



# Policy for empowering, supporting and protecting children and young people

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## **Terms and definitions**

**“Child”** in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and for the purposes of this policy, is defined as any person under the age of 18 years (UNCRC Article 1).

**“Young person/people” or “youth”** in line with United Nations definitions, include individuals – young women, young men, and young persons of other gender identities - aged 15 years to 24 years old. This group spans the categories of ‘children’, ‘adolescents’ and ‘adults’ but regards young people as having particular safeguarding needs and requiring distinct consideration aside from younger children and older adults.

**“Violence”** against a child or young person includes all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, emotional ill-treatment or psychological violence, sexual abuse and exploitation, harassment, and commercial or other exploitation of a child or young person. Acts of violence can also take place online through, for example, the web, social media or mobile phones. It may be an intentional act involving the use of physical force or power or it may be failing to act to prevent violence against a child or young person. Violence consists of anything which individuals, groups, institutions or organisations do or fail to do, intentionally or unintentionally, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in actual or potential harm to the child or young person’s wellbeing, dignity and survival and development. KeKi developed an [information sheet](#) explaining the types of violence that children and young people can possibly encounter.

**“Harm”** is any detrimental effect on a child’s or young person’s physical, psychological, or emotional wellbeing. Harm may be caused by abuse or exploitation whether intended or unintended.

**“Safeguarding children and young people”** is the responsibilities, preventative, responsive and referral measures that we undertake to protect children and young people, ensuring that no child or young person is subject to any form of harm as a result of their association with the organisation.

**“Integrity policy”** refers to the policy of safeguarding the integrity of children and young people involved, as well as staff members, that KeKi – together with tZitemzo and the Flemish Children’s Rights Coalition – is currently drafting.

## 1. Introduction

The Children's Rights Knowledge Centre (*Dutch*: Kenniscentrum Kinderrechten – *abbreviation*: KeKi) is a knowledge centre on Children's Rights established officially by the Flemish decree of 18 July 2008.<sup>1</sup>

KeKi aims to acknowledge and strengthen the position of **all children and young people as fellow-citizens** within society and to assure that all children and young people can live and grow up in a just, solidarity-based, humane and inclusive society. Respecting and safeguarding children's and human rights are fundamental to achieve this. An interdisciplinary, critical-constructive and reflective approach based on academic knowledge, is central to our work in developing a **child rights approach** in research, policy and practice.

KeKi actively focuses on **the lived realities of children and young people**. As a knowledge centre, we find it paramount that children and young people provide KeKi with knowledge, expertise and experiences relating to their daily lives. For the most part, this happens indirectly by means of existing materials and research. On occasion, this happens through direct consultation of and participation with children.

The **purpose of this policy** is to prevent any type of violence from occurring during moments of direct contact with children within (research) activities, projects and collaborations with partners. Its implementation also helps in guaranteeing the empowerment of children and young people, creating a safe and welcoming atmosphere in which it is possible for them to fulfil their full potential. In accordance with **article 19** of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>2</sup>, KeKi wants to take all the appropriate measures possible to fulfil the purpose of this policy. This includes necessary steps of prevention, reaction and policy. The Belgian constitution also explicitly includes the right to integrity in the first paragraph of article 22bis: "Every child has the right to respect for its moral, physical, mental and sexual integrity."

What is meant with children and young people is explained in the list of terms and definitions. KeKi will also apply this policy, including its standards and principles, as a standard framework when working with young people above the age of 18. The nine core UN Human Rights treaties recognise fundamental human rights, the dignity, worth and equal rights of people at any age. Therefore, this policy plan refers to both 'children and young people'.

This policy was written out on the basis of existing materials, among which the Child Protection Policies of Eurochild, Terre des Homme Switzerland, Plan International Belgium, University of Ghent and HOGENT. The plan is also fruit of previous dialogue with the Flemish Children's Rights Coalition and project and consultations KeKi held where children and young people were involved.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Flemish [Decree on a renewed youth and children's rights policy \(2012\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> Article 19 UNCRC:

1. States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.
2. Such protective measures should, as appropriate, include effective procedures for the establishment of social programmes to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child, as well as for other forms of prevention and for identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up of instances of child maltreatment described heretofore, and, as appropriate, for judicial involvement.

