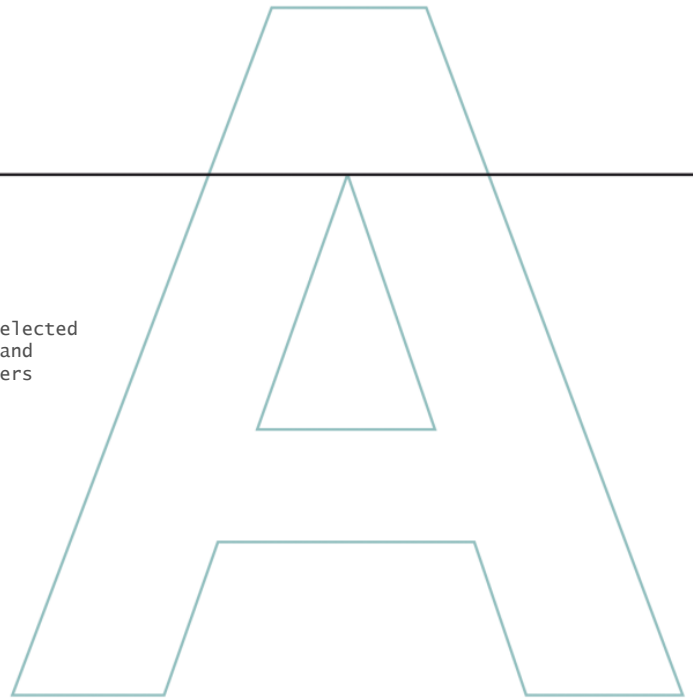




Advice

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COMMISSION To all Flemish elected representatives and competent ministers



A child's perspective on the COVID-19 crisis – #youthaboutcorona

The coronavirus crisis affects all children and young people and challenges more particularly their rights. Yet, the perspective of children and young people is not sufficiently addressed. Not only are children and young people not often heard, but there is also a lack of attention to the impact of the crisis on children's rights, such as right to receive education, to play, to care and asylum, to assistance and protection against violence.

That is why the Children's Rights Commission, the Children's Rights Knowledge Centre, and the Flemish Child Rights Coalition decided to organize a major survey among children and young people in Flanders with children's rights as a starting point. The voice of children and youngsters must be heard louder while developing corona related measures and an exit strategy, and we need to learn lessons for the future. This is possible by letting children and young people speak for themselves.

We asked 8-to-17-year olds about their experiences and needs during the first wave of the pandemic. The online survey ran from Monday 11 May to Sunday 17 May 2020. Children and young people made themselves heard en masse and completed the questionnaire with over 44,000 responses.

The results show how they experience the crisis and the measures against the coronavirus, and what their needs are. These results should support the policy response to the crisis.

For most children, the measures taken to prevent the spread of the coronavirus are clear, but that is much less the case for young people. So far, the guidelines have mainly been tailored to the needs of adults. We ask that

the measures themselves be based much more on **the needs and daily experiences of children and young people**.

More account should be taken of children growing up in a vulnerable situation. Furthermore, we request **clear and direct information** for children and young people. The survey shows that one in three children are afraid of becoming ill themselves and two in three children are afraid of their family and friends becoming sick. Those figures show once again the importance of correct information to reduce anxiety and panic.

The coronavirus guidelines **affect the feelings and well-being of children and young people**. This is also confirmed by our survey. Boredom and loneliness are much stronger than before the crisis. Children and young people miss a lot during this period: most of all their friends, family, and hobbies. That is why we ask that the school, youth work, youth care and the Student Guidance Centre (*Centrum voor Leerlingenbegeleiding*) **continue to connect with children and young people**. They need perspective for the coming summer. We call for more attention to their needs. Especially when they grow up in a difficult situation with little space and with stress and violence, the impact of the guidelines is immense.

The results of the survey confirm the signals from care providers that there is **more domestic violence** due to the lockdown. Half of the children and young people say that there are now more arguments at home. One out of ten children and young people sometimes experience physical or verbal violence. The majority of those children and young people declare that violence has been more common since the coronavirus crisis. Since the measures, there are more risk factors for violence in families such as stress, anxiety, financial insecurity, and constantly living in a confined space. At the same time, protective factors such as social contact, social control, youth care to the family, places offering support - such as school - disappeared. We request for **the lockdown to go hand in hand with protecting children and young people against any form of violence**. There is a need for raising awareness on abuse and violence, and for comprehensive information on emergency helplines. For families in difficulties, youth care must remain available and accessible, especially in a period of lockdown. What could be of help and create opportunities offering support, are the opening of schools and playgrounds, where children and young people can escape the difficult home situation. Besides, intensive attention should be paid by health care organizations such as Centres for General Welfare Work (in Dutch: *Centrum voor Algemeen Welzijnswerk* or CAW), Public Centre for Social Welfare (in Dutch: *Openbaar Centrum voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn* or OCMW) and doctors, teachers, youth welfare work, and out-of-school childcare, where the reflex should be to primarily think of the children. No child should be a victim of violence, even after the coronavirus crisis.

The coronavirus pandemic also clearly has an impact on bullying. Most children and young people who are sometimes bullied are less bullied now. This confirms once again the prominent role that schools, youth movements, youth work, recreation organizations can play in the fight against bullying. We ask the government **to support these organizations as much as possible to pursue an anti-bullying policy and to set up a Knowledge Centre on Bullying**.

The survey also shows that school has a very important role in the lives of children and young people:

- 70% of children and 45% of young people miss school. 85% of the children and 72% of the youngsters say they prefer to go back to school.

- Nearly one out of two say they have more stress because of school. A phenomenon that increases with each grade.
- One out of four declare that it is too hectic at home to do schoolwork.
- Almost half of the children do not always understand their homework and 25% of the young people have difficulties to follow with schoolwork.
- Most children say they have necessary material to do schoolwork.

