future endeavors in safeguarding children's well-being. The following insights emerged as pivotal lessons learned, providing a roadmap for future initiatives.

1. Early Recognition of Children's Resilience: The congress underscored the remarkable resilience exhibited by children in the face of unprecedented challenges. Acknowledging and celebrating this resilience should be a foundational element in shaping future policies. Recognizing the inherent strength of children contributes to the creation of support systems that build upon, rather than undermine, their innate capacities to navigate difficulties.

2. Holistic Approach to Education: The disruptions caused by the pandemic highlighted the fragility of traditional education systems. Future initiatives should adopt a holistic approach to education that goes beyond academic learning. Fostering social and emotional well-being, providing avenues for creative expression, and recognizing diverse learning styles are imperative for crafting resilient education systems.

3. Digital Well-being as a Priority: The dual nature of digital engagement was emphasized during the congress, prompting a re-evaluation of the role of technology in children's lives. Future initiatives must prioritize digital well-being, striking a balance between online and offline activities. This entails equipping children with the skills to navigate the digital landscape safely while ensuring that technology enhances, rather than hinders, their overall well-being.

4. Inclusive Decision-Making for Lasting Impact: The resounding call from children to be actively included in decision-making processes echoes as a crucial lesson for the future. Policymakers are urged to prioritize inclusive approaches that consider the diverse perspectives of children. Establishing mechanisms such as youth advisory panels and integrating child impact assessments ensures policies resonate with the lived experiences of the younger demographic.

5. Strengthening Support Systems: The congress shed light on the pivotal role of support systems in mitigating the impact of external stressors on children's mental health. Future initiatives should prioritize the creation of robust support networks, both within and outside formal educational settings. Nurturing environments that facilitate open communication, active listening, and empathy will contribute to the overall well-being of children.

6. Sustainable Mental Health Interventions: Lessons from the congress emphasized the urgent need for sustainable mental health interventions tailored to the unique needs of children. Future initiatives should prioritize accessible and ongoing mental health support, recognizing that the repercussions of the pandemic may manifest in the long term.

The experience gleaned from the youth-led congress provide invaluable insights for shaping the future landscape of children's well-being. These lessons underscore the need for a holistic and resilient approach to education, prioritizing digital well-being, embracing inclusive decision-making, strengthening support systems, and ensuring sustainable mental health interventions. By integrating these lessons into future initiatives, policymakers, educators, and stakeholders can contribute to a more compassionate, resilient, and child-centric world.

Conclusion:

Summing up the comprehensive insights gleaned from the youth-led congress, this report encapsulates the collective voice of the future generation. Their narratives, concerns, and solutions echo the universal aspiration for a world that nurtures resilience, values mental well-being, and places children at the forefront of policy considerations. As we reflect on the profound impact of their stories, the call to action for policymakers becomes clear—to craft policies that prioritize children's mental health, amplify their voices, and build a future where every child not only survives but thrives. It is a testament to the resilience of youth and the potential for positive change when their perspectives are valued and integrated into the fabric of societal decision-making. The journey towards a brighter, more compassionate future starts with listening, understanding, and acting on the collective wisdom of our youth.