## 1.1. Scope of the policy

**Staff members** working at KeKi have read and agreed with this policy and the principles and procedures it contains.<sup>3</sup> New staff members will be asked to read and sign this plan. Staff members include employees, the board, general assembly, interns<sup>4</sup> and volunteers. In order to monitor and review our safeguarding measures and to continue to give attention and visibility to our policy plan and any changes, staff members are asked to review, discuss and re-sign the plan every year.

**Actors and organisations** collaborating with KeKi on initiatives where children and young people are involved are expected to act in accordance with the underpinning principles set out below.

**Children and young people** involved in activities will also be actively informed about the principles and procedures of this policy. They are also given the opportunity to make adjustments or additions to this policy. For children and young people, this policy is a tool to know and use their rights.

This policy can also inspire other organisations to reflect on their functioning, and how to better support, empower and protect children and young people.

## 2. Underpinning principles

The principles listed below are the building blocks of this policy and underlie all the standards and procedures as written out. These are inspired by the leading principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: the right to be heard, the right to non-discrimination, the right to have his or her best interests taken into consideration and the right to life.

- All steps and decisions taken following this policy should always be in **the best interest of the child**. KeKi developed a [roadmap](#) consisting of 5 stages that assists in taking a decision in the best interest of the child.
- There will be **no discrimination** based on sexual orientation, nationality, gender, religion, language, ethnicity, socio-economical background or other statuses. However, recognising that children have different needs or face different challenges, it might be necessary for staff members to treat children differently to address inequality and discrimination and thus promoting equity.
- Children and young people deserve the autonomy and agency **to express** how they feel about the principles and procedures as written out in this policy. Their views will be taken seriously and given 'due weight' in accordance to their age and level of maturity.
- KeKi aims to implement **children's participation** based on the nine requirements for meaningful, safe and inclusive children's participation:<sup>5</sup>
  1. Participation is transparent and informative
  2. Participation is voluntary
  3. Participation is respectful
  4. Participation is relevant

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<sup>3</sup> A commitment to the policy plan is to be attached in the appendix.

<sup>4</sup> A separate procedure is being developed on procedures concerning interns.

<sup>5</sup> As cited from [the General Comment](#) (No12) on The right of the child to be heard

5. Participation is child-friendly
  6. Participation is inclusive
  7. Participation is supported by training
  8. Participation is safe and sensitive to risk
  9. Participation is accountable
- **Transparency and accessibility:** this policy will be made publicly available through the online platforms of KeKi. If a new version is made, this will always be published online as soon as possible.
  - **Accountability:** this policy is developed to ensure the highest standards of professional behaviour and personal practice to ensure no harm occurs in any situation to children and adolescents during their involvement in KeKi's activities. Concrete actions are listed to monitor and review this policy plan on a regular basis.
  - The children and young people involved in KeKi's work come from a **variety of backgrounds and contexts**. In addition, KeKi's work also spans a diversity of activities and contexts. The content, principles and guidelines of this policy are drawn up in such a manner that they are applicable to the variety of individuals, activities and contexts. Be that as it may, it may never lead to relativism of the principles, only to improvement and strengthening of the procedures and full empowerment of children involved.

### 3. Acts of prevention

In this policy and our work, we put a lot of emphasis on the prevention of violence and harmful behaviour. In the event of a report of suspicion, disclosure or determination of a breach of integrity, a report is made to the Integrity Focal Point and the reaction procedure is activated.

#### 3.1. 'Integrity Focal Point' (API)

It is mandatory for youth organisations in Flanders to have an **Integrity Focal Point (API)**. KeKi has a shared API together with the Flemish Children's Rights Coalition ("Kinderrechtencoalitie"). More information on the role as well as the contact details of the API are available on KeKi's website (Dutch document).

The **API has three (potential) roles**.

- First, children and youth participating in activities can report violations and misbehaviour to these Integrity Focal Points.
- Second, it is the API's responsibility and role to raise awareness and inform staff members of the organisation:
  - through discussing the topic on (internal) meetings, as well as reminding about policies while reflecting on and designing new activities or projects.
  - by keeping track of new developments around the thematic of safeguarding and protection, and accordingly spreading this knowledge towards the staff members.
  - by giving advice and information to the organisation on how to develop and improve policies that can avoid any types of violence.

- by taking part in regular meetings with the regional sector, learning from other organisations and their practices.
- Third, the API may also act as a consultant towards third organisations to share expertise.