School plays an enormous role in the lives of children and young people. The school is not only a place where children learn, but also where they have social contacts and play or relax and can find support. It is very positive that there was perspective last week for pre-school and primary school children to possibly go back to school before the summer holidays. We **call on the National Security Council to examine and follow the advice of the Minister of Education and the educational networks where possible. And to further investigate whether it is possible to have all secondary students return to school in June.** We further ask that, with a view to any subsequent new coronavirus outbreaks or health crises, distance learning be evaluated and, where necessary and possible, be improved, and that a shared vision be developed for the future. **During the restart, the school and the Student Guidance Centre should give more attention and dedicate more time to children and young people with learning disadvantages due to the crisis.** Some children feel that they have been deprived of a 'special period', such as finishing sixth grade or secondary education. Please pay attention to those transition moments.

The survey also provides a lot of information about games and recreation. Half of the children play with siblings, **but one out of five have to play alone. Most young people meet their friends online.** In addition, half of the young people see their friends in real life, respecting social distancing. Most children and young people have a place to rest where they can quietly withdraw. Yet, 16% of children and 17% of young people say they do not have such a place. Among young people, one in ten is not able to relax well at home. **There are many children and young people who no longer or very sporadically leave their homes.** Because they do not feel like it, it is not allowed, out of fear for the coronavirus, or because they are alone, or their parents or supervisors have no time.

The right to social contact with their peers and the right to play and relax is critical for young children, teenagers, and young people. But the coronavirus measures have severely restricted those rights. The figures show that some children and young people spent a lot of time indoors. And that the socially vulnerable children are the ones who least go outside to relax. Luckily, the perspective for the summer period is gradually growing. The playgrounds will re-open for children up to the age of 12 and the summer camps can take place, in an adapted formula. We ask the different authorities **to communicate clearly about what is and is not allowed.** Ideally with clear pictograms in places where children and young people come together to play, as in the Netherlands. **Unlock more public spaces** to allow for play and encounters from a distance. We ask the **different authorities to be more ambitious and to do more than just make spaces and playgrounds accessible again. Organize outreaching play and leisure activities for those children and youth in their district.** For example, clear the streets in their neighbourhood, or make the school playgrounds accessible, set up temporary playgrounds for the youngest, and ensure that young people can do plenty of leisure activities. Too many vulnerable children have been inside for too long already.

Finally, the survey also assessed **whether children and young people have a say in how to deal with the coronavirus guidelines at home, or where they**

live. We found that 18% of the children have no say in how the rules about the coronavirus are being applied. For young people this amounts to 23%. So almost one out of four. For young people living in group, this is even 55%: more than half say that they are not allowed to take part in this discussion. Given the major impact of the crisis, it is important **to hear those children and young people clearly about what is going wrong and what can or should be done differently.**

We should literally involve them in making the agreements at home, in the facility, and at school.

Even as a **society**, we have not given their voice enough space in this crisis. We call for inclusion of the living environment and the needs of children and young people in the coronavirus measures and in the exit strategy.

1. Children, largely absent when dealing with coronavirus crisis

The exceptional and stringent coronavirus measures imposed by the government pose major challenges in the field of children's rights. The measures are necessary for public health. They must safeguard the right to health and life. But the side effects can be disturbing for children and young people. Children do not or do not attend school full-time, which jeopardizes their right to education. The right to play and recreation is under severe pressure. Many children need help, live in poverty, grow up in a difficult situation, in a vulnerable home or are even homeless.

From the start of the coronavirus crisis, the Children's Commissioner has drawn attention to children's rights that are under pressure. Also, civil society organizations regularly sounded the alarm. Early April, we bundled the signals and recommendations on our site and informed the members of the Flemish Parliament about them. We asked for an active policy to keep in touch with those children and young people and to safeguard their rights.

Early May, we provided the members of the Flemish Parliament and the government with an advisory report, where we recommended to put the child's perspective first.¹

Since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, we have received signals from children and young people themselves, from troubled parents, grandparents, educators, youth care workers, youth workers, youth welfare workers, therapists, teachers, volunteers and guardians. They feel too little account is taken of children and young people.

Too often the voice of children and young people is missing. Decisions are made over their heads. Their perspective must be given more attention in the coronavirus measures and the exit strategy. This is mainly possible by letting children and young people speak for themselves.

¹ Only available in Dutch:

<https://www.kinderrechtencommissariaat.be/advies/meer-aandacht-voor-kind-perspectief-coronamaatregelen>

2. Powerful joint initiative to make the voice of children and young people heard

That is why the Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner, the Children's Rights Knowledge Centre and the Flemish Child Rights Coalition joined forces and organized a large-scale survey in which the experiences and needs of children and young people during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic were examined. The results reveal how children and young people are coping with the crisis and the measures taken, and what they need.

In this way, we encourage policymakers to put the children's rights perspective centre stage. Defining the coronavirus measures for public health is a difficult task. We hope that the results of the survey contribute to measures and an exit strategy tailored to adults, children, and young people all together. And that they teach us how we can better manage similar crises in the future.

Participation of children and young people by means of a survey

Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have the right to express their views on any matter that concerns them. But in the public debate about COVID-19, we barely heard the voice of children and young people. The best way to express their perspective is to let them have their say.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child also emphasizes the importance of children's participation and asks the states:

'to provide opportunities for children's views to be heard and taken into account in decisions-making processes on the pandemic. Children should understand what is happening and feel that they are taking part in the decisions that are being made in response to the pandemic'.²

Children's rights as a starting point

As a basis for the survey, we took the rights of the child, as set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and signals received by the Flemish Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner, the Children's Rights Knowledge Centre and the Flemish Child Rights Coalition via the Hotline and civil society.

The starting point for the survey is that children are entitled to special care and protection. Children who live in difficult circumstances deserve extra attention.

While international law provides for the possibility of restricting children's and human rights in emergency situations, this needs to be considered very

² On 8 April 2020, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child warned of the serious physical, emotional and psychological impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children and called on states to protect children's rights.

https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/1_Global/INT_CRC_STA_9095_E.pdf

carefully and can only be justified when strictly necessary and proportionate to the emergency situation. It is therefore important to take all appropriate measures in the coronavirus crisis to ensure that the rights of all children are respected, protected and fulfilled.

Online survey in which every child, every young person counts

With this study, we wanted to hear the voice of children and young people. With two questionnaires, one for children aged 8 to 12 and one for young people aged 12 to 17, we invited children and young people to speak up and explained them that we would certainly send the results to them, but also to the policymakers.

Children and young people were allowed to complete the questionnaire on their own. No permission was required from parents or other caregivers. We informed the children and young people in advance. We processed all results anonymously and let the children know where to turn to if they have questions afterwards. Children and young people could decide to stop the questionnaire at any time. They could choose to skip questions they preferred not to answer. It is not easy for every child or young person to understand or answer such a questionnaire. Adults could certainly help, without influencing their response.

Every child, every young person counts. Children under the age of 8 and young people over the age of 17 also completed the survey. We included their answers. We consciously sent the questionnaire as much as possible to different children and young people. For example: children and young people who stay in a facility or another family, such as a foster family, children and young people who go to the OKAN class (reception class for foreign-language newcomers), children and young people who follow special education. We also tried to make the questionnaire as inclusive as possible.

Historically high response rate – a nerve was struck

The response to our survey exceeded all our expectations. More than 44,000 children and young people completed the questionnaire, about 17,000 children and 27,000 young people.

In the media and on social media, there was a lot of attention for our initiative and we could count on massive cooperation from many organizations from the start. Civil society organizations, government agencies such as Fedasil (Federal Agency for the reception of asylum seekers) or the Agency Growing Up (Opgroeien), the educational networks, guardians, youth workers, aid workers and media partners helped us publicize and spread the survey as widely as possible. Much effort has been made to reach the most vulnerable groups, which are traditionally more difficult to reach for this type of research.

We present and describe the results as the children and young people gave them to us. It is not us, who own the thousands of answers, but the more than 44,000 children and young people who completed the questionnaire.

3. The results: conclusions and recommendations

Do children and young people understand the coronavirus guidelines?

Nine out of ten children say they usually understand the guidelines well. Among young people, this is less than six out of ten. Young people who live alone find the rules even less clear (47%), as do young people who say that it has been financially difficult (46%) since the coronavirus.

Among the children, 14% received an angry reaction for violating the coronavirus guidelines. This happened several times for 5% of the children. Among the young people, 18% got an angry reaction and for 9% of the young people, this happened several times.

The youngest children, children who do not live with their parents and children who say that it is financially more difficult, are more often confronted with an angry reaction when they do not follow the coronavirus guidelines.

Among young people, boys, older young people, young people who live in a group (boarding school, institution, youth care facility, asylum centre, hospital), in a financially difficult situation, and those without an own place to rest, are more likely to get angry reactions when they do not follow the measures.

'I sometimes find it difficult to understand the measures. I think they should also say it in a way that kids like me get it.' (girl, 8 years old).

'That the news and the press releases provided us with a very unclear picture of corona.' (girl, 14 years old).

'Children need structure, but also clarity. If we're told that something is allowed again and then it is abolished, that's very difficult to understand.' (girl, 12 years old).

Take the living environment of children as a starting point for developing measures

From the start of the crisis, the government invested heavily in informing the population. Many organizations, such as WAT WAT (youth information platform), Ketnet (children's and youth channel on TV) and Awel (telephone and online helpline for children and young people), have translated the guidelines in Flanders as well as possible for children and young people. Youth and youth welfare workers were important role models.

However, when activities or movements were allowed, those were mainly tailored to the needs of adults. Adults were allowed to exercise together with one, later with two other adults. The official communication of the Public Health Service did not explicitly speak about children or young people. When asked whether children were allowed to play and whether we could inform them about this, the government informed us that playing was not allowed in public spaces. The government's communication on info-coronavirus.be paid no attention to it, which meant that parents usually had to rely on their own

interpretation. For example, can a young person, like an adult, play sports with another person? Can a young person go to the shop? What are essential journeys for children and young people? Is skating and roller skating comparable to cycling and walking? In our opinion, this noise in the communication means that, especially for young people, it was and is not always clear what is and is not allowed.

The guidelines did not take sufficient account of children and young people and especially children and young people in a vulnerable situation who do not have their place to rest or relax. The guidelines were and are much stricter for these children and young people. They are often literally locked up.

Focus on child-oriented and direct information and use channels that children can access if they have further questions

The exit strategy and any new measures should pay more attention to direct information for children and young people, tailored to their needs. Making information 'child-oriented' means adapting the information to the age and maturity, language, gender and culture of the child or young person.³ It means that you spread information in different forms, with verbal, visual and written support. But also that you choose channels (such as YouTube or TikTok) and sources (for example 'influencers') that children and young people often consult. And not to forget, that you involve children and young people while developing and evaluating the communication material.

There is a lot of information on the coronavirus available on the youth information platform 'WAT WAT', through the helpline 'Awel' for children and young people and the Flemish information programme for children 'Karrewiet'. However, it is not yet clear for many children and especially young people what is or is not allowed. In other countries, the government provides direct information to children and young people. In the Netherlands and Norway, for example, the Prime Minister answered questions directly from children and young people. In Flanders, too, politicians can communicate more directly with children and young people, and explicitly name this target group in the messages of the Security Council, with more emphasis on what is allowed and what is not allowed. Or invite the Prime Minister Wilmès to WAT WAT or Karrewiet.

The further disclosure of organisations where children and young people can ask questions about the coronavirus, such as Awel and WAT WAT, is also a crucial link to properly inform children and young people.