### 3.2 Creating a culture of awareness: spreading information and knowledge

It's the objective that both internally and externally there is an active campaign of informing about the existing procedures regarding the protection and safeguarding of children and youth.

All staff members will be informed about the protection and safeguarding policy and are required to sign a form of commitment to its principles and procedures. This obligation equally applies to permanent staff, temporary staff as well as interns. New staff members will be introduced to the policy prior to starting with the organisation.

The plan itself will also be actively communicated towards children and young people in each activity KeKi organises. It is essential that they are well aware of the principles they can refer to, as well as the procedures they can count on. Children and young people are given the opportunity to comment on and discuss the principles and policy plan.

*A child friendly version of KeKi's full integrity policy is currently in development and will also be made accessible through the website.*

KeKi engages in dialogue and exchange of information, best practices and lessons learned at different levels and gatherings, with other non-profit actors as well as government:

- Twice a year – KeKi, tZitemzo and KiReCo (three Flemish children's rights organisations) – organise a dialogue to exchange lessons and practices learned regarding protection and safeguarding.
- KeKi takes part in the working group on integrity, organised by the Flemish Department for Culture, Youth and Media. It is a regional platform to exchange good practices regarding integrity, violence and safeguarding of children and young people.

### 3.4 Safe recruitment

Prior to recruitment, new staff members at KeKi (including volunteers and interns) will be asked to read and sign this policy plan for empowering, supporting and protecting children and young people. People not willing to sign the policy plan, will not be recruited.

### 3.5 Communication and media

Using (social) media and external communication while communicating about the work conducted, the rights and dignity of children and young people should always be respected and the first concern. In all communication about children, KeKi will apply the following principles, as cited from the policy of Eurochild:

- **Dignity:** The child's dignity must be preserved at all times. Languages must not degrade, victimize or shame the child. In images, children should always be dressed appropriately and should never be depicted in any poses that could be interpreted as sexually provocative.
- **Accuracy:** The portrayal of children must not be manipulated or sensationalized in any way. Images and stories should provide a balanced depiction of the child's life and circumstances, balancing negatives with empowering images or showing the progress that children are

making. Communications should avoid making generalisations, which do not accurately reflect the nature of the situation and pictures should not be taken and used out of context.

- **Privacy:** Any information that could be used to identify a child or put them at risk will not be used.

Informed consent will always be sought before taking any photos, videos, or requesting personal information about children's lives that may then be used within KeKi's publications or communication. KeKi will provide children and young people (and their parents/legal guardian(s)) with all necessary details (including potential risks) to be able to make an informed decision.

Regarding collected data, all activities involving the processing of personal data, including children's data, must comply with the General Data Protection Regulation. Staff members should anonymise or pseudonymise whenever possible.

## 4. Reaction: reporting procedures.

KeKi is a small organisation with only a few staff members and few strict procedures. However, there are clear policies on how to deal with complaints – both internally and externally. The API and the board are first point of contacts and guarantee both confidentiality and the commitment to act on complaints or signals of transgression.

### 4.1 Procedure

A comprehensive roadmap on what to do following a reported violation or issue will be included in KeKi's integrity policy. A child friendly version with the same information will also be developed, and uploaded online via KeKi's website as well as actively distributed towards children and young people participating in activities.

We distinguish internal and external complaints:

- Internal complaints concern situations that occur within the organisations' activities or in which staff members are involved. This concerns situations during activities, as well as possible violations that occur outside the (participation) activities or working hours. Such reports can be handled by the API.
- External complaints concern situations that have no link with the activities of the organisation. Such reports are not handled by the API. In such cases, the API solely refers to the competent authorities.

A report concerning a suspicion, disclosure or identification of a breach of integrity can be reported to the API. The API can also provide the option to forward the report to a member of the other organisation, if it is not possible to raise the report to the own organisation concerning a matter of trust.

### 4.2 Support and assistance

A list of organisations providing professional assistance is attached to the integrity policy. A child-friendly version is available on KeKi's website in the form of an [information sheet](#). The API also refers staff members to assistance when needed.

### 4.3 Accountability: evaluating and strengthening the policy plan

Twice a year – KeKi, tZitemzo and KiReCo (three Flemish children’s rights organisations) – will organise a dialogue session to exchange lessons and practices learned regarding protection and safeguarding.

Every year, staff members of KeKi will review, discuss and re-sign – thus read and agree – the policy plan. This procedure ensures that everyone is well aware of the standards and principles that are written down in this plan.