One out of three is afraid to become ill and two out of three are afraid that a family member will become ill

One out of three children and young people is afraid of becoming ill themselves due to the coronavirus. Children who do not live with their parents are usually more afraid (52%), as are children who hardly ever go outside (52%). Children who mention financial difficulties since the coronavirus, are also more afraid (49%) that they would get sick themselves.

³ Definition: Council of Europe Committee of Ministers Guidelines on child-friendly justice, adopted on 17 November 2010, guideline 2.

42% of young people who live alone are afraid of becoming ill. This is also the case for young people who say that they are having a harder time financially.

One out of three children and young people knows someone who has or had COVID-19. And two out of three children and young people are afraid that family or friends will get COVID-19.

'I have a lot of fear because I don't think you can stop corona and this heavy virus could destroy the whole world.' (girl, 12 years old).

Focus on providing correct information about COVID-19 to parents, children and young people

According to scientists, children and young people are at little risk of developing serious symptoms due to a COVID-19 infection. However, one child out of three is afraid of becoming ill. Panic and anxiety in adults with whom children and young people live or are in contact with at school, but also fake news can contribute to that anxiety.

The coronavirus? Being bored and most of all missing your friends

Boredom everywhere

When asked which emotions children and young people experience the most since the coronavirus crisis, they report: **boredom** (77% of children and 62% of young people), **loneliness** (47% of children and 52% of young people), **sadness and anger** (about 34% of children and 30% of young people), **fatigue** (about 35% of children and 45% of young people) and **stress** (30% of children and 43% of young people).

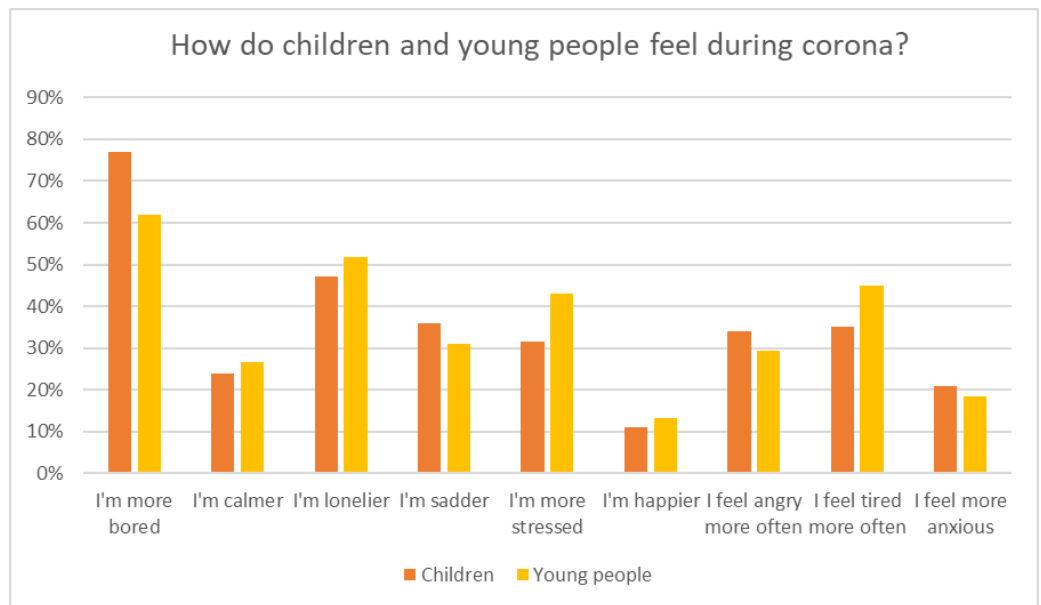
Many of these emotions weigh even more heavily on children and young people who say they have been struggling financially since the coronavirus and children who do not live with their parents.

'I'm really bored, I'm all day sitting behind my computer and I don't want to, but I don't have anything else to do.' (girl, 10 years old)

'I miss my friends and I feel alone.' (girl, 12 years old)

'I feel a bit depressed by the corona crisis. I hope the crisis will be over soon and that we can meet again.' (boy, 10 years old)

'I'm tired and exhausted from doing nothing.' (girl, 16 years old)



Children and young people miss their friends the most

Children and young people mainly miss **friends** (90% of children and 86% of young people) and **family** (74% of children and 48% of young people), **leisure time** (76% of children and 72% of young people) and **going outside** (34% of children and 59% of young people). 71% of children and 45% of young people also miss **school**.

'I hate corona and desperately want to hang out with my friends.' (boy, 12 years old)

'I miss my friends very much, even though I see them on WhatsApp almost every day. Because of corona I now have my own mobile phone to be able to call and send messages to my friends a lot.' (girl 10 years)

'I want to see my family again and to hug and kiss them as soon as possible. I really miss that!' (girl, 12 years old)

About nine in ten children and young people have someone to talk to when it is necessary

However, 13% of children and young people cannot turn to somebody to talk about their feelings. Children who do not live at home, young people who live in another family (foster home, family, with grandparents) or alone, children and young people who state that since the coronavirus it is financially more difficult or have no place to rest of their own, report more often that they cannot talk to anyone.

Some children and adolescents feel calmer or happier now

About one out of four children and young people feel calmer than before the coronavirus. More than one in ten children (11%) and young people (13%) feel happier.

'I am always busy and naughty at school and now I am calm and happy.' (boy, under 8 years old).

Do not let go of the connection with children and young people during the coronavirus crisis

The school, youth work, the Student Guidance Centre (*CLB*), and youth aid must keep a sufficient and regular connection with children and young people, also to keep an eye on their mental well-being. The importance of channels such as Awel and WAT WAT, the chat of the Student Guidance Centre, is enormous.

Parents, brothers and sisters, family and friends are essential to discuss personal feelings. Parents and those responsible for education must be provided with the right tools and support to engage in conversations with children and young people about the coronavirus and the impact on their living environment. "How do you start a conversation with your child who is afraid of corona?" Involvement of partners with expertise in parenting support, such as EXPOO (Flemish Government's expert centre for parenting and family support), is more than needed.

Many schools, teachers, staff of Student Guidance Centres and pedagogical counselling services and youth workers are now bringing children online together or are visiting vulnerable children and young people. This means already a lot for those children and young people. Seeing each other, even on a laptop screen, is a powerful stress and anxiety reliever.

When preparing the measures, take into account the needs and requirements of children and young people and offer perspectives for the future

The coronavirus crisis weighs heavily on children and young people and makes their lives look completely different. The guidelines weigh heavily on children and young people in a vulnerable situation, in a difficult home situation, with little space at home. Before the summer holidays, there must be a perspective for children and young people. Last week, the Federal Consultative Committee, in consultation with experts, decided that summer camps and playgrounds can continue this summer. However, this should be done under safety conditions, in groups of a maximum of 50 children or young people. The community playgrounds are also accessible again for children up to the age of 12. This is very positive news and gives children and young people the prospect of a beautiful summer.

But playground activities and summer camps must also be financially feasible and accessible to everyone. Socially vulnerable children and young people also deserve a perspective on fun activities and social contact with peers. A friend in their bubble or a chat buddy can make a world of difference to children and young people who feel alone.

More arguments but also more attention

One out of two children and young people say that they have more arguments at home now

Half of the children and young people now say there are more arguments than before the coronavirus crisis. 15% of young people say they have a lot more arguments. Of the young people who live in a group, 27% now say they have a lot more arguments. The young people who say that it has been financially more difficult since the coronavirus also declare more than average that they have "much more arguments" (29%). Children who do not live with their parents also indicate more than average that there are a lot more arguments

than before the coronavirus (24% versus 12%). This also applies to children saying they have financial problems (20%).

'I hate corona. I'm having a hard time with everything. I can't sleep anymore, I'm arguing with my family, I'm having a hard time with schoolwork. It's all just too intense.' (girl, 16 years old)

Extra hugs and compliments since the coronavirus

The coronavirus brings children, young people and their parents, but also children, young people and their care providers closer together. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, more than half of the children more often receive hugs, attention and compliments. This is more than one out of four among young people.

Extra attention, hugs and compliments are there especially for younger children, for children who say that it is financially more difficult since the coronavirus and for children who never or hardly go outside. Among the young people are those who live in a group or with another family. The young people who follow special education also say that they receive more attention, hugs, and compliments.

Attention to the needs of children and young people living in a facility or a group

The percentages show that the coronavirus measures for youth care services put pressure on the interpersonal relationships in the living groups. Young people living in groups have had more arguments with the people they live with since the crisis. They get angry reactions more often than other young people when they do not follow the coronavirus rules.

The Hotline of the Flemish Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner already received many signals from the start of the lockdown. The coronavirus measures weigh heavily on young people in a facility. The relationships between young people, youth care providers and parents are sharpened. Parents, social workers and young people did not and do not understand. People living in a residential care centre were allowed to receive visitors, until recently the young people in a facility were not. Young people who first stayed at home and returned to their facility after a while had to remain in quarantine for seven days before they could join their group again. The parents did not understand: "Why should my child be quarantined? Shouldn't staff be quarantined as well? They go home every day, right?"

On the other hand, some young people say that the coronavirus measures just resulted in more hugs, attention, and compliments. This was more the case for young people staying in a group. Furthermore, most young people living in a group (83.1%) have somebody to talk to.

Violence increases during the coronavirus crisis but bullying decreases

Most children and young people who experience violence now say they experience more violence than before the coronavirus.

About one out of ten children and young people experience physical or verbal violence. 19% of the children who experience violence now experience it much more and 47% a little more. Of the young people who are victims of violence,

more than half say that it is now much more (17%) or a little more (45%) than usual.

Young children, children without their own place to rest, children who hardly ever go outside or children who experience a financially more difficult situation since the coronavirus, experience proportionately more violence. Young people are more likely to experience violence if they live in a group (39%), another family (22%) or alone (30%), find it financially more difficult since the coronavirus (26%) or do not have their own place to rest (20%).

'The longer corona lasts, the naughtier my 6 years old little brother becomes. He does not do his homework and is very annoying. Sometimes my dad reacts heavy-handed and we have to see it happen. My parents are obviously under a lot more stress than usual.' (girl, 10 years old)

'I sometimes feel very sad because I feel locked up. Very often I argue with my parents and my brother and sister. I also feel that I always get blamed by my parents when I argue with my brother and sister. Sometimes I get beaten by my parents too.' (girl, 12 years old)

Most children and young people who report that they are sometimes bullied say that they are bullied less now

The coronavirus shows a positive trend reversal in the figures on bullying. 68% of children and 66% of young people who are sometimes bullied are less bullied now. 6% of children and young people who are sometimes bullied say that they have been bullied a lot more since the coronavirus. About one out of ten children and young people who are sometimes bullied say that it happens a little more now.

Lockdown measures should go much more hand in hand with protecting children and young people from violence

The percentages confirm aid workers' signals about the increase in domestic violence since the coronavirus crisis. In the very short term, there are more risk factors for violence in families. Stress, anxiety, financial insecurity, continuously living together, substandard housing: these are all factors that can play a role in escalating family situations where the situation was already turbulent. At the same time, protective factors have disappeared or diminished, such as social contacts, social control, face-to-face counselling for the family, places to escape for a while, like a school. Research confirms that stress situations are an important trigger for violence. It should therefore not come as a surprise that children and young people in vulnerable situations are now more exposed to violence. Services in the field such as Awel and 1712, the hotline for domestic violence, also receive more reports of violence.

In any case, awareness of abuse and violence is needed, as well as information on emergency helplines such as 1712, nupraatikerover.be, Awel and Tele-Welcome, via accessible information platforms such as radio, children's and youth TV and social media to reach as many people as possible from all sections of the population. It is essential that these services continue to operate in a very accessible manner, with the necessary capacity to answer all calls.

For families in difficult circumstances, youth care, home counselling to residential youth care services, should be and remain available and accessible, especially during a period of lockdown. Crisis youth care must also remain available and offer a solution if things no longer work out at home. In order to

be able to pick up signals, active connections must be made with vulnerable families, for example by telephone, via Skype, WhatsApp, Messenger, Instagram and via messages to those families that are experiencing difficulties.

The right of children to protection against violence is strongly limited by the lockdown, and because children go outside much less. Opening schools and playgrounds where children and young people can escape from a difficult home situation can help and provide opportunities to find support.

Focus on the child reflex throughout the entire care provision and on a chain approach in the event of domestic violence

We request an accelerated introduction of the ‘child reflex’ or even ‘violence reflex’ in organizations such as Centres for General Welfare Work (In Dutch: *Centra voor Algemeen Welzijnswerk* or CAWs), Public Centre for Social Welfare (in Dutch: *Openbaar Centrum voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn* or OCMW), doctors, teachers, youth welfare and out-of-school childcare. Organizations with a low-threshold approach should be given tools to talk about violence in families. The Confidential Centre on Child Abuse and Neglect (In Dutch: *Vertrouwenscentrum Kindermishandeling*) has the necessary expertise to develop this further.

Situations of domestic violence and child abuse do not only end up in the social care system. Police services also actively intervene in family situations. We draw attention to a consistent approach to violent situations in which justice, police and assistance are coordinated. This implies strengthening the current chain approach to domestic violence. To be able to support, monitor, evaluate and adjust these processes in practice, we request a relaunch of the Flemish Child Abuse Forum and the further refinement of the Child Abuse Protocol.

Support schools, youth movements and leisure organizations as much as possible to pursue an effective and high-quality anti-bullying policy

Schools, youth movements and leisure organizations can play a major role in protecting children from bullying. Most children and young people who are being bullied say that it is less common now during the crisis than it used to be. The fact that there is less bullying has to do with closed schools, but that there are fewer social contacts in the youth movement and hobbies also plays a role.

We ask to further develop useful tools that support policy and practice to develop a policy against bullying. The Flemish Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner has been asking for years to set up a Knowledge Centre on Bullying. By doing this, we do not mean a heavy organization, but a centre or network that can build up and bring together scientific knowledge and expertise about bullying. The Flemish Network ‘Kies Kleur Tegen Pesten’, in which Awel, Gezinsbond and several organisations from youth work and education are active, is already bundling a great deal of expertise and developing training courses. A Knowledge Centre can play an important role in this and strengthen their work.

Children and young people miss school very much

71% of children and 45% of young people miss school

Children miss school very much, (71%) and 85% of the children even say they are eager to go back to school. Among young people, 45% say they miss school, but 72% would also rather just go back to school.

One out of two young people are now more stressed for their schoolwork and this increases with age

More than four in ten children (42%) and more than half of the young people (55%) now say they are more stressed because of their schoolwork. That increases with every grade. For young people in higher education, this increases to more than eight in ten. Stress due to schoolwork is also higher among children and young people experiencing financially difficult times since the coronavirus. 58% of primary school children and 71% of young people in secondary education from those families say that they now have more stress from schoolwork.

‘A lot of stress for schoolwork at home. Nothing to look forward to (no youth movement, sports, school and friends.)’ (boy, age 14)

‘Because I cannot go to school, I have a lot of stress for my homework. I always argue with my mom about that. If I could go to school, our relationship would be good again.’ (boy, 10 years old)

For one in four, it is too busy at home to do schoolwork

One out of four children and young people find it too busy at home to work well for school. This increases to one out of three in the youngest years of primary education, in BSO and BUSO, and increases to 42% among young people in higher education. Among children and young people who say that it is currently more difficult to cope financially, this increases to four out of ten children and almost half of the young people.

Almost half of the children do not always understand their homework and one out of four young people cannot always follow

13% of the children and 28% of the young people do not receive help with schoolwork.

42% of the children do not always understand homework and 27% of the young people cannot always follow with schoolwork. That proportion is higher in the non-general secondary education studies and increases to 38% in the secondary arts education. 58% of students in higher education say they are unable to attend school. Nearly half of the young people who say that it is financially more difficult since the coronavirus crisis say they are unable to follow schoolwork properly.

Most children have suitable equipment

97% of the children and 91% of the young people say they have all the necessary material to work well for school. This is less the case among young people in the secondary arts education (80%) and the professional or technical secondary education (84%). It is also less (78%) among young people who say it is financially more difficult since the coronavirus crisis.

Investigate whether schools can restart for all children and young people

The school plays a particularly important role in the lives of children and young people. It is not only the place where children learn. They also have social contacts, play, relax and find support there. The fact that most children and young people cannot go to school and have to take classes digitally also has an effect on their stress level and on being able to follow lessons.

It is positive that the Minister of Education, together with the educational networks and unions, decided last week to allow pre-schoolers and primary school children to go back to school before the summer holidays. This way, those kids get something to look forward to. Even a limited return makes a big difference. Teenagers also get more perspective. Pupils of the second and fourth year of secondary education can resume their lessons now. Pupils of the first, third and fifth year of secondary education should be invited to the school for at least one day and more to finish the school year. We call on the National Security Council to investigate and follow this advice.

Evaluate digital teaching and school safety regulations for the future

With a view to possible new COVID-19 outbreaks or other health crises, schools would do well to seriously evaluate and improve their distance learning, if necessary. The feedback from parents and students is crucial. There are currently major differences between and within the schools: schools open in different ways and the way of teaching also differs. Children and young people notice differences between schools and do not always find this fair. We realize that the school context is often quite different, but we still request to develop a common vision and agree on a common approach for the future.

Pay special attention to children and young people in a vulnerable situation during the crisis and the restart

We request priority and maximum attention for children and young people with specific learning needs, who are in a difficult home situation and for students who are unable to find their niche so that they do not fall behind even more.

For children and young people in a difficult home situation, in addition to material support, intensive tailor-made guidance is required. If they are living in a home that is too small and with a lot of people, taking lessons or doing homework is not easy. Provide spaces where children and young people can do schoolwork when it is too busy to work at home.

Take into account the concerns of children and young people about exams

About half of the children and young people are more stressed about schoolwork due to the coronavirus crisis. The older the young people are, the more excessive stress they report. Their answers to open questions show a strong concern among young people about possible exams and a demand for a fair solution for all students:

‘No exams for anyone. This creates a lot of stress for young people. It’s not an easy time to study well ...’ (girl, 16 years old)

‘Either exam in every school, or none at all.’ (girl, 16 years old)

Pay attention to the symbolism of important transition moments

Children and young people answer to the open questions that certain moments will never return for them and that they have the impression that those are lost forever, due to the coronavirus crisis.

'I regret it because this is my last year in primary school and I can't say goodbye in a decent way to the kids in my class, or the other class at all.' (girl, 12 years old)

'Corona ruined my senior year in high school: no end-of-year trip, no Ventoux climb with some of the school, no end-of-year party, uncertainty about the summer ...' (boy, 16 years)

'I know it may sound selfish, but as a sixth-grader, together with my peers, I have been hit hard. All the traditions I've been looking forward to all my life are gone.' (girl, 16 years old)

'I am very sorry that we cannot finish this year in primary school as usual ♡' (girl 10 years)

'I miss everything we do in the sixth grade to go to another school.' (boy, 10 years old)

As a school, pay enough attention to those transition moments, such as the sixth grade and the sixth year of secondary education. Besides, we advocate that every toddler and pupil can celebrate the end of the school and conclude it positively. That makes a big difference after this special period.

Play, interact with peers, and relax

Half of the children play with siblings, one out of five has to play alone

22% of the children do not play with other children during this period. 53% only play with brothers or sisters. Only 26% see other children.

'As an only child, I feel alone. I can play with mom and dad, but it is different than with other small children.' (boy, 8 years old)

'I often get bored. My dad has a lot of meetings, which I find annoying.' (girl, 8 years old)

Digital contact with your friends, rather real contact with boy/girlfriend

Most young people see friends digitally (91%). Also, 45% see friends at a distance. The contact with the boy/girlfriend is different. More than half of the young people see their boy/girlfriend as before.

Almost one out of six children and young people do not have a place of their own to rest

Most children (84%) and young people (83%) have their own place to rest. Yet, 16% of children and 17% of young people say they do not have that. The percentage of children without an own place to rest is highest among children who do not live with their parents (29%) and children who mention having financial difficulties since the coronavirus crisis (20.6%). We also see this correlation with young people. If they live in a group, 26% have their own place to rest.

Most children and young people can relax well at home

Nearly 94% of children say they can relax well at home. They can read, play games, listen to music, draw, watch TV, play games, and move. This is not possible for 6% of the children. The percentages are different for young people, of which 12% cannot relax well at home.

Need for contact with peers in real life for pre-school children and young children through a 'child bubble'

Many parents complained to the Flemish Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner that their child is disproportionately affected by the coronavirus measures because it could no longer play with peers and only spend time at home with adults who often have to work. Playing is vital for young children and they need to play to develop and feel good. One course of action that we see here is to allow contact with one other family more quickly if this should happen again. Then young children can play again, and parents can help each other with childcare. A kind of 'contact bubble' with priority for young children.

Going out and leisure time

76% of the children go out almost every day, while 4% hardly ever go out and 20% sometimes. Among young people, 50% go out almost every day, 12% hardly ever and 38% sometimes.

When children go outside, it is mainly in **their own garden** (88%), to the park, the forest, the countryside (60%) or a public place (42%). Park, forest, countryside (75%) are the most popular among young people, followed by their garden (73%).

Why don't children go outside? Especially because they are not allowed (48%), are afraid of COVID-19 (37%) or cannot go out with others (32%). Among young people, it is mainly because they do not feel like it (50%), cannot go out with others (40%), because there is no good place to go to (24%), because they are not allowed (25%) or because they don't have time (26%).

Financially vulnerable children and young people and children and young people without a space to rest of their own, but especially children and young people who stay in a group are less likely to go outside.

4% of all children never or hardly ever go outside. This percentage is higher among children who say having it financially more difficult since the coronavirus crisis (9%), among children without their own place to rest (8%) and among children who do not live with their parents (7%). Among the young people who hardly ever go out (12%), the **young people who live in a group go out least of all** (26%), followed by young people who live alone (19%).

The children and young people who 'miss going outside' most often are the same vulnerable groups. Children and young people who hardly ever go out, young people who live in a group or who do not have a personal space to rest, and children who say that it is financially more difficult since the coronavirus crisis, miss 'going out' more than average.

Right to play and leisure time in sight again

One child out of five does not have a peer to play with. For young children, teenagers and young people, the right to social contact with others and the right to play and relaxation outdoors is critical. But the corona measures have severely limited that. The figures show that some children and young people spent a lot of time indoors. And that socially vulnerable children go outside to relax least of all. Children, especially pre-school children, depend on adults to go outside. If the parents are afraid, if they do not have time, if the children are not allowed to play outside in public spaces or on their playground, this has a major impact on children and pre-school children. Especially for children who grow up in a vulnerable situation, without a garden, without a personal place to rest, or without a good place in their neighbourhood.

Young people more often go out alone and also *want* to go out alone. They are more independent and mobile than children. They have to work out for themselves how to interpret the coronavirus measures. For example: What counts as physical exercise? Is that also skating? In the beginning, skating was not explicitly mentioned, but later it was. On the one hand, young people miss 'going outside' and their 'leisure activities'. On the other hand, some young people simply do not feel like going outside and prefer to communicate online with their friends or peers.

As from 2 June 2020, the right to play, to relax and meet of children and young people will be given more space. Children, teenagers and young people are given more opportunities to see each other again in real life. The playgrounds will open again for children up to 12 years old. And after more than two months of lockdown, maybe even all the kids will finally be able to see their friends back at school. There are also perspectives for the summer holidays. Playground activities can restart, in an adapted way. Summer camps for groups of up to 50 children, youth and supervisors are allowed.

It has been previously decided to give groups up to 20 children and young people the opportunity to meet and exercise together as long as they respect the 1.5 m distance and a supervisor keeps an eye on them. Some local authorities have already opened small playgrounds for the little ones. And they are also thinking of opening supervised skate parks and sports grounds.

Yet many children and young people still dream of more free play, recreation, and social contact. We believe that the right to play and relax, wherever in public space, should be even more explicitly addressed. Playing games is for children what sports is for adults. It is vital to maintain a good mental balance.

Clear communication remains necessary about what exactly is allowed in the outdoor area

We urge the different authorities to communicate clearly about what is not allowed. But also and especially about what is allowed. Preferably with clear pictograms about the guidelines in places where children and young people come together and play, like in the Netherlands.

Unlock more spaces to play, relax and meet, especially if the 1.5 m distance rule remains

More spaces need to be unlocked to allow for play and meeting at 1.5 m. distance. In order for children and young people, and in particular teenagers and young people over 12 years of age, to fully enjoy their right to play, the different authorities need to be more ambitious and not just make spaces and playgrounds accessible again. They need to look further and not just reduce

the coronavirus measures. Ideally, sports grounds, soccer fields, school playgrounds open again to the general public and not only to members of the sports club or the students of the school. Some schools are experimenting with an open playground after school hours. Parents can reserve a playtime slot. Why not opt more resolutely for more play lanes or a network with places to play that provide with challenging impulses to move around and play keeping a distance of 1.5 m? Or safe spaces where young people can meet and get to know youth workers with whom they can share their story and concerns. The recovery period can thus become a good reflection and try-out period for local authorities to reconsider space in the municipality so that there will also be more space for children and young people in Flanders in the long term.

Actively look for vulnerable children and young people

Financially vulnerable children and young people, without a personal space to rest, or children and young people living in a group, go out less than average. If you ask children and young people if they miss 'going outside', the same vulnerable children and young people will indicate that more often than other children and young people.

We plead for outreaching play and leisure activities for those children and young people in their neighbourhood. For example, clear streets in their neighbourhood or open school playgrounds, set up temporary playgrounds for the youngest, and ensure that young people can do enough leisure activities there. Too many vulnerable children have been inside for too long.

The right to play and leisure of children and young people living in a care facility deserves much more attention

The results are clear. Young people who do not live with their parents but in a facility go out much less, miss going out and do not have a personal space where they can withdraw quietly.

The statistics confirm the many stories of children and young people in youth care during the lockdown. The coronavirus measures are much heavier for young people in a facility than for others. The many complaints to the Hotline of the Flemish Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner also illustrate this.

We urge that children and young people in a facility are offered equal enjoyment of play and leisure time. The experience gained should be evaluated in the light of their right to play, relax and meet, not only for any new COVID-19 outbreaks but also for the many children and young people who now reside in a care facility and go less outside.

'I hope this is useful because I feel lonely and have the feeling that children are being pushed aside in a facility.' (boy, 16 years old)

'We in our facility, have stricter rules than the outside world and I think that is not reasonable! We would like some breathing space, clarity and justice. Thank you.' (girl, 16 years old)

Participating in discussions about how to deal with COVID-19 measures?

18% of the children are not allowed to have a say or to think about the rules at home. This is 23% for young people. So almost one out of four.

Children and young people living in a group have less to say

This is 37% for children who do not live with their parents. For young people living in a group (boarding school, institution, youth care facility, asylum centre, hospital) even 55%. So more than half say they are not allowed to take part in the conversation.

Children and young people have the right to express their views on this coronavirus crisis and how to deal with it

The lives of children and young people were turned upside down in the last two months and everything looked different. The schools were closed, the leisure activities stopped. Seeing family and friends, playing outdoors, going on excursions: it was no longer allowed. And even going outside was very limited. At home, in the youth care services, on the street, children and young people experience the impact of the crisis, just like adults. We learn from the survey that the pandemic has a major impact on their feelings and well-being, that they have to miss a lot and that some of the children unfortunately also experience more violence.

Due to the major impact of the crisis, it is also important to listen carefully to children and young people about what is difficult and what can or should be done differently. Literally involve them in the agreements made at home, in the facility, in the emergency care service at school.

Many children and young people are not individually heard or involved in this. But also as a society, we give too little attention to their voice in this crisis. Their perspective is not yet sufficiently covered. The guidelines are mainly tailored to adults.

From the enormous response to our survey on the coronavirus crisis, we can deduce that children and young people were eager to express their views. They responded en masse to make their voices heard. Their responses to the open questions also highlighted that children and young people appreciate being able to speak out about the pandemic and the measures taken.

'I think this survey is a fantastic idea. Thank you for taking the time to listen to us as I feel our age range is forgotten in times of corona. So, thank you again.' (girl, 16 years old)

'Yes, I think it is a nice initiative to let young people express their opinion about the situation. Thanks. It's done me good.' (boy, 12 years old)

'I am happy with this questionnaire and that my opinion can be taken into account.' (boy, 9 years old)

'Don't forget about us. We also have a voice and feelings.' (boy, 10 years old)

'I think there should be a Security Council for children, now all decisions and rules are only focussed on adults.' (girl, 10 years old)

The results of the survey show how children and young people experience the crisis, the approach to it and what they miss the most. We ask policymakers to take into account what children and young people say about it in the following days, weeks and months and in the possible event of a new health crisis. We explicitly call for extra and permanent attention to be paid to children and young people in vulnerable situations. This crisis has sharpened their problems and made them more 'visible'. Let us keep them visible by working on structural measures for those children and young people. Let us give their rights a place